



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

#28

# Cat $\equiv$ Sales

*Awkward Pauses*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**AWKWARD PAUSES**



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**AWKWARD PAUSES**

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## AWKWARD PAUSES

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A bright full moon illuminated the rooftops of the L & L Lofts in the heart of the once seedy, now ultra-fashionable Meatpacking District. Batman retrieved his grappling hook and reloaded the ascender, then he removed his gloves and massaged the knuckles.

It wasn't the three hours of Zogger, he told himself, it was the JLA meeting. Sitting there for an hour and a half of interminable nonsense, he'd expressed his disgust the only way possible, by clenching and unclenching his fist.

A burst of hoarse laughter came from below. Batman turned to see a trio of drag queens leaving a nightclub, one pointing in his direction. The moon, he was perfectly silhouetted by the full moon. He muttered an obscenity, firing a line to a more discreet location and swinging out of the moonlight.

The Meatpacking District. In the 60s, it was SoHo; in the 80s, TriBeCa. Struggling artists find a rundown area where rents are cheap. They improvise studios and performances spaces however they can from old warehouses, factories or, in this case, meat lockers. Then someone becomes a success, and the beautiful people find them. Pretty soon, restaurants, boutiques, galleries and super hot nightspots are popping up in the rawest of raw industrial spaces. The Meatpacking District was still in the early stages of transition, but before long, it would be saturated in chic, the remaining spaces would be converted to apartments, the rents would skyrocket, and the artists who started it all would move on.

Batman scowled. It wasn't like him to look on any corner of his city with contempt. Hell Month. It was just Hell Month.

A tone sounded in his utility belt. It was the alarm he'd been waiting for. Six hours ahead in Paris. She'd just be waking up. He muted the OraCom and took out Bruce Wayne's cel phone.

"Good morning, Kitten," he began, with a cheer he didn't feel, "how was the opera?"

::Morning, Handsome. Little known fact: today, it's mostly ballet that's performed at the Paris Opera House.::

"Just a minute."

::Just a minute,:: the deep voice graveled. Then there was a clunk, a swilsh, and silence. In her lush suite at the Ritz, Selina sipped her café. After a few minutes, the voice returned.

::Still there?: he asked.

"Mugger, dealer, or pimp?"

::Excuse me?:

“You put down the phone, swoosh, and you come back out of breath. You just pummeled somebody.” There was a pause, and she bit into her croissant. “Pummel opportunities are few and far between this time of year, *n’est pas?*”

::Pummel opportunities are few and far between this time of year, *n’est pas?*::

Batman’s lip twitched. Nobody teased him during Hell Month. Never. Not even Dick the wiseass. Not even Plastic Man. Nobody. Only the Cat would dare.

“If you want to play detective, I do have a puzzle I wanted to ask you about.”

::Oh?::

“A package arrived at the manor. Gift basket. Box of cigars, lime scented candles, bodywash and shampoo, big natural sponge, and a card with a cat on one side and a riddle on the back.”

He heard a happy laugh on the other end of the receiver. He growled. It was encouragement to continue, but merriment annoyed him during Hell Month. A lighthearted outlook on crime always irked him, but during Hell Month... He glared at the cityscape before him, then sighed, looked back at the phone and read the riddle:

*“My first is half that to which a baker adds one,*

*“My second sounds the fate of a broken down car,*

*“My third is inspiration to you, dear friend,*

*“And my whole lived with poets and pirates on an island by the sea.*

*“I return on the 17<sup>th</sup>.”*

::Well?:: Selina prompted.

Batman liked that. She knew he had the answer. She was giving him the opening to show off.

“A baker’s *dozen* is thirteen, or twelve plus one. Half twelve is six. The first syllable is six. A broken down car is towed; the sound alike is -toed. Six-toed something. Third syllable is inspiration to you, his dear friend. Six-toed cats, or polydactyl cats are indigenous to Key West, an island off the coast of Florida where Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and many other writers lived, and was historically a base for numerous pirates and wrecking crews.”

::Meow:: was all she said, but he could hear the smile in her voice. He felt a pang. Sending her away seemed the best course at the time—it was for the best—he wasn’t about to second-guess his decisions. He did miss her though. He expressed this with an angry snort.

“Meow, nothing,” he spat, “it’s not an answer. It answers the riddle but not the puzzle of the card and the clues: cigars, candles, soap, sponge - And what’s this ‘I return on the 17<sup>th</sup>’ bullshit?”

The laughter that had been merry now became downright delighted.

::You’re too adorable,:: she gasped at last, ::They’re not clues, you obsessed jackass. They’re souvenirs. Eddie’s gone to Key West, he’s coming back on the 17<sup>th</sup>::

Batman stared into the phone... It was all too familiar. That voice, mocking him. Meow. So light, so carefree, so sexy. Meow. He wanted her back home, wanted her to cut the trip short and come home and be with him, wanted that voice as hot breath in his ear, “Meow,” not the cold treble of a telephone. He wanted... just like he used to,

he wanted and he couldn't admit it. She knew too, like she'd always known, and she wouldn't help him. Vicious cat.

Like now. Laughing. He was trying to think over these clues and this riddle in light of new information and all she could do was laugh at him.

::Eddie is always like that,:: she was saying.

"Fine," he snorted, "but if I find out he's been up to something all this time—"

::Yeah, yeah, yeah, you'll take it out of my tail. Whatever. Oh wait, you can't, can you, 'cause you sent my tail 3,000 miles across the Atlantic.::

Turning the screw. Vicious cat. He did it for both their sakes, why couldn't she see that?

"So..." was all he could manage, then after a pause, "...How's Paris?"

::Great....::

It matched his "So..."

Maybe she felt the same way—

::Not at all crowded this time of year.::

"So it's mostly ballet at the Opera House now?" he heard himself ask, while fingering a Batarang absently. Psychobat was starting to stir. *What the hell was he doing talking about the ballet...*

::Yes. Giselle. Quite a production.::

There were crimes being committed *in his city*.

"Sounds wonderful," he grunted.

*Why was he standing here talking about the ballet at the Paris Opera House...*

"The weather ok?"

*The weather! Ultimate sign of a doomed conversation.*

::Well, it is winter. And the House of Chanel has never embraced central heating, so the fittings have been an arctic experience. Rather like Kittlemeier's backroom.::

Kittlemeier's. It brought his thoughts back to Gotham. To Selina being back in Gotham. To Selina, scantily clad, in that cold little room... The grumbling that followed concealed a knowing chuckle.

"Yes, it's quite cold here as well..."

*What the hell am I talking about?!*

::I'm sure it is, being January and all. How many flights up right now?::

"Fifteen."

*Odd question.*

::Wind is pretty harsh up there.::

"Not too bad. It's when I'm mid-swing that I feel it the most..."  
*and in bed... It's been so cold without you.*

Reflexively, Psychobat clenched, unclenched, and re-clenched his fist. *It was time to check the docks. Then last call at the Iceberg, see who's closing the place and who heads out where. Then a quick pass through the diamond district. Then museum row and the park front condos.*

On the phone, the silence had become conspicuous.

::Well, button up then,:: she said finally.

He nearly remarked that there were no buttons on the Batsuit, but that would only rile the cat. Instead he grunted "I will."

There was another painful pause while Psychobat railed in his brain: *This was all wrong, the conversation was wrong, the words were wrong. Why was he thinking like this? Why was he TALKING like this? He had WORK to do.*

"I should go, I'm on patrol," he said finally, just as she said, ::I should let you go then. You're mid-patrol.::

" ... "

:: ... ::

" ... "

:: ... Well, good night then. ::

"G'night... .. I—"

*You what? Psychobat interrupted, You love her? You miss her? You want her here with you?!? We've got to get to work!*

"—I'll talk to you tomorrow."

::Yeah... Tomorrow... *Bonsoir*:::

There was a click. Batman stared into the phone, the instinctive *What the hell was that?* response cut off by a commotion below. At last, Psychobat had the action he craved, but the wind cut a little colder than it had before.

Selina sat on the roof of 13 Rue de la Paix, otherwise known as Cartier Paris. She'd forgotten what it was like, the awkwardness, the unspoken questions, the unspeakable wanting, and then, the curt slap of the bat-rejection.

Was this all it took to set them back? A few days apart and they were back to square one. Worse. Worse than square one.

"Button up," she had said. Catwoman, mistress of innuendo. *Button up now, sweetie, it's cold out there. Drink plenty of liquids, have some chicken soup...*

"...Well, good night then." How suburban. Mary Lou Lipschitz leaning in after the movie. *Well g'night, Bobby, I had a wonderful time...*

::I'll talk to you tomorrow,:: he had said. That's the one that hurt. Why? Why did it feel so much like—like the Watchtower. She'd saved them, the whole goddamn JLA was taken out by that blowhard Prometheus with his gadget and his tinpot Renfaire-reject armor. Superman thanked her. Steel thanked her. Flash said "not a moment too soon." Green Lantern, in no shape to talk, nodded. Huntress admired her whip. Aquaman held her chair. And Batman? Batman said "Put the storm opals from Rann back on your way out."

::I'll talk to you tomorrow:::

100 journalists were at the Watchtower that day. It was how Selina had snuck onboard, disguised as one of them. When the crisis was passed, they all had to be shuttled home. No one thought Catwoman, Catwoman who had saved their sorry hero asses, should have to suffer a ride back with Katie Couric, Mary Hart, Matt Lauer and Barbara Walters. So she waited in their conference room. And waited. And waited. Plastic Man brought her coffee, and then she waited some more. Finally Martian Manhunter came in; the coast was clear. She came out to find only a few heroes remained. Batman was one of them. Batman who was, presumably, going back to Gotham just as she was.

Thanks again, from Flash. A smile from Green Lantern who still hadn't entirely recovered from the neural chaff and gunshot wound. ...PAUSE... .. And finally... a grunt. Then Martian Manhunter looked at Batman, Batman looked at Manhunter, more pausing... She could just tell they were talking mentally to one another, having an argument from the looks of it. And then Batman walked off without a word. "Well," Martian Manhunter said with an air of covering for a missed cue, "I guess I'll shuttle you back."

::I'll talk to you tomorrow::

Jackass.

Bruce knelt beneath the stalactite where he always meditated after a workout. He sat up straight, but found it difficult to relax his shoulders for the breathing exercises. They were stiff. They ached. He inhaled through his nose, slowly, steadily, feeling the air fill his lungs, taking care not to lean forward, expanding his stomach area as he inhaled...

What did he expect? No sleep, so his shoulders ached.

He felt the air moving into the top of his lungs—maximum capacity. He held the breath for a second, then exhaled slowly through his mouth.

The tension twisted down his back.

::Yeah... Tomorrow... *Bonsoir*::

She sounded so—off.

Four regular breaths, then inhale again.

What the hell did she want from him? He was on patrol. What did she expect, a sonnet?

Inhale—deep—don't lean—DAMNIT! WHAT THE FUCK DID SHE WANT FROM HIM??? He sent her to Paris! Wouldn't any woman—wouldn't Catwoman especially—He FLEW HER to PARIS in his PRIVATE PLANE—he said GO TO CARTIER, BUY YOURSELF SOMETHING NICE! Wouldn't any woman flip? Wouldn't Catwoman of all women wrap her arms around him and kiss him? What the hell did she expect, he was on patrol!

::Yeah... Tomorrow... *Bonsoir*::

There were criminals loose in his city. Dick once said a crime was committed every eighteen minutes in Gotham. He was wrong. It's every sixteen minutes. What the hell did she... -the aching shoulders crumpled- ...want?

He wanted her home. If she was here, she would have soothed him and he would have slept. She would have massaged his aching muscles. She would have noticed him clenching his fist and taken his hand, opened the fingers, kissed the tender flesh inside the palm...

Zogger. He'd been meaning to make some modifications, version five was past due. He could insert heat coils into the steel arm to prevent the user from grabbing onto it, that would also open up the possibility of steam. Intense shots of heat, highly pressurized...

Heat. Pressure. Intense. Who the hell was he kidding...

“Selina?”

:: Yes? ::

“I know it’s late there—”

:: S’okay, I wasn’t sleeping. ::

“ ... ”

:: ... ::

“ ... ”

:: ... ::

“So, I’ll send the plane to pick you up in the morning?”

:: No, I’ll get the concierge to get me on the next Concorde out. Be home by lunchtime. ::

Oswald Cobblepot reread the offending document in disbelief. He flipped it over and checked the postmark: Key West, Florida. With a hostile agility not seen he’d retired from fieldwork, he grabbed the nearest umbrella, charged from his office, and angrily rang the brass bell over the bar.

“Your attention please, Iceberg patrons!” he began with an icy hauteur, “Be it known that from this day forth, the person of Edward Nigma is *persona non grata* in this establishment. The Riddler is BANNED from the Iceberg Lounge!”

## PART 2: CAT-TALE - OH MY

Tim Drake and Cecily Grenville sat in Gino's Pizzeria, across the table from Cassie and Randy-quad, all discussing the second installment of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Tim made an effort, but the truth was, he hadn't enjoyed the movie at all. Not having read the book, he didn't know there would be treeherds avenging the destruction of an ancient forest. The sight of giant, sentient trees running around wreaking havoc, so thrilling to the rest of the audience, left Tim wrestling with unwelcome memories of Poison Ivy and her warrior plantlife.

"And when that one big treeguy caught fire and ran to the burst dam to douse the flames!" Randy enthused.

Cassie smiled.

Cecily laughed.

"...Yeah," Tim said finally. "That was... funny." Though in his heart, he had been disappointed not to see the psychotree burn.

The petite, dark-haired hostess called Raven ushered the ninth job applicant through the Iceberg's main dining room. She gave him a judgmental look up and down, then pointed to the office door.

"Mr. Cobblepot will see you now," she pronounced, her dour monotone reminiscent of the sinister housekeeper in a Gothic novel. The applicants were not to blame, but she blamed them anyway. She was a hostess, not a secretary. When Mr. Cobblepot asked her to come in to work in the middle of the day, that was one thing. The club was closed and no patrons meant no tips. But a job was a job and he was the boss. So she came in, as requested. Still, if the slimy birdman made one false move, said one word that could be construed as a proposition, she was ready with the pepper spray.

Turned out she didn't need it. He wasn't hitting on her; he had scheduled interviews all afternoon and wanted her ushering the losers back to his office like he was some kind of big shot.

Nurse Chin waited until her colleagues left for lunch, then let Pamela Isley into the infirmary. It was strictly against policy to let one Arkham inmate visit another this way, but poor Harley Quinn was having such a rough time of it. Why it took them twenty minutes arranging her pillows in the morning, getting her into a position where she could lie comfortably. All those bruises. Dear girl. If a visit from her friend would cheer her up, Chin could see no reason to deny them.

And besides, an underpaid junior staffer at Arkham Asylum never knew when she might overhear something... profitable.

"Harley, my dear, this time you've really gone and done it," Pam chided, "Giving Joker Punch and Judy dolls, it was bound to give him ideas. What were you thinking?"

"Wasn't that, Red," Harley moped, "my Puddin' is excitable, that's all."

Pam swore under her breath, then changed the subject. She was here to cheer Harley up, not chew her out. There would be plenty of time to make her see reason about Joker—later. For now...

"Here, I thought you'd find these amusing. Clippings from that website, hotwing.com."

Harley clapped her hands, anticipating a treat. When Oswald, the party poop, whitewashed the women's washroom at the Iceberg, the graffiti went online. The best of it, dedicated to the oh-so-delectable Nightwing, was housed at hotwing.com—and it only got better over time. Pam had spent the morning surfing, and began reading the most entertaining clippings:

"Sculpted. The man is positively sculpted. Buns of steel, arms like those thick braided loaves of bread, thighs of a Clydesdale..."

Nurse Chin, hearing this, raised an eyebrow, but kept her eyes on the file she was pretending to read. Pamela continued to read, unaware of her audience:

"...just the right amount of chest hair..."

Poison Ivy speaking that way about Nightwing? Nurse Chin smiled. Her generosity in letting Isley visit her friend had been well rewarded. Indeed, one never knew an underpaid Arkham staffer might hear something profitable. She closed the file on her desk and consulted a small card in her wallet: **Gotham Tattler** 212-555-6719 ext. 12.

"Mr. Fox?" Moira knocked timidly on the Chief Operating Officer's door.

Lucius gestured for her to come in as he made a final note and hung up the phone.

"I'm not sure if you're aware," Moira informed him as she sat, "that Mr. Wayne was in the office this morning."

Lucius nodded. He was aware; he simply avoided Bruce as much as possible in the month of January.

"He dictated a letter and a memo. As you requested, I'm showing it to you before sending the letter out."

Lucius removed his glasses and massaged his eyes. Every year it happened: Bruce in January. On one of his temperamental rampages, no doubt. At least this year, Lucius had the foresight to pull Moira from her regular duties and have her act as his secretary. She was certainly qualified, having served the LexCorp CEO before Wayne Enterprises stole her away, but what made her particularly well-suited to Bruce in January was not her stint at LexCorp, but her pilot program training assistants to deal with difficult people.

In the past year, Bruce was doing better, all things considered: more focused, less of a flake. And the support staff at the upper echelons of Wayne Enterprises had responded favorably. They had a far better caliber of employees assisting them at this level than ever before. And all it would take was one of Bruce's typical January episodes and it would all be shot to hell. That was *not* going to happen again.

Lucius replaced the glasses on the bridge of his nose and read:

*F.B. Publicists, Suite C, Robinson Building*

*Dear Sirs:*

*In reference to your letter of January 3<sup>rd</sup> regarding alleged misspelling of Zatanna's name in promotional material for the Wayne Foundation Gala, December last. We beg to inform you*

that no literate person regards the use or not of capital letters throughout a word as misspelling. Furthermore, if your goal is to see your client's name in print more often rather than less, you would do well not to antagonize her presenters in this fashion, to say nothing of the press, by insisting on these ludicrous marketing gimmicks.

If, on the other hand, your goal is to gain attention by being as obnoxious as possible, and assuming you don't feel it's pretentious enough that Zatanna has no surname, why not try changing her handle to some unpronounceable glyph.

Yours truly,

Lucius winced. Typical Bruce.

"And the memo?" Lucius asked wearily. Moira handed it over.

To: Lucius Fox

From: Bruce Wayne

RE: Moira Selmon

Lucius,

Moira is an exceptional employee in every respect, and I certainly must admire her poise in this absurd position she's been placed in. She is, as you know, fully occupied with her duties implementing the assistants' training program and DDP (Dealing with Difficult People) Seminars. A program for which she has particular insight because of her stint assisting Talia twitterHead at LexCorp.

"Talia twitterHead?" Lucius looked up.

Moira said nothing. After a pause, she nodded. After four drafts, that was the politest term Mr. Wayne had come up with. Lucius continued to read.

... assisting Talia twitterHead at LexCorp.

Anyway Lucius, it seems some damn fool has taken her off this worthy assignment, the job for which I hired her in the first place, and has her assisting me. Of course I have no complaint with her, but this is an egregious waste of her many rare talents.

Do see that she is reassigned A.S.A.P.

Picking up Selina at the airport this afternoon, so I shan't see you until tomorrow. Let's schedule a LONG lunch and you can bring me up to date on things.

Lucius looked up again. Moira had stood and was smiling down on him.

"As my final act as Bruce's secretary, he had me put that lunch on his schedule for tomorrow and make sure Gale did the same for yours. D'Annunzio's. Try the shrimp, it's to die for."

"..." was all Lucius could reply.

"I like your friend," Randy confided when Cecily and Cassie went to the powder room. "She listens. Not like those debs."

Tim said nothing. He could tell Randy was quite taken with Cassie, but Tim had more experience with Cassie and her silences. He could tell she was not having a good time. Though she talked more than she used to, each day acquiring more of a vocabulary and a sense for how and when to use it, she still expressed more in her looks and shrugs than in words. And her manner suggested to Tim that she was bored to tears, both with Randy-quad and the dating experience.

Assuming she even realized she was on a date. When she'd shown up for this, her first date as far anyone knew, in jeans and a Buffy the Vampire Slayer t-shirt, Tim realized his oversight. He had invited her casually, "Come to the movies with me and Cecily and a friend from school." Any girl their age would have known what it meant. Any girl not saddled with a David Cain upbringing. But Cassie, who knew what she understood? Nuance, particularly social nuance, was still beyond her.

"So," Randy asked hopefully, "think she likes me?"

"...Eh..." Tim sputtered between pauses, "Shh, later, they're coming back."

"Your name?" Oswald asked the latest applicant, without looking up from his desk.

"Giggles, sir," the young man replied.

Oswald looked up.

"Surely not."

"Excuse me, for the last year, sir, it's just been Giggles."

"Ah, you're the chap that's been working for Joker then. I told you on the phone I don't need a henchman, I need a bartender."

"Begging your pardon, sir, you need me. Anyone can pull a tap or pour from a bottle. Not everyone can handle your clientele, Mr. Cobblepot. I can. Mr. Joker's henchman for a year, and here I stand, breathing, sane, and only smile on my face is what God put there."

Oswald's eyes narrowed. He said nothing for a long moment. Then put the pen into his mouth like a cigarette holder. "Giggles" took this as encouragement and continued.

"Well, maybe not God," he said with a between-men smirk. "Truth is, was that little Raven that showed me in here. She's a cute little bird."

Oswald's mouth dropped open and the pen fell to his lap.

"Particularly when walking away," Giggles concluded.

"If you made such observations about Ms. Quinn when working for Joker you would not be standing here now," Oswald observed coldly.

"Actually, Mr. Joker specifically instructed me to learn as many blonde jokes as I could find and accompany him—"

"Oh, kwak-kwak, that was you, eh? Well that's a little different. Giggles, hm. What was it before?"

"Sir?"

"Your name, my good man. You weren't born 'Giggles,' were you?"

"..."

"Come, come, out with it. What's your name, Boy?"

"I will be happy to accept any designation you wish, Mr. Cobblepot."

"Your NAME? Kwak-kwak."

"Brady, sir. Greg Brady."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"That sounds familiar," Penguin said finally.

"I've heard all the jokes, sir."

"Yes, I'd imagine so."

Nightwing crept into the dark, still bedroom with as much stealth and caution as he would entering a criminal lair. The fact that it was his own bedroom—and the room's sole occupant his own wife—made no difference. It was Barbara's attention he so desperately wanted to avoid attracting just now.

He couldn't hope for much of a reprieve. Barbara was Oracle; Oracle found out everything. She probably knew already.

But at least if he didn't wake her, the fireworks could wait 'til morning.

He tiptoed into the closet, stowed away his costume behind the false door, returned to the bedroom, and slipped silently between the sheets. He stared at the ceiling. Maybe he was overreacting. It wasn't a story any woman would be *happy* hearing about her husband, but Barbara wasn't stupid. She'd know to take that kind of thing with a grain of salt.

The rumor mill was what it was. Every few weeks, it linked some male and female—the more improbable the better—just to see what would stick: Hawkwoman and Mad Hatter, Lady Vic and Catman, Batman and Wonder Woman. It was only the galactically clueless, the emotional twelve-year-olds, or the clinically insane that latched on to any of that nonsense. It took a special kind of stupid to believe such garbage. Barbara was none of those things. She wasn't insane, depraved or emotionally stunted, and she certainly wasn't clueless. She would laugh at it. Any sane woman would laugh at it. What was he worried about? So the tabloids picked up some story about Nightwing and Poison Ivy. That didn't mean he was neck deep in fertilizer. Dick smiled at the ceiling, gathered the blanket to his throat, and turned over. Then the light clicked on.

"Dicky, my sweet," his wife addressed him, "it's one thing to be the subject of idle gossip, happens to the best of us, and with a luscious bod like yours, speculation is inevitable. But you really don't help the situation skipping your shower after patrol, sneaking into bed this way, and laying there brooding for half an hour."

"..."

Oswald sipped the concoction Greg "Giggles" Brady set before him.

"An adequate igloo," he proclaimed, setting down the signature drink and regarding the prospective bartender shrewdly. He was, at least, one of them. A patron could sit and tell his troubles to a former Joker henchman as he could not to Joey, the applicant from the Waldorf, or Susannah from TGI Friday's.

"It was Nigma who brought on this crisis," Oswald said, cupping his drink and sitting at the bar like a customer. "Edward Nigma, the riddling excrescence. It's not like he's the first criminal to take a vacation in January, mind you, it's always a bad month for business. Bats goes batty and everyone lies low. Nigma, being a genial sort, sends a gift basket: oranges, marmalade, some key lime wine that was quite palatable. It was good of him. We received no such gesture from Ms. Quinn when she went to France last year."

"She's cheap," Raven pronounced from the doorway, "just like Joker."

"Now, now, my dear," Oswald waved her in, "Don't be bitter just because they tip you in monopoly money. Come meet our new bartender, Greg Brady."

“Groovy,” was Raven’s only response.

“Anyway, to resume the narrative,” Oswald continued, feeling his new bartender was indeed very easy to talk to, “the trouble with Nigma is that he thinks he’s so terribly clever. And he always has to be proving it. So with the basket of this and that—that key lime wine was surprisingly good—there was a letter. A long, detailed letter which I suppose he intended to be entertaining, effervescing about the many pleasures of this lush tropical paradise: Sunset Celebration in Mallory Square, colorful characters, live and let live attitude, taverns everywhere, a party town, warm tropic climate, and so on.”

Oswald paused, reflecting that perhaps he shouldn’t go into such detail with the new bartender. Seeing where this was going, Greg covered the awkward hiatus by refilling Oswald’s glass.

“Yes, that very excellent key lime wine, I must remember that,” he said quietly.

Finally Raven continued the story, picking up where Oswald had left off.

“Whenever someone that knew Eddie came into the bar, the letter was read again. And I guess after the sixth or seventh repetition...”

“Sly quit,” Oswald said flatly.

“At first, we thought something happened to him,” Raven moaned, “he just didn’t show up for work one night.”

“Like when Kittlemeier disappeared,” Oswald said confidentially, remembering Greg was a Joker henchman and would know about Kittlemeier and the mugging incident. “Then the letter arrived. His resignation. Postmarked Key West. He’s opened his own bar.”

Not knowing what consolation to offer in the face of such dire news, Greg Brady remained silent.

At four o’clock in the morning, an awkward “ ... ” was the best comeback Dick could devise for his wife’s comments. At nine o’clock, having made the pilgrimage to that fountain of inspiration, the Mr. Coffee, he felt he could do better.

As expected, Barbara did not rant like a jealous harpy because of the deluded fantasies of *The Gotham Tattler*. These things happened, she said. Her objection was that he’d tried to hide from it, which he certainly wouldn’t have done unless the story struck a nerve. Last night, he didn’t have an answer. Now, revived by Mr. Coffee’s elixir of reason for beleaguered husbands—with milk and two sugars—he knew what to say:

“Babs, I didn’t want to get into it in the middle of the night, that’s all. I’m cool with it; I really am. It’s no different than that ludicrous Nightwing-Catwoman story a few years ago.”

“Except you laughed that off,” Barbara objected, sipping her own elixir, splash of milk, no sugar, “Cucucachoo, Mrs. Robinson, and all that. Whereas with this, you brooded like a bat.”

“It’s easier to laugh when you’ve got Selina standing on a stage, mocking the idea in front of a cheering audience,” Dick insisted. “Somehow, I don’t think Ivy is so accommodating. If she has a sense of humor at all, I don’t know anybody who’s seen any indication of it.”

"Fair enough," Barbara conceded. She'd reached the same conclusion in the time she'd spent eavesdropping on the rogue's IM network.

"I swear, I don't know where they get these stories," Dick sighed, relieved that the storm had passed.

Barbara laughed.

"You DON'T? You obviously haven't seen the cover of the Gotham Post this week, have you?"

Dick stared, not understanding.

"They've got their highest circulation in *YEARS*, my dear," Barbara crowed. "This bit about you and Ivy in The Tattler is obviously a ploy by their chief competitor to get a piece of the action."

"I don't get it, what kind of picture could the Post be running that could possibly lead to a Nightwing and Ivy pairing—"

Barbara pointed to her monitor where she had pulled up the picture from the Gotham Post website.

"...Oh... ..my..." Dick gulped after a strained pause.

"*Bonjour, mon plus cher chevalier noir,*" Selina gushed stepping past the customs gate and throwing her arms around Bruce, "*Je t'ai tellement désiré, tu n'as aucune idée.*"

"Watch your language," Bruce chided lightly. He meant her addressing him in public as *chevalier noir*, 'Dark Knight,' and realized too late, only when she laughed musically, that his words seemed like a joke about her speaking French.

"I missed you too," he whispered, kissing her cheek, "I missed your laugh."

In the time it took to walk past the Duty Free, the ATMs, the tourist information booth and the food court, they caught up on those aspects of their lives it was safe to discuss in public. They turned the corner, heading for the elevators to the parking garage. Bruce explained that he didn't have Alfred or the limo with him.

"I came straight from the office. I just hope there's room for your bags in the Jag, otherwise we'll have to get a taxi to follow—"

He stopped speaking and turned slowly to the left. From long habit, Bruce constantly scanned his surroundings, unconsciously processing whatever his peripheral vision detected. In this case, it was a newsstand, a common enough sight in a busy airport, but something...

Gotham Times. Herald Tribune. Daily Planet. London Observer and then... There they were... in living color on the front page of the Gotham Post... Batman and Catwoman... in one of the most spectacularly passionate clinches ever portrayed on newsprint... Her arm wrapped around his neck, she was pressed tight against his body from chest to knee... his left hand cupping the back of her head, while the right grasped her waist... the cape whipping around their legs... a glorious full moon above, golden cityscape behind... It was... *Wow*.

He felt warm breath on the back of his neck and turned to see Selina behind him, looking where he had looked.

"...Well..." she said finally after a lengthy pause, "There's something you don't see everyday."



## PART 3: TWO-FACED TALE - HARVEY

"Two sevens! Go fish!" Joker said, cackling inanely.

"Jack, we're playing poker," we said, through gritted teeth.

"Oh," he said, his grin fading slightly. "Sorry, Tutu!" he said brightly, an innocent smile on his features. Eddie smacked our hand away as we reached over to strangle the clown. Since Oswald was busy interviewing for a new bartender, Eddie was feeling daring enough to return to the Iceberg, despite Oswald barring him a mere day before.

"Question. Should we put up a sign or something advertising our little sojourn or did you already have a small group in mind?"

We regarded Eddie evenly, pondering his question before answering. We had always liked Sly. He was a well-needed breath of normality in an otherwise completely abnormal bar. His departure had hurt us, and we were not going to let him swan off to the Florida Keys without a fight. We had resolved to go to the Keys ASAP and 'bring our boy home.'

Our resolve had been strengthened by the stand-in bartender: Hugo Strange. Admittedly, he would only be bartender until Oswald appointed a replacement, but we had already run through mental scenarios where he became permanent. The thought was too horrible to entertain. We needed Sly.

We answered Eddie's question after some thought.

"We think it's probably for the best if we limit it to as few as possible. We're less likely to get into trouble that way." Despite trouble being inevitable, we thought ruefully.

"Well, that's settled then," piped up Jack with a characteristic grin. "Harv, you're Murdock. Eddie, you're Hannibal. I'm Mr. T, cos I'm a bad Mammajamma..."

"Shut up, Jack," we spat irritably. "As we've already discussed, Eddie's going because he knows the Keys. We're going because, other than Selina, we probably have the best chance of successfully persuading Sly to come home—" Joker motioned to say something. "—Without resorting to bloodshed," we said firmly. Joker sat back down. "And you're going for two reasons. One: when the chips are down, we're going to need someone to punch to relieve our frustration. And Two: well, frankly, we can't figure out how to get rid of you," we said, grinning wickedly.

Jack swallowed hard, laughing nervously. Suddenly, his grin broadened. He was looking over our shoulder.

"I think we may have ourselves a new candidate for punch bag of the trip," he said, giggling slightly. "And so I said 'you *must* get out of that wet magic cloak and into a dry martini!' HAHAAHAHAHA! Oh sorry, Catman, old chum, didn't see you there..."

We turned, a sinking feeling in the pit of our stomach. Sure enough, Tom Blake was swaggering towards us. We groaned. This wouldn't end well.

He and we haven't seen eye to eye since that incident that resulted in him being blackballed from rogue socials. We regarded each other with barely disguised contempt.

"Mister Blake," we managed to snarl, with a conciliatory nod.

"Messrs. Dent," he said, with a nod. We snarled in anger. He ignored us and bowed low.

"Gentlemen. One could not help but overhear your animated conversation."

"And we're sure you tried so hard not to," we snarled, bitterly. He continued, ignoring us.

"I understand you good fellows are on something of a hunt. Well, what better man for the task than I? In words men of your obvious intellect might understand, I wish to join you in your attempt to return Sly to the bar he managed so magnificently. What say you?"

"I dunno, Tommy. The Keys are a pretty wild place. You don't wanna risk spilling anything on that magic cape of yours. It must cost a fortune to dry clean, what with trying to not wash off all the magic and all..."

A collective snigger. Eddie and we exchanged a quick high five. We should explain: Tom Blake is what the ladies, in their genteel manner, call a 'witless dickhead.' Our favorite example of this involves his Catman costume. It is made, so he claims, from some mystic fabric taken from a hidden temple in the jungles of wherever he used to shoot things. He says it gives its wearer the nine lives of a cat. We say it makes its wearer look like a witless dickhead. Jack is particularly spirited on the subject, and we shall never forget the time he introduced Blake to Harley. Predictably, he told her the old nine-lives bit within the first minute (witless dickhead that he is), and Joker, who'd been waiting for it, hopped onto a table and sang *Coat of Many Colors* from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

Blake regarded Joker coldly, fiddling with his handlebar moustache irritably.

"Joker, you, sir, are lucky that the incident of which you speak ended as it did. If the salsa dip you attempted to ply my cape with had indeed made contact, it could have had grievous consequences for the world as we know it. Such is the mystery of the magic of the ancients. Power that should not be mocked by the likes of you."

We stifled a guffaw. He fixed us with a glare. We batted our eye-lid at him. He shrank backwards in distaste.

"There's only one way to settle this," Eddie said, diplomatic to the end. "I propose a vote. If you think Catman should accompany us on our quest, then raise your hand now."

Catman raised a hand. Eddie looked around, deliberately ignoring him.

"No-one? No takers?"

Catman jumped up and down on the spot, arm waving.

"Damn you, Edward, you damnable deuce! Catman wishes to accompany you!"

"Catman do, huh?" we said, thoughtfully.

"Isn't that a dance of some kind?" Joker asked, looking up from attempting to tie Eddie's shoelaces together.

"It's actually a place in Nepal," Eddie said, kicking him away.

We laughed. Suddenly, however, the laughter died on our lips as we spied Hugo Strange behind the bar, attempting to pour a Guinness.

Hugo was not concentrating on his task. Magpie was sitting at her customary stool, studying with intent the jeweler catalogue that lay open in front of her on the bar. Always in search of a new look, and most often turning to MTV to find it, she had recently hit upon Britney Spears as the style that would boost her to notoriety. Sadly, she had chosen to wear a particularly low cut top, one that revealed just about all there was to reveal to the bartender as she leant forward. Hugo, for his part, was staring intently at her cleavage, a line of spittle snaking downwards from the corner of his mouth, through the filthy jungle of beard, culminating in one growing blob near the bottom of his chin.

We watched, the whole group mesmerized, feeling time slowing to a crawl, watching the fetid lump of phlegm dangle agonizingly from the dirty beard that may once have been white, but was now a particularly revolting shade of grey. Not yet willing to relinquish its grasp on the matted hair, the saliva hung desperately to one strand.

All eyes were on that one strand, hoping against hope that it would assist its load in defying gravity just long enough. Hugo reached with a grubby hand for the glass, ready to slide it down the bar to KGBeast. We gasped.

The phlegm had begun its fall. The hand inched closer to the glass. The spittle seemed to be gaining in velocity, speeding towards KGBeast's Guinness with unerring accuracy, the inevitability of it all making our heart ache.

At the same second as Hugo's fingers gripped the glass, his spittle dropped. It landed with a delicate splash in the frothy head of the pint. We looked from it to KGBeast in perfect horror. The poor sap was pounding away in frustration at a Gotham-themed slot machine. Hugo slid the drink down the polished bar surface with a practiced wrist action. Looking for some kind of liquid consolation for his woes, KGBeast grabbed the pint glass in one huge hand and took a long swig.

We looked away, unable to bear it.

He turned to look at our small group, feeling our incredulous collective gaze, a look of puzzlement on his face. Even Jack had been stunned into silence. We looked from KGBeast's confused eyes to his drink and back again. His brow furrowed further.

Jack, ever the diplomat, wandered over to him, looking for all the world like a condemned man might on his way to the gallows. He motioned for the beast to come closer. KGBeast lowered his massive head. Conspiratorially, Jack whispered into his ear. KGBeast's jaw dropped. To conclude, Jack patted him sympathetically on the shoulder. KGBeast didn't appear to notice. He had not moved since his jaw fell, a look of pure horror on his face.

Jack moved away, not wanting to face the inevitable painful wrath. But it never came.

The same expression of horror on his face, KGBeast walked over to us. The sweat was pouring from our brow. KGBeast's temper was infamous in these parts.

He clapped a monstrous hand on either of our shoulders. It is for just this situation that we always carry our will on our person. If you are reading this, and we have expired—hopefully heroically—then check our breast pocket.

He looked at us with eyes that spoke of untold sadness, and said in a shaking voice, "Find Sly. Quickly. Death imminent."

There was an awkward pause. Unsure of whether he meant his death, Hugo's or ours (and not willing to find out), we nodded and shoed our motley crew (Tom Blake included) out of the door.

Key West, here we come.

## PART 4: CAT-TALE - CASSIE

The Batmobile was the most advanced driving instrument ever conceived: a 1200 hp jet turbine engine with a carbon-fiber body that took aerodynamics to the molecular level, it delivered a maximum speed of 265 mph without strain, 0 to 60 in 3.1 seconds. It was, in every sense, *THE BATMAN'S CAR*. Hydraulic steering, titanium-reinforced grapnel launchers for cornering, speed and external radar-control sensors. *HIS!* Afterburner, drag chutes for emergency stopping, ceramic fractal armor panels over the whole thing. It was, quite simply, the ultimate driving machine. And controlling such an awesome vehicle was no small feat. It took concentration, split-second reflexes... Compared to the Batmobile, the exquisite Jaguar Bruce drove now was child's play.

And yet, he was having difficulty. There was... a distraction.

"It's purple, look at that. Their knockoff Catwoman, she's in purple. Not *MY* purple, but there's a tint."

Selina had, understandably, latched onto the Gotham Post cover with a ferocity that was positively feline. It was still a tabloid, she maintained, and they were still lying bastards. But this was the first story to spotlight Catwoman since her one-woman show denounced their degrading slander campaign for what it was. She scoured the picture and accompanying article for any hints that her public image was on the mend.

"I mean, there's still no tits to speak of, and I still don't know what the deal is with those goggles, but this looks better than that Jane Doe disaster, don't you think?"

Bruce said nothing, but allowed his eyes to glance at the image again before changing lanes. To his mind, the most startling aspect of the picture had nothing to do with Catwoman's appearance but the fact that she was wrapped around Batman, and he around her, locked in a passionate embrace. He nearly said as much, but waited. When they stopped at a red light, Bruce looked at the picture more carefully.

"Looks better," Batman's voice graveled finally.

She purred. And for a while they drove in silence.

He knows what that voice does to me. Deep, intense, just a touch of danger. Meow.

He had a point; the purple was secondary to... *Meow*... The Bat and Cat, in the dark, making sparks. Still. I miss my hair. In the picture, I mean, on the copycat. It's not something a guy in a cubicle at the Post would think of while he sat there playing with Photoshop, but when Bruce and I finally started—for real—getting past the teasing, it turns out he really likes my hair. In costume and out, he'll run his fingers through it, or pull it to draw my head back, stretching the neck under his mouth...

"You're purring louder than the car," Bruce observed dryly.

I said nothing for a while. Finally, to fill the pause, I mentioned the purple tint again. It's a victory, and I relished it.

"That's a reflection," he said, "Trick of the moonlight." It was exactly the same killjoy tone he'd use in a museum, like he has to ruin my fun. Jackass.

"It's *PHOTOSHOP*," I rebutted. "There is no moon; there is no reflection. If it's purple, that's 'cause *somebody made it purple*."

He said nothing, but there was a low satisfied grunt before he admitted, "Maybe... a hint... lavender... very pale."

From her position in the ventilation duct of the Grenlore Suites, Batgirl was certain her surveillance target couldn't see her. But she couldn't keep the target in her line of sight either.

Despite being inexperienced with many aspects of daily life, Cassie Cain was far from naïve. What she didn't know, what David Cain neglected to teach her, was omitted in order to intensify her focus on what mattered. And what mattered to David Cain was the kind of knowledge that would make her the perfect assassin.

And so it was that, although she didn't know what kind of ice cream she liked, she knew this was the set of a pornographic movie, rife with cocaine, ecstasy and methamphetamine. And she knew the meth source Black Canary was tracking from raves clubs could be traced through one of the film crew below: the porn star called NeferTitties. NeferTitties not only kept this set and others supplied with illicit substances, she made the round of the underground raves clubs. Her outrageous costume, a Bat cowl and cape over Wonder Woman's bustier and shorts, was meant to be noticed and remembered. For "Batwonderlove" was known on the rave scene as THE source for pot, speed, K, E, GHB, poppers, coke, 2C-B, even magic mushrooms and whippets of nitrous oxide. If it shut down brain cells, you could get it from Batwonderlove.

Batgirl silently opened the vent grate. This crew, she realized, were filming after hours because they had no legitimate access to the building. They were keeping a low profile and had far less lighting than she'd seen legitimate movie companies use when filming on Gotham streets. With the low lighting, Batgirl knew she could risk leaving the vent for the dark shadows of the catwalk. From there, she could keep her target in a direct line of sight.

She preferred to think of the woman she watched merely as "the target." Of all the things David Cain taught her, most Batman had shown her to be false, but that one mental discipline she did retain as useful. It was best to think of the target as precisely that. To spend a night or more trailing this individual and have to think of her as "NeferTitties" or "Batwonderlove" would be a needless penance.

Batgirl knew the target would need to visit her supplier soon. Drug trafficking, like all criminal activity, dropped off during Hell Month. Her stocks would be low, and with the colleges back in session after winter break, the raves would be in full force again...

The target had to meet her connection soon. It was just a matter of waiting and watching.

Greg "Giggles" Brady was finding the transition from henchman to bartender less onerous than the adjustment from Joker's underling to Penguin's. Penguin wasn't nearly as volatile, but he was terribly anxious about his cash register, quacking in the

background whenever it was opened, just to make sure you knew he was watching. And he was curiously obsessive about the amount of liquor poured into well drinks during happy hour. But the greatest adjustment of all was the Penguin's policy about 'breakages.' Breakages were never an issue at the HA-HAcienda. With Joker and Harley, the more breakages, the better.

Still, Greg would have to admit as he stepped outside for a smoke, he liked his chances of survival much better at the Iceberg. And if Cobblepot was a strange little fussybudget, that was still better than... uh oh.

"Who th'fu're you, Dirtwad?"

Blades got his nickname from an unpleasant hobby involving razors and rats. He himself spread the story: sixty kilos of C, Angel Marin was buying, to test the sample Blades offered his razor. Marin took it, cut a line, then looked oddly at the blade—it was sticky and a rodent hair clung to the tip. That's when Angel Marin puked all over a kilo of premium Columbian cocaine.

Blades was meeting the porn twat, NeferTitties. A stupid bitch, but she made up for it being the best meth dealer south of Chinatown. The money and small plastic bags were just changing hands when he heard a loud squeak down the alley. Kitchen door of the nightclub. A man walked out, lit a cig, looked their way—SHIT, money and the bags in plain sight. And Blades had never seen the man before. He reached for his namesake:

"Who th'fu're you, Dirtwad?"

To answer such a question "Greg Brady" seemed foolhardy. To answer "Giggles" was worse. So Greg answered the menacing punk as he was taught to approach Batman when henching for Joker:

Smile. Politely. Then...

Smile. Like you know something about his sister.

Flex up.

Telegraph a right hook

and then

Jab- jab- jab with the left.

Batgirl was about to intervene before the new target, the supplier, sliced up a witness in the alley. But in the time it took to fire a line from the fire escape, the witness took control of the situation. Batgirl watched, fascinated. She saw impressive technique! Imaginative use of a car antenna as an improvised weapon! Not to mention—Ouch—the dumpster lid. That knee wouldn't support weight for a month. It was a pleasure to watch. Nice final kick when the scum was down, just to make sure he stayed down. What a guy.

The witness left the target heaving in a fetal ball of pain and walked nonchalantly back... into the Iceberg Lounge?

The telephone rang the minute Bruce left my apartment. It was Barbara. Drop everything, she said, and get over there ASAP. I looked out the window and saw...

"..."

::What gives,:: squawked the phone, ::Selina, cat got your tongue?::

It was one of those moments of clarity. One of the moments where you realize that, however much you love Bruce, you've let things snowball out of control, and unless you want to wind up with that insignia and the word BATFAMILY tattooed on your butt, steps will have to be taken.

"Barbara, Black Canary was just on the rooftop across from my apartment. Why is that?"

I knew the answer. But I wanted to hear her say it.

::Had to wait for Bruce to leave before I called you, of course. Now seriously, get over here. Don't unpack. Don't do shit. Just get over here right now!::

Forget the fact that I'd just stepped off a plane. Forget that I was still on Paris time and thinking in French. Toss all that aside and you're STILL left with this:

"Cats do not come when called."

::Yeah, yeah, tell it to the belfry. Look, Selina, this is Hell Month and this is an—::

"Hey, none of you even bothered to clue me in on Hell Month last year, so don't think just because—"

::Hang on::

Through the receiver, I heard typing and the distant sound of the 'Oracle voice,' crisp and efficient. When she returned, she sounded pleased with herself.

::There, that's done. 'Wing'll be busy for the next three hours. Selina, I know what you're going to say, but hear me out: It's Hell Month. Then that Post story comes out. (Nice picture by the way. Is that a purple tint?) And then the Tattler tries to top it with Poison Ivy and Nightwing. Zatanna's publicists changed her name to a glyph, so now I gotta draw the symbol for Boron with an umlaut over it just to type up the JLA meeting minutes! —and now *Batgirl is in love with a criminal!* Something's gotta give. It's estrogen solidarity time, so get your furry tail over here! ::

"..."

What else could I say?

"Okay," I began in my calmest humoring-Joker voice, "let me get this straight. Cassie was helping Dinah track a drug dealer to her supplier. She calls in that she found the guy, he's unconscious behind the Iceberg."

"Right," Dinah said absently, leafing through Barbara's copy of the Gotham Post. "He goes by Blades. Real serious scumbag."

"So far, so good. You compliment her on a job well done and..."

"And she says no, not her collar. She's really anxious to give credit where credit is due. It was this other guy. He was *wonderful*. Powerful, fierce, vicious. Like a panther."

I raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything.

"Nobody's ever heard her go on like that," Dinah explained.

"Nobody's ever heard her use that many words together," Barbara added. "And look at this!" She turned one of her monitors so we could all see. It was a mugshot of a

twentyish young man, not bad looking in the decorative henchman sense. "This is the feed from the satellite cave. This picture's been up for an hour, she's reading his file."

"And this is a crisis because...?" I asked. They both stared like it was obvious. "Oh, like I'm really going to object to the idea of a bat-hero stepping out with a villain?"

"Hey, nice picture, by the way," Dinah commented, pointing to the Post. "I see you're still very 'complex,' though."

This was her little joke since the night of Barbara's bridal shower. We logged into a chatroom where some of those faux-sensitive schmucks thought they'd actually score points with women—get this—by pretending they don't like breasts. Flatchested equals "More Complex" was their theory (I am not making this up), that's what was supposed to make them look deep when other guys were superficial: cupsize is inversely proportional to character. And when they pointed to Black Canary and Catwoman as examples of heroines that were simply too busty to have any depth, Dinah and I popped a fresh bottle of bubbly and settled in to have some fun.

I winked at her.

"We should do that again sometime," she suggested, obviously thinking back to the same chatroom. "A girl's night in!"

"Could we stay focused on the issue, please," Barbara interrupted, sounding like a schoolmarm. "It's Hell Month, and Cassie is mooning over a Joker operative, handle of 'Giggles.' Bruce is going to go thermal."

"So don't tell him," I suggested. It seemed an obvious solution. It still DOES seem the obvious solution.

"He'll know," Barbara objected.

"He's Batman," Dinah tacked on.

It's a cult. What can you do with people like that. It's a cult.

"You only encourage him when you say things like that," I told them. "You two do realize that, don't you?"

They stared. More silence.

"Okay look," I said finally, "Hell Month is pretty far along. It's what, A-minus-four already, say he takes another three days to simmer down..."

"Best to allow a full week," Barbara interrupted.

"Fine, a week then. Cassie is a seventeen year old girl. She's gone and done what teenage girls do, found someone who will be a guaranteed headache for all the adults concerned. If she's *THAT* normal, then she can do what all those other teenage girls do, which is keep this thing quiet and nailed down—for a week to ten days anyway. That's really not too much to ask. And in the meantime, I'll ... make some calls, check around the Iceberg, see what I can find out about this guy from the other side. I'm sure I can come up with more info than 'Giggles.'"

Bruce parked the Jag in the garage and entered the manor through the back door. He cut through the kitchen heading straight for the elevator in the butler's pantry.

"I'll be downstairs," he growled when he saw Alfred was there and had to be acknowledged.

“Certainly, sir, I trust Ms. Kyle’s flight was pleasant and...” he stopped when the elevator door shut in his face. He sighed. Hell Month. A-minus-4.

## PART 5: TWO-FACED TALE - ROADTRIP

♪ Four thousand six hundred and twenty seven bats chained to a wall, four thousand six hundred and twenty seven BATS!!! Bite off the head, pull out the wings, four thousand six hundred and twenty six bats chained to the wall!! ♪

And so it went.

On and on. Mile after mile. Bat after bat chained to the wall.

♪ Bite off the head, pull out the wings, four thousand six hundred and twenty five bats chained to the wall!! ♪

We tried to ignore it as the stolen BMW sped down US Highway-1. We were at the wheel again. We, Eddie, and Blake had agreed to take the long haul driving in turns. The idea of Jack driving was too horrible to contemplate.

We tried to concentrate on the gray road. We tried to block out his singing. We really did.

That same, irritating ditty, over and over and over again until our head pounded with... unholy vehemence and our teeth were clenched tighter than the purse clasp of... Gah! we can't remember the name now. A Dickens grotesque is characterized in that way. Just thinking of that stupid tune has completely ruined our power over adjectives. You can only imagine the effect it had at the time.

It is a Dickens character. Her purse clasp snaps shut like a bear trap. We think it was Estella from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Two-Face insists it was Maxi Amberville in *I'll Take Gotham City* by Judith Krantz. But we digress...

We like to think of ourselves as a tolerant man. But we dare you to listen to that same tune, spoken in a deliberately infuriatingly sing song way by a man who is suicide-inducing at the best of times, and see how much you like it.

Got the picture in your head? Now imagine that said annoyance—let's, for arguments sake, call him Joker—has been singing for the past **two hundred miles**...

Catman was the first one to crack. With a cry of "Out, vile spot!" (he has a penchant for misquoting Shakespeare - also for using words like 'penchant'), Blake fell upon Joker and began strangling the sadistic clown with his seat belt. Eddie started a rousing round of applause.

"Tommy... I never knew you cared... Erk!" Joker managed to squeal. With a howl of frustration—the kind that usually means yet another crime of his has been attributed to Selina, Blake tightened his hold on Jack's neck.

We sighed, massaging the bridge of our nose with our fingers. We have never been one for bad puns, so we'll refrain from describing the headache as splitting. But it was a rough one, and it was getting worse. Joker seems to have that effect on us. We honestly couldn't tell you why.

We actually sympathized with Catman, as surprised as we were to realize it. In truth, when Blake cracked, we had been very close to it ourselves, grinding our teeth down to the gum in a desperate attempt to block out Joker's fevered chanting. A glance at Eddie using our rear view mirror confirmed that he was going through the same torment.

He looked drawn and pale and, since the trip had begun, he appeared to have aged a good fifteen years. It was these factors coupled with the fact that he had now joined Blake in strangling Jack—inventively using the shelf behind the passenger seat at the rear of the car for leverage—that led us to the almost Sherlockian feat of deduction that Jack was annoying all of us equally.

We sighed, regretting what we were about to say before the words had left what was left of our lips.

“OK guys, get off him!” we ordered. “He’s going the same color as his suit. And besides, Blake, imagine what the blood of such a creature could do to your precious cloak.”

Blake squirmed away from the now gasping clown, a look of horror on his face.

“Egads, Dent! For once you are correct! The consequences of the potent magic imbibed in my cloak being mixed with the blood of this charlatan could indeed have grievous repercussions...”

Eddie gave him an incredulous stare.

“Don’t look at me like that, Nigma. What would a man of your pitiful intellect know of magicks such as this?”

Eddie’s mouth had suddenly become a very thin line. You don’t cast aspersions on the Riddler’s brainpower, you just don’t. There was going to be trouble. We growled menacingly.

“Oh for the love of...” Words failed us, so we banged our head on the steering wheel, “Can’t we at least pretend to get along?”

“Great idea, Harv,” piped up Joker. His voice was croaky, and yet unnervingly perky. “Now, who’s for a quick game of Eye Spy?”

Almost instinctively, we found ourselves swerving the car hard right into the solid shoulder and bringing it to a juddering halt.

“That TEARS IT!” we hissed. Out of the corner of our eye, we saw Eddie and Catman squirm backward in their seats. We whipped around and fixed all three of them with an angry glare. “Listen you three. We have tried to be patient. We have tried to be understanding. But we have just about reached the end of our tether. Correction. We **have** reached the end of just about every tether! Jack—you will sit in the front seat next to us. You will sit perfectly still and say nothing. And if we hear anything—and we mean anything—from any of you, then there will be HELL to pay.”

“Will it be expensive?” Joker said, “because I’ve only got a couple of bucks on me.”

We fixed him with a glare that could melt ice. Without a word, he came and sat in the seat next to us.

“Right then,” we said, sighing heavily. We kicked the car back into gear.

“Sorry, Mom,” came a murmur from the back. Our head snapped round again, eyeing Blake and Eddie, daring them, willing them even to attempt to mess with us. They said nothing and did their best to look innocent.

Making a mental note to stop Eddie’s allowance when we got home, we resumed driving.

We had stopped at the last service station for a quick bite to eat. Joker had also picked up some reading material—that is to say, all the most recent gossip rags.

We had calmed down since the little outburst about two hundred miles back and were actually enjoying the ride now. There's something about the freedom of the open road that we enjoy. The same thing that had inspired so many singers, writers and poets to write about it, we supposed.

Suddenly, in the seat next to us, Joker began whistling innocently. Our heart began to sink. That kind of whistle could only mean one thing. Trouble.

We tried to ignore him, but we couldn't. We simply had to know what he was up to, if only out of very morbid curiosity. Resignation in our heart, we looked over to him.

He was clutching one of his gossip magazines. This one, judging from the bawdy graphics that adorned the front cover, was called 'The Gotham Tattler.' We knew of it, actually. The Tattler is a particularly trashy tabloid that looks into the meaningless lives of meaningless celebrities in Gotham City. Being as Gotham is one of America's most infamous towns, the magazine (using the word loosely) is available nationwide.

We were about to regale Jack with a five-minute speech on the pointlessness of such publications when something caught the corner of our eye.

Ivy was on the front cover. Our ex girlfriend, Ivy. A shudder passed through us at the memories, experiences shared and wounds not totally healed. But what was she doing on the front cover...?

And then it struck us. Next to her was a picture of Nightwing. A lump of seething fetid bile was forming in our throat. We read the glossy caption.

"Nightwing and Ivy! Together at last!" screamed the headline. We turned to the road, our jaw clenched. Our hands gripped the steering wheel. Hard.

"Sordid meetings in the Brazilian rainforest," Joker read out. "Baby oil and plant pots... and—Eeeew! Oh ,that one's too sick to read out! HAHAHAHA! Ivy and Nightwing, eh? Who knew, huh, Harv? Hardly surprising, though. Harl was just telling me the other day how he's got the cutest ass in Gotham. Naturally, I was disgusted and mildly offended, but it seemed like an appropriate fact to throw in nowish. HAHAHAHA!" He said this, lightly punching us in the shoulder. We said nothing, eyes staring forward, hands gripping the wheel even tighter.

Eddie sighed sympathetically.

"Sorry, Harv. Better luck next time, eh?" He paused, looking past us and out of the windshield. "Uh, Harv..." he said, uncertainly. "Far be it from me to criticize, but don't you think that electricity pylon is getting a little close? Harv? Harv?"

Fortunately, injuries from the crash were relatively light. No one was seriously hurt, with the worst injury being sustained by Jack. In a freak accident, after the crash our fist seemed to somehow connect with his eye, leaving him with some nasty bruising.

We waited around for about half an hour for a tow truck to arrive and pick up the BMW now shaped like a fortune cookie. When it arrived, we pulled the driver from the cab, leapt in and drove off. Catman insisted on driving this time, so in the interests of peace and to avoid further argument, we left him fuming at the side of the road.

Surely you didn't expect anything less?

We hate Nightwing.

"I'll bet you never knew, Harv, that the Florida Keys cover an area of 1024 square miles and have a population of 81,000 people."

We looked out of the window of the tow truck impassively as Eddie read aloud from his guidebook. We were driving across the long, flat "7-mile bridge" that links the islands and the mainland together.

We hate Nightwing. What the Hell does she see in him?

"The word 'key' actually comes from the Spanish word cayo, meaning 'little island.'"

Jumped up little brat with his cocky ass attitude and stupid ponytail. Does he still have a ponytail? What does it matter?! He's all 'look at me, I'm Batman's understudy' and we're like 'yeah, like we give a shit' and he's all like 'yeah, but I got a black and blue suit that looks really cool and showcases my cute ass, the one I pulled your ex with' and we're like... 'Knives. Something involving knives...'

"The Keys have an annual rainfall of just 40-45 inches."

Maybe spoons would be better? Rusty ones preferably.

"You haven't been listening to a word I've said, have you, Harv?"

We turned to Eddie, and grinned apologetically.

"What? Oh yeah, right. Yeah, don't dye it bright red, it won't do anything for your complexion."

Eddie sighed in a long-suffering manner. He patted us on one shoulder, and continued reading.

"It says in here..."

We stopped listening again.

Whether the bat-brat and Petal were together or not, we were here to bring Sly home.

That was our mission objective. We were a single-minded calculating machine. We were like Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan*. We had to bring someone home, and we were going to do anything in our power to do so.

That was the reason we were going to The Keys this January. No really. It was.

OK. We're not convincing ourselves, let alone you. It's time for the truth.

We rogues have a theory. January is what we call 'Hell Month.'

The reason we call it that? Because it's what the beatings dished out during this time hurt like. Don't get us wrong—Batman is a skilled fighter and all his beatings hurt. But in January, things are different. He's more savage, angry—violent, even by Gotham standards. Essentially, if you're a criminal, and you're planning to remain in Gotham City in January, you'd better have exceptional medical insurance, or at the very least, an ample supply of morphine. At first, we assumed our Hell Month theory was paranoia, but when you're lying in a hospital wing (handcuffed to the bed, of course) and you find yourself surrounded by virtually every crook and lowlife in the city, their leg casts and traction cuffs similarly chained to hospital beds, you do start to see a pattern.

We shuddered violently thinking of Hell Month back in Gotham. Naturally, we snapped up the chance to avoid it. Who wouldn't? We had even hypothesized it might be a scheme of Sly's to get some of his more favored clients out of Gotham for a while. Who knows? All that mattered was that we were in picturesque Florida on

what was essentially a holiday, and we would be keeping our teeth where they belonged for the first January in years.

We smiled at the sign on the bridge that welcomed us into the beautiful “Conch Republic” of the Florida Keys. The smile held for a second, then faded as another thought crossed our mind.

We really hate Nightwing.



## **PART 6: CAT-TALE - SELINA**

I'm the first to admit, I've had some odd visits to the Iceberg Lounge. There was the New Year's Eve that Harley Quinn lost a bet with Catman, drugged my champagne, and delivered me to his table trussed up in wrapping paper with a bow on my ear. There was the famous Grand Reopening after an especially festive brawl took out the icicle chandelier. There was Joker and Harley's anniversary... the first slumming visit with Bruce... and who could ever forget Jervis's Aunt Maud. But even by Iceberg standards, this was a very peculiar episode.

First, it was raining; I got caught in the rain. And Oswald, the umbrella king, is always just a little snooty if he catches you running in out of the rain holding a newspaper over your head. It's like you've let him down.

Not to mention, the place was a ghost town. No Eddie, no Harvey—my preferred informants, being as close to sane as you can find in an establishment run by Oswald Cobblepot. It was still early, so I sat at my usual table in the big dining room and waited. Finally, an alternate news source arrived. No one will ever call The Mad Hatter sane (if they did, I suppose Jervis would have to find himself a new handle), but mad as he may be, he is an eerily reliable fount of information on just about everybody.

"Evening, Jervis. Buy a lady a drink?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly; you make one quite giddy!"

This is the usual shtick when Jervis sees me, Alice to the Cheshire Cat. Then I always smile, he sits and spouts a little more nonsense about seeing a cat without a grin or a grin without a cat, and we can get down to business.

"The place seems pretty empty tonight," I remarked.

"Leaving ever so much tea and crumpets for the rest of us," he twittered, tucking a napkin into his collar.

"Absolutely," I answered, because with Jervis, as with Joker, you have to pick your battles.

"And where has the Cheshire Cat been these many a day?" he asked pointedly. And I could just tell he was making the transition from Mad Hatter to Gossip Gertie. "Out of town for Hell Month?"

"Yes," I answered, truthfully enough.

After a long pause—once he figured out I wasn't going to offer details no matter how long he sat there waiting—he moved on to a more promising subject.

"Heard about Sly?"

I hadn't. While Jervis told the whole sordid story, I twisted to see into the bar. And sure enough, there was the man I'd come to snoop about: Giggles.

"So Two-Face has gone off with Joker, Riddler and Catman to bring our boy home—by any means necessary. And the worst of it is, he's missed that delicious bit about Ivy and Nightwing in the Tattler. So now we are all deprived of seeing his reaction firsthand. We shall be dependent on his traveling companions for a report."

"By any means necessary" sounded ominous, particularly from that foursome.

"Jervis, just out of curiosity, if it's that important to get Sly back, why didn't you go?" He knew what I was getting at. His mind-control chips are a hell of a lot more persuasive than an ex-prosecutor with a duality complex, a killer clown, an anagram freak, and Mr. Magic Cape.

"One cannot train a 'hatted' individual to mix a proper martini," Jervis stated, "I've tried."

He looked at the empty novelty glass in front of him, and I could just tell he was about to go off on one of his mad tea party episodes...

"I should like a fresh drink," he said, "your glass is full. Let's change seats."

The thing about Jervis is: as mad as he gets, the opportunity to spread some gossip will usually bring him around.

"*Twinkle, twinkle, little bat. How I wonder where you're at...*" he recited.

"So Jervis, what do we know about the new guy?"

"...*Up above the world you fly, like a teatray in the sky...*Hm? Oh Giggles? He's a most interesting dormouse. Joker's henchman he was, a go-getter, a fine Knave of Hearts. Always first into the fray. No mousy lookout duty for him. Always volunteered for the muscle work. A bruiser."

I looked back into the bar. The chap being described as the Joe Louis of the Gotham underworld was polishing a hurricane glass. I decided to have a closer look.

"Why don't I get us some fresh drinks," I said with a twinkle.

Cassie put the finishing touches on her disguise and regarded herself in the mirror. She had forsaken the advice Barbara and the others thrust upon her when she asked about a new look to attract Azrael. She learned much from that. Their advice was useless. She was seventeen, after all. She needed to be her own woman. She needed her own look, one to reflect today, not the outdated modes of the first Batgirl, Black Canary, and Catwoman.

Of course, Spoiler was nearer her age and likely to understand. Under normal circumstances, Cassie would have turned to her. But lately, all Stephanie wanted to do was whine about Tim seeing Cecily. Cassie avoided her.

It didn't matter anyway. She didn't need advice. She could manage well enough on her own. Batgirl had seen enough of the Goths and groupies that hung out at the Iceberg to realize an extreme look patterned after some themed criminal was the perfect in. She could infiltrate the club and be accepted as one of the transient groupies that hung around hoping to be picked up as a henchwench. Then she could be near him, her adored one, *Gregory Brady*.

"Greg Brady?" I sputtered, nearly choking on my martini. "Your name is really Greg Brady?"

There was an awkward pause in which the bartender said nothing, just looked out with a hangdog expression. I realized he must get that all the time.

"No wonder you turned to crime," I smiled, sipping my drink.

“Also why I got out,” he said casually. “Mr. Joker said he was going to start grooming me, said I should set off on my own one of these days as THE BRADY, said he’d have a big 70s theme crime spree to launch me.”

I confess the statement caused me to down that martini just a bit faster than was wise. I couldn’t help it. The mental image of Joker in bell-bottoms and platform shoes, of Harley Quinn spouting phrases like ‘Foxy,’ ‘Dyn-o-mite’ and ‘10-4 good buddy.’ I chugged my martini, okay? I couldn’t take it, and I chugged my martini.

Bruce strode from the stalactite to the costume vault and flung the cowl into the wall. The exertion did nothing to lessen his frustration so he punched the shelf meant for Selina’s Catwoman costume. It splintered into bits, embedding slivers of wood in his unprotected hand, but again, did nothing to alleviate his frustration.

He couldn’t meditate. Three days to the anniversary, and the ritual cycle had begun: when he was not out as Batman, he was in the cave: working out, meditating, reading the logs that recorded each night’s progress of his mission since it began, more working out, more meditation. He would take only water and vitamin tablets in this time. The monks taught that three days was a suitable period for a fast in the cause of purification. He would not sleep, for natural sleep would only interfere with the directed focus of his meditations, the meditations that would intensify his focus on the mission until he became one with it: his parents, the murders, the mission, Justice. The concentration must be absolute, to become an avatar of the mission, to become Justice incarnate... except... his fist clenched, forcing drops of blood through the creases where the splinters pierced his skin... except he couldn’t do it.

He couldn’t meditate. He’d focused on the one-point, the chakra, his center of gravity. He focused on his breathing. He focused on the stalactite, the nothingness of pure air between his eye and the stalactite, the sound of condensed moisture dripping off the stalactite to land with a damp squelch against the stone floor. Nothing. He couldn’t clear his mind.

So he’d gone to the costume vault and took down the cowl, placed it before him, and used it as a focus. The face of Batman. The mission incarnate.

And still... Nothing... He couldn’t still his thoughts.

Not since the Harley-Catman incident have I come out of the Iceberg with such a beastly hangover. After that first martini gulped in reaction to the Joker-70s horror, I stayed at the bar, nursing another. I didn’t especially want another drink, but it let me chat a while longer with Giggles and I learned a surprising amount.

He was far from the bloodthirsty zealot Jervis had described: He did volunteer for muscle work, but not for love of ramming his fist into Batman’s face. It was survival strategy. Giggles had noticed that most henchmen prefer lookout duty: find a nice quiet spot, keep an eye out for Bats, and let the other guy get his ass kicked. What they didn’t realize is it’s always the lookout that gets stuck bringing Joker the bad news: The Batmobile is out front. Ergo, Batman is coming. Ergo, Batman escaped the deathtrap. Then SPLAT, flat lookout. Or BANG, lookout’s chest gushes blood. Or

Pfffffft and HA-HaHa-HAHAHAHAAAA! Lookout gasps, spasms and stiffens into one of those hideous deathsmiles. So Greg "Giggles" Brady decided he was a muscleman, not a lookout.

"I heard you're always first into the fray," I mentioned.

That too, he said, was strategy. Joker might blame the last guy to go down, the one who actually lets the Bat get past him to wring Joker's own neck. And the last man left standing can sometimes get used as a human shield. No, it was better to lead the charge. First in, first out.

It made sense. The only problem was that Oswald overheard my question and thought Catwoman was poaching. Was I trying to steal away his new help?

Now I never went in much for henchmen, and Oswald knows that as well as anybody. Now and then, if I was setting up a new lair or stealing something heavy like a big stone antiquity, then maybe I'd pick up a few guys to do the lifting. But to employ men for the purpose of fighting with Batman? No. That is, to put it mildly, not my style. Catwoman has always known how to handle the Bat and Greg Brady doesn't enter into it. Not in any way.

But Oswald is a little paranoid these days, and one has to make allowances.

By way of assuring him, Giggles demonstrated how I was just teaching him to make my special martini: Drink #3.

With the third drink, I did get to hear why he was such a terror with the hyenas. The file Barbara showed me did mention that Joker's snarling pets would often attack alongside this particular henchman. Why? The Batfile theorized it was his fierceness. Nope. Giggles survived by flying under the radar. He kept quiet, watched and listened. When he saw Joker becoming pensive, he didn't stick around to see if it was one of those "it's Thursday, let's kill all the henchmen" moods. He made himself scarce. He took the hyenas out for a run! They liked him, so when he charged into battle, they ran alongside him.

It was really quite funny. I would have thought so even without that third martini.

Cassie turned off the television in horror. She hadn't understood what was so funny about the name Greg Brady, but some of the comments in his police file made her curious. She never watched television, except for Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The show was silly for most of the hour, but at least once in every episode, there would be an exciting display of imaginative fighting techniques.

It took her a while to find TVLand, but once she did, she understood. Greg Brady... "Groovy"... what a terrible handicap for a great warrior.

So I had the information I came for. It cost me three martinis on top of jetlag to get it, but I had the 411: Cassie's new amour a.k.a. Joker's former henchman Giggles was Greg Brady, strategic hyena-walker and avoider of lookout duty. Groovy. Now I *JUST* wanted to go home, have a hot bath, and climb into bed.

But no. There was still an obstacle between me and the exit sign, and that obstacle was leafy, lonely, and fresh out of Arkham.

"Come sit with me, Catty."

You had to know Pam to recognize who was talking. To the outside observer, it would have looked like the wall of ivy and clematis around the booth was speaking. The outside observer might wonder about this, because foliage isn't supposed to talk. But then it's not supposed to move either. Yet here it was, parting like a theatre curtain and holding out a chair for me. In other words: Drink #4.

There really is no other way to deal with Poison Ivy, you have to humor her. I honestly don't know why she bothers with the pheromones and mind control. She can mostly get her way just being a royal pain in the ass if she doesn't. Like the plant from which she takes her name, she is exactly as persistent as a deep-rooted sub dermal itch. You can try to ignore it, but you're kidding yourself. Sooner or later you've got to scratch, so you may as well do it now and get it over with.

So I sat down for Drink #4 - Humoring Pamela: Her skin is alabaster, not green. She is a natural redhead. Paper is murder. Harvey Dent is a loathsome two-timing skunk.

And that brought us to Drink #5: The stories in Gotham Post and the Tattler.

"Where do they get this stuff, huh? Tell me that, Catty. You've had 'sperience with these papers b'fore. So tell me, where would they get an idea like that? NIGHTWING, he's so... tall."

Not a characteristic I personally find displeasing in a man, but if you think I would say that, you're not grasping The Humoring Pam Principle.

"And blue," she went on, making a face, "his costume, it's so BLUE."

Again, I'm not entirely clear on what's objectionable about blue, but again I let this pass.

"And those pictures—I have leaf hair! Leaves are for adornment, not coiffeur. The leaves of the living vine make becoming gilding for the body, and on mine they—like everything - are irresistible, but in the hair!"

"Pam, you look fine," I reassured her, "at least they didn't take you down three cupsizes."

"FREDERICKS OF HOLLYWOOD! WILL YOU TWO GIVE IT A REST!"

Pam and I looked at each other and the vine curtains parted to reveal—a thoroughly pissed Roxy Rocket.

"Ivy, you looked hot in those pictures. I would give everything I have if my worst problem was that the COVER STORY on me in a national paper didn't have me looking hot *in the way I prefer to look hot*. And Catty, take a reality pill. Everybody who's actually *had sex* can see what they're doing. The affected virgin lemmings carp that breasts are sexist. Fine, so they reshape the T&A to downplay the T and punch up the A. The undersexed pundits *don't have a clue* what's happening, and right under their noses all the normal, healthy red-blooded guys get an even better show. Meanwhile, while you two sit here whining about your coverage, SLY IS GONE! The only bit of identity I ever had around here was 'cause he noticed me and now HE'S GONE!"

"..."

I looked at Pam.

"..."

Pam looked at me.

I threw a twenty on the table and stood to leave. Pam did the same. Once you've been publicly spanked by Roxy Rocket, there's nothing more to say. It's time to go home.

## PART 7: CAT-TALE – HELL MONTH

Nothing turns a bunch of hardened criminals into drama queens like the subject of Hell Month. “The savage brutality of Genghis Kahn, the cunning cruelty of Torquemada, the sadistic torments of the Marquis de Sade, the terrible wrath of Attila the Hun, the searing pain of—” I dunno, Amazon menstrual cramps.

Hard to believe, isn’t it. I mean, they’re talking about *Bruce*! Contrary to what some people say, I do have a healthy respect for the Bat’s dark side. But he is not mentioned in the Book of Revelations. He’s a crimefighter and a damn good one, but even at his worst, he is not a horseman of the apocalypse.

If you want to talk sadistic wrath of vengeful torment, consider the hangover. Try pouring five martinis on top of jetlag, then sharing a cab uptown with Pamela Isley. Okay, first: her skin is *green*; not alabaster, and a henna rinse does *not* make you a natural redhead. And when you share a cab, it is customary to drop the person who lives closest *FIRST*, let them pay their share and go on their way. Particularly when they’re nursing a hangover and want nothing more than to go home, swallow five or ten aspirin, and die in their own bed. But no, Queen Chlorophyll has had some kind of falling out with the oak trees in Riverside Park, so she has to go back to her old digs in Robinson Park. And Robinson Park has been re-landscaped, so it might take a few tries to find the right path. And she can’t leave the cab waiting if she’s all alone. Don’t ask me why. I’m still working on ‘tall’ and ‘blue’ as her chief objections to Nightwing’s romantic appeal.

I finally did get rid of her, got home, and got some shuteye. Next day, the headache was less pronounced, but still present. I had an invitation to Wayne Manor. Leg of Lamb *a la Pennyworth* was promised, a welcome home dinner. In my hungover condition, I wasn’t in the mood for a big meal, but clearly Alfred had gone to a lot of trouble. Of all the laws, natural and manmade, that govern the universe, there are one or two even Catwoman holds sacred. Of those, “Don’t Cross Alfred Pennyworth” ranks very close to the top of the list.

So I downed a few more aspirin and trudged out to the manor. Imagine my surprise when I learned that Alfred didn’t just leave the message on my machine, it was he who extended the invitation. Bruce didn’t know anything about it. Bruce was holed up in the cave. He’d been down there for a day and a half and wasn’t expected to surface for dinner or anything else for another thirty-six hours at least. Alfred took down a tray, he said, at hour four, then returned at hour six to find the soup and sandwich untouched. He replaced the tray with a fresh one and repeated this procedure at two-hour intervals, except for the period when Batman was on patrol.

“Alfred,” I said cautiously, mindful of the universal law against crossing Batman’s butler, “this might be my hangover talking, but in my opinion, the behavior you’re describing is simply fucked in the head.”

Batman has a subtle way of smiling; it’s best described as a quick, slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. You have to know what to see. Alfred is much the same but more so. Between English, a servant, and the product of an older generation, there’s a

reserved dignity that goes beyond mere 'battitude.' A twitch would be far too demonstrative. Instead, there's this odd glint in the eyes, just a flicker of recognition. I understood what it meant: "'Fucked in the head,' Miss? Right ho!"

I took the grandfather clock passage down to the cave. The stairs weren't ideal, but the thought of Alfred's elevator with my head still throbbing was—ulgh.

The text swam. Bruce sat at his Workstation, eyes fixed on the Log Entries for April 1997: Matches Malone infiltrating Penguin's gang, planting the seeds that would unravel his alliance with Mr. Freeze. He was beyond the point of reading; he just stared at the words... the shape of the letters... *Cobblepot... suspicion... distrust...*

How many hours now... and he still couldn't meditate... The Logs were part of the Ritual, as a record of all Batman had accomplished and all there still was to do...but now they were more than that, they were his only hope of focusing on The Mission... *Penguin... criminal ... apprehend...* focusing to the point of exhaustion... *Frieze... distrust... avenge...* becoming one with it... *avenge... criminal... apprehend...*

"Why?" Until he heard the word, he didn't realize he was speaking. "Why isn't it working? Why can't I focus?"

Suddenly, the sound of his voice was joined by a new noise—Clip. ClipClip.... Clip... echoed... ClipClip... Clip... High heels on rock... Selina... Less clippy than usual.

"Something wrong?" he asked quietly, eyes never leaving the monitor.

"Oh... don't shout. Hangover. Iceberg. Don't ask."

"I won't," he grumbled softly.

Technically, he'd acknowledged my existence. But just barely. I knew better than to treat this antisocial behavior as if it was anything out of the ordinary, so I peered past the back of his head to the file he was reading, some ancient history with Oswald and Freeze. Yawn. Then I saw the Batcuffs. I picked them up, made myself comfy and started to fiddle.

These were the new modified cuffs Eddie had mentioned. New locks, hard to quick pick. I told Eddie I'd take a look when the opportunity presented itself, since I was the one who figured out how to pick the old cuffs. What Eddie didn't know, of course, was that I had suggested the modification: a little flap in front of the Grazour mechanism blocked a standard retractable pick. But Bruce had added something else, something of his own, and I had been meaning to figure out what.

"Don't break those," he snapped.

Don't break those. Unbelievable. The very suggestion of my 'breaking' handcuffs set up, I was sure, a dozen wonderful zingers. But damnit, my head hurt and I couldn't quite work out a punch line. So I had to settle for:

"If I can break them, Stud, then they're not up to the job, now are they."

I decided if my head wasn't up to *talking* about the Batcuffs, it certainly wasn't up to *picking* the Batcuffs. So I set them down and noticed the infamous lunch tray.

"Are you going to eat that sandwich?"

Bruce glowered. Impossible woman. Everyone else got it. Everyone else knew— Even Dick in his most ornery teen years knew: It's all about The Mission. If you can't be focused on that, get the hell out.

The Mission.

Even he couldn't focus on The Mission.

Why?

And why did she have to sit there demonstrating her maddening criminal expertise picking his Batcuffs? It was like she was flaunting her illegal activities right in front of him—in defiance—in The Cave, no less. Inserting herself into his life—again.

"No," he said, ignoring the cuffs and returning to the sandwich question, "I'm not hungry." Hungry. It was a broad word. What did it mean? More than wanting food. Wanting. Will. Will to do things. Will to participate, to partake of the world, taking part in the life experience... No. It meant food. In this case, ham and turkey with mayo and a cup of lobster bisque.

"I'll assume that's why you didn't invite me to dinner," Selina was saying, "Alfred did, by the way. We're having his famous Leg of Lamb Pennyworth. Sure I can't tempt you?"

Amoral Bitch.

She was behind this.

"*Sure I can't tempt you?*" This was why he couldn't focus. The Mission. The Mission was all. "*Sure I can't tempt you?*" To become one with The Mission meant blotting out everything else. Bruce Wayne was a Mask. A Tool. Another Weapon used to advance The Mission. He existed to serve the Bat. "*Sure I can't tempt you?*" Bruce Wayne carving out a bit of life for himself was never part of The Plan. Thus far, it had not interfered with The Mission, so Psychobat let it be. But now he couldn't meditate. He could not shut out the man Bruce Wayne had become. The man beyond the Bat was refusing to be silent... "*Sure I can't tempt you?*" It was all her fault.

"No," he pronounced finally. He meant it to sound firm, but even to his own ears it sounded stubborn instead. He tried to soften it. "No thank you." Silence. "I'm not hungry," he added, not realizing he'd said this before.

"Suit yourself." She shrugged as if it was of no importance, picked up her bag and headed towards the Costume Vault.

Putting away the catsuit.

He swiveled his chair back, meaning to return his attention to the computer, but instead a thought struck him and continued his momentum all the way around until he faced the Vault again.

Putting away the catsuit, *Catwoman's catsuit!* Defiling his Vault with a criminal's costume!

"I can handle putting a costume away," he called, stalling for time chasing after her. He caught up with her at the door. She looked amused—like she always looked before a Vault.

"So can I," she answered lightly.

Typical. Defiant—like she always was before a vault. Impossible woman.

Bruce turned back towards his Workstation, took a single step, then paused with a slight stumble when, as before, a thought hit him: *If she goes in the Costume Vault she'll see...*

**"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU Doooooh damnit, mustn't shout."**

*...she'll see that her shelf was smashed to bits.*

In a heartbeat, she stood before him in the Vault doorway, holding two splintered pieces of wood the size of popsicle sticks.

She repeated her query silently, with only a questioning raise of an eyebrow.

"Oh, that," he said gruffly, "I needed some space."

"Needed space for what?" she asked finally.

"There's still a hanging peg in there for you."

"The peg pulls the leather. Needed the space for what?"

"What does it matter, I needed the space. I'll get you a hanger for the suit."

"Don't bother, I never asked for the shelf. I can go back to keeping it under the bed.

Needed the space for what?"

He snorted contemptuously. "Under *MY* bed, you mean."

"Bruce," she looked him in the eye, refusing to be baited, "Needed the space for what?"

"..."

"You needed the space for your fist, didn't you?"

The look was a new one. Not a deathscowl, to be sure. Not a glare, nor a glower. Whatever it was, it was followed by a soft grunt. To the untrained ear, a grunt like any other. But to Selina, well versed in the nuances of BatSpeak, it was an answer, as much of an answer as she was going to get.

A look and a grunt. He didn't want to open this up for discussion, but it was hard to turn his back on genuine concern. Particularly when he knew if he did turn away, the concern would follow him, stubborn, defiant and ferociously feline.

"It's not a big deal," he said finally, "I was having trouble meditating. Got frustrated."

"Ah," she said. It wasn't disapproving, nor was it sympathetic. Just "Ah."

Bruce's blood began to boil, and he heard the explanation tumbling from his lips—in Batman's voice—with a hateful bitterness he'd directed at many criminals over the years but never at Selina: This was *HER FAULT*, he couldn't *FOCUS ON THE MISSION. THE MISSION WAS ALL THAT MATTERED* and he *COULDN'T SHUT HER OUT!* Damn her to hell! She and all she brought with her! Damn the joy she found in living. Damn her loving him for who he was. Damn her for opening his mind and his heart to things in this world besides hate, anger and rage. How in the *HELL* was he supposed to turn all that off!

When he finished, he was breathing hard.

Selina said nothing. She was silent for a long, long minute.

I almost turned away and left. Not for good, just to give him some time until he was rational. Obviously he wasn't right now. When someone lays into you for making them happy, that's going straight through irrational into the land beyond, where Jack

kills his henchmen because it's Thursday and Ivy is a natural redhead because henna is a plant.

I stayed—not because of anything he said, but the way he said it. The pain in his voice was palpable. I took me right back to the beginning—to Xanadu—it reminded me why I'm here.

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

What he needs from me, what he somehow sensed Catwoman would give him that no one else did or could: I'll never make light of his tragedy, but I will not be another acolyte at his Temple of Loss. Leaving him alone until he's rational, that's what they all do. And that's exactly why I stayed.

He'd gone back to his workstation. I followed and read over his shoulder. Ignoring the more personal aspects of his rant against me, I went straight to his favorite topic: The Mission.

*"So... April 1997. Quite the pressing emergency you've got there."*

"Is there a point to this?" he spat. And I could hear it in his voice: *"You still here? Impossible woman. I thought you were smarter than that—can't you take a hint?"* The message was clear enough. He just pronounced it: "Is there a point to this?"

"You tell me. What is the point of this? Tell me how justice is served by you being hungry, tired and alone."

He got up in a huff—again—and poured himself some water from a pitcher on the tray. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

"Justice is served when I have all of the tools and information necessary to complete my task."

"Nice try, but not even close," I pointed to his monitor of 1997 crime fighting issues, "Tiffany's is building a replica of the 240 carat blue diamond from Titanic for Celine Dion to wear at the Oscars, think Catwoman will make a play for it before it's sent to Hollywood? I'm guessing not, 'cause I was in Martha's Vineyard at the time. So let's try again. You, hungry tired and alone: what's the payoff?"

"I'm eating and sleeping all that I need to. I can handle the physical pressure—HEY, WHATTHE—BITCH!"

That last outburst because I swept his leg and he landed ducking into a backward roll, hit the railing and wound up in an undignified sprawl. Nothing more needed to be said. On his worst day, he should have seen a move like that coming. He was not handling the physical strain. Justice was not served by his being depleted. There was something else going on here with this "ritual," something that had nothing to do with the Mission. Sequestering himself in his cave, starving himself, exhausting himself. It wouldn't protect his city, save innocents or frighten criminals. What was it supposed to do?

"Is there a reason you're punishing yourself?" I asked, sitting on the floor next to him and leaning back against the railing. He stood and began to walk off towards the workout mats.

"No pain, no gain." Then an exasperated grunt. I knew why: if that was the best answer he could think of.

"That's exercise," I insisted, "This is not productive pain. This is not a burn that makes muscles stronger; this is taking a kitchen knife and carving up your arm for no reason. This accomplishes nothing for Batman. So, *Bruce*, I'm asking again, why are you doing this to yourself?"

Silence. Then...

"I'm going to meditate. Somehow now, I think I'll be able to block out you and everything you stand for."

It was meant to hurt, meant to drive me away—like everybody else during Hell Month. Which is why I didn't let it. Besides, I finally realized what had been bothering me:

"Bruce?" I had followed him to a dark area beyond the mats, his special place to reflect.

"Selina, it's easier to block out the thought of you if you're not actually here."

"The way I was taught to meditate, you don't block out extraneous thoughts, you let them have their moment, run their course, then you can move on. You must know that."

"..."

"So why?"

"..."

"Bruce? *Why?*"

"..."

He stood and looked down at me, stirring a powerful surge of *déjà vu*: We'd done this before, and so many times. All those galleries, all those rooftops, all those vaults. We both knew what we felt back then; it was palpable. But he wouldn't say it aloud. If he said it, he'd have to face it. Then, as now, he resented me for pushing the issue. Well... fine then... let him.

"So," I said frankly, "we're back to pink elephants?"

"What?" he looked incredulous, sounded incredulous — like the first time he saw I'd changed to purple. It was an improvement over sulky-hostile at least.

"Don't think about pink elephants.' It's worked so well up to now."

"..."

*Déjà vu* all over again. If he didn't speak back then, he was also stubborn, tenacious even, when *he* was the one who wanted an answer to something. I'd learned to be the same.

"The question, in case you forgot, is *WHY?*"

"You know why," he growled, irritated that the question wasn't going away. "To instill fear. They *DO* fear me. It will never happen again—not in my City, not in Crime Alley, not while I draw breath."

"This isn't about what you do out there. You want to turn up the heat every January, give them Hell, nobody is questioning that. This is about what you're doing in here, these last few days: not eating, not sleeping, burying yourself in a hole in the ground..."

"THE GRAVE IS NOT A HOLE IN THE GROUND!"

The shout echoed through the cavern. It was only after the last reverberation had stopped that he looked at me. I said nothing. No need. He'd heard it. Slip of the tongue. Paging Dr. Freud.

“The Cave is not a hole in the ground,” he said softly, correcting the slip. Then he said nothing, just looked up at a stalactite for a moment, then back at me. His eyes were searching, naked, pained, like that night in the vault a lifetime ago when he kissed me. “I let them die,” he whispered. “I let them die. I couldn’t save them. I wasn’t strong enough, or fast enough or... good enough to save them. I couldn’t save them that night, so why should I get to enjoy a normal life now? I... I don’t deserve a life.”

There it was: The Why. He was punishing himself because he lived and they died. He was starving himself, exhausting himself, refusing to dwell even momentarily on any part of his life that made him happy, because his guilt said he deserved to suffer.

Fortunately, Bruce is not a stupid man. He could deceive himself for so long by dressing this ritual up in a Batsuit, convincing himself it was part of the Mission. But now that his true motive was spoken, I had an ally, an unexpected ally, in Batman. The most rigid, domineering, autocratic, ruthless aspects of Batman, the Psychobat that’s been my adversary from the beginning, was suddenly my ace in the hole.

Batman was about intellect and discipline. He overruled his feelings, Bruce’s feelings, often enough when they conflicted with the almighty Mission. Now his intellect was confronted with an undeniable fallacy in those feelings:

“Of course you couldn’t save them, you were a child.”

And not just a fallacy, a fallacy that caused an injustice, the worst kind of injustice—a fallacy *that harmed an innocent*:

“You were ten years old, Bruce, there was nothing you could have done. You’re punishing yourself for something that isn’t your fault.”

The searching, vulnerable look was gone. Batman was in charge. He wasn’t going to stand by and see an innocent blamed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But for all the determined gleam in his eyes, he still didn’t speak. He wanted to right the wrong, that was his function, but he seemed at a loss on how to proceed.

“Come upstairs,” I offered, “it’s where the food is, and the sunshine, and the people who care about you.”

“All but one,” he said, slipping an arm around my waist. I felt a hand stroke my hair, and his lips grazed my forehead, just at the hairline. We went up to the manor. I was still hung over and he was exhausted, so Alfred took pity on us, served the dinner on a tray in front of the fireplace. We curled up on the big sofa and crashed for the night.

I know what you’re thinking: Batman taking a night off during Hell Month? Blasphemy! He said he wasn’t up to it, that his depleted physical condition made patrolling an unjustified risk. Personally, I think the Bat felt he owed the Man. This wasn’t over, far from it. But it was a beginning.



## PART 8: TWO-FACED TALE – KEY WEST

We really couldn't believe our luck.

Here we were, sitting on a beach—in Florida, no less—and (this was the clincher) it was Hell Month, and we were miles from Gotham.

For the first time in living memory, the big old coin in the sky had landed in our favor. We sighed happily, lying back, basking in the sunshine. Apparently, this was quite cold for The Keys. It was heavenly for us.

You might think it odd that a wanted criminal with characteristics such as ours could lie on a crowded beach in the sun without fear of arrest or deportation. It is easily explained, however.

Key West is an island. It is a small island. As one local put it: "Honey, (she called us Honey), there ain't nowhere to go to get away from folks, so you better learn to live with them." We believe this whole Live and Let Live attitude results from a great mixing of cultures. Spanish, Cubans, pirates, all living in close proximity with no choice but to tolerate the other guy's food, music, attire, or propensity to wreck ships, claim their cargo as salvage, and auction the booty in the local square. A similar attitude pervades the dank old corridors of Arkham, but it was nice to find it somewhere other than an asylum for the criminally insane.

That history of piracy and wrecking may also explain a certain rebel spirit that looks askance at authority and views what some call criminals with a more liberal eye. Indeed, Eddie claims that, on his first visit, the landlady at his bed and breakfast knew her guest was the notorious Riddler, but didn't care. His worst characteristic, in her view, was that he was "a Yankee," and that regrettable character flaw can be overlooked so long as you hand over your Gold Card at regular intervals.

Naturally, however, as we lay on the beach, none of that mattered. As ashamed as we are to admit it, Sly had been temporarily forgotten. We felt our limbs, aching from hours in the stolen BMW, begin to warm and loosen. We sighed again, listening as the waves softly crashed into the shore.

Our happiness was broken by snickering. In fact, no, this was less of a snicker and more of an outright giggle. Instinctively, and without opening our eyes, we reached to our left and punched Jack hard in the side.

"What wazzat for?" he whined. "Has Eddie discovered I switched his suntan lotion for cooking oil or something?"

We opened our eyes, ready to give Jack yet another lecture. In front of us stood two impossibly muscular blonde haired lifeguards, each trying to stifle a laugh behind well-toned hands.

There was an awkward pause as we tried to ignore this blatant rudeness. The men continued staring at the three of us.

"Can we help you gentlemen?" we asked, becoming increasingly exasperated.

"*L'Anglais en vacances,*" said muscle-bound moron number one to muscle-bound moron number two. Two, for his part, gave up any attempt at stifling his chuckling,

throwing back his head and laughing. He was joined shortly by his friend. We were outraged.

“Gentlemen! We’re not English!” we said, hoping that the tiny amount of French we knew hadn’t failed us. The two laughed even more as they walked away.

We looked over ourselves, Jack, and Eddie. We were wearing swimming shorts. One half was white, made of figure hugging spandex. The other half was black, made of coarse feeling nylon and was much baggier. Eddie wore a body length green swimming costume dotted with little black question marks. He still wore his eye mask. It wasn’t actually a swimming costume—he had simply managed to shrink his regular costume in the wash whilst on Iceberg hiatus. Joker wore outlandishly large goggles with a snorkel attached to the side, flippers, armbands and extremely small purple speedos with a tiny yellow smiley face on. His skin, white as marble, looked satirically out of place in the surroundings.

We had absolutely no idea what the David Hasselhoff fan club had meant.

We resolved to not let it trouble us, reasoning that we were on holiday and should enjoy that fact.

“OK. I’m gonna go swim with the fishies. Just like so many of my victims before me. Heh. Tanning ain’t really my thing,” Joker said, waddling theatrically toward the sea in his black flippers with a slapping sound as the plastic met the sand beneath. We couldn’t help but think of Oswald. “Don’t you boys do anything I wouldn’t whilst I’m gone. So, that means writing ‘ass’ in sun tan lotion on some sleeping loser’s back and pissing in the shallow end are most definitely good to go! HAHAHAHA!”

Eddie growled as he watched him go.

“I always did wonder who did that to me at Penguin’s last pool party. Hugo told me it was Ubu, but I was far too keen on my life to ask.”

We laughed.

“Never mind, Eddie. People forgot about it. Eventually.”

Eddie shuddered despite the heat from the sun. Apparently, for the Keys, this is quite cold. We believe that’s something people from Florida say to make us mainlanders feel better about our subarctic climate.

“Anyway, Harv. That’s not important. Have you given our little quest any thought?”

What with the Nightwing problem, we realized, we had actually given Sly surprisingly little thought.

“Yeah, loads,” we answered.

“Let’s hear it then.”

“Hear what?”

“Your plan!”

“Oh! Uh... well, we’re... gonna need four ski masks, a really large cotton sack, some kind of baton...”

Eddie laughed.

“Proving once and for all that the old adage ‘Two heads are better than one’ is not applicable to those with two faces.”

We decided not to tell him that Jack had switched his lotion. He continued: “Question: Why not just go and talk to him? You’re probably the best person—should that be people?—for the job.”

We had visions of Joker threatening to kill all of Sly's new clientele with Smilex-laced custard pies unless he came home. It was our turn to shudder.

"We don't know, Eddie. What if Sly doesn't want to speak to us? Maybe he finally had his fill of sweeping up shattered glass from the skylight and cleaning blood from tables? Maybe he just wants a normal life—and who are we to try and take that from him?" Despite our best efforts, we couldn't keep a bitter tang from our words.

Eddie glanced over at us knowingly.

"That's a lot of questions, Harv. And speaking as someone who is very well-versed in that particular art, I'll say this: A question needs an answer. If only for piece of mind. If you don't go and speak to Sly, you will never know what might have happened. You will always curse yourself for not having at least tried. What have you got to lose? Answer—nothing. But you've also got everything to gain."

We sighed. We hated it when Eddie went through this Mahatma Gandhi routine. He had a point, though. And his plan wasn't too bad, we supposed. We and Sly had always got on well. In many respects, we had been each other's bastion of sanity in The Arkham Asylum Bar and Grille, otherwise known as The Iceberg Lounge.

Our musings were broken by a commotion coming from the water. We sat up.

Joker, armbands and all, was floundering pitifully in the water.

"Uh, guys... I've just remembered—I can't swim—Heh, heh, heh gurgle splutter." He broke off as he began sinking underneath the salty foam and his mouth began to fill with water.

We shrugged, and laid back down. Sighing heavily, Eddie dragged us up by the arm until we were both standing.

"What?!" Two-Face asked him incredulously, more than happy to let the little shit drown. He gave us a glare. We looked over at the sinking clown. His hand was the only thing visible now. His fingers were counting down from five as they do in cartoons to signify how much air he had left. We sighed, Harv winning this particular moral battle. "OK. OK."

With that, we both ran to the water. After a few minutes struggling, we emerged carrying the deranged, and no longer breathing, clown on our shoulders. We threw him down on the sand.

Eddie crouched at his side, pressing an ear to Jack's chest.

"He's not breathing!" he pronounced. Eddie's crowning moment was when he appeared as an extra in E.R.

Within seconds, one of the Hasselhoff brothers had appeared. Attached to his ankle was one of those stupid little red life buoys that all lifeguards seem to carry. Pointless in this case, as Jack was on dry land, but we were not able to point that out as the buoy had skipped on the sand and smacked us in the face.

We cursed.

Ignoring us, the lifeguard dropped to the floor. Taking a moment to do a couple of press-ups (much to the glee of some of the female observers), he looked up at me and Eddie.

"Do any of you know the kiss of life?"

"Hell no!" we said, stepping backward. We do actually know it (when you play games like we and Ivy used to, you need to), but definitely not in this case.

"In that case, I'm going in," said the lifeguard. We turned away, wincing.

"We never—and The Joker means NEVER—speak of that incident again," Joker said, sitting on the corner of his hotel bed, a serious expression on his normally cheery features.

We and Eddie nodded. That was more than fine by us. Joker's shrieking upon waking could easily have been mistaken for whales mating and may have short-circuited the Gulf ecosystem for at least a month.

"I would rather have died than endured that," Joker continued to rant. "He should have known that. Hence, a suitable revenge has been arranged. Don't think that you will escape punishment just because I enjoy tormenting you both. If you mention it, ever, to anyone, I'll carve a smiley face onto your foreheads with a shovel. And that's just for starters. Suffice it to say that Smilex **will** be involved in some shape or form."

We nodded meekly. We are glad that Eddie did not point out at this point that, ever since the 1960's, Key West has been famous for its free and welcoming attitude towards homosexuals. Indeed, the brochure Eddie had read claimed that the area was 'a closet with no doors.' We doubted Jack would have seen the funny side of it. For once.

Suddenly, the door of the room burst open, almost flying off its hinges.

Framed in the doorway was Tom Blake. Catman.

He looked for all the world like a feline version of Norman Bates. His clothes were unkempt, his hair also. His eyes glittered dangerously at us, the psychotic gleam more prevalent than usual. His face was framed in a scowl The Bat would have been proud of. Atop his lip, which had disappeared into a menacing little line, sat his handlebar moustache, curling upward at the edges. This had the most disconcerting effect of reminding us of the horns atop Satan's enormous forehead, but we quickly dismissed the comparison. Blake was turning far redder than the Dread Lord could probably manage anyway.

He pointed one shaky gloved finger at us. We actually felt a twitch of fear tugging at our chest. We had never seen the little furball this angry, and he was surprisingly intimidating.

"You..." he managed to rasp huskily, still pointing at us, "You accursed deuce... you left us at the side of the road... with a man who goes by the undoubtedly stolen name of 'Billy Bob Jonah Jim'... For my money, that defies all normal confines of Western society in that he has two first names too many and one last name too few... Anyway—it turns out that not only is Mr. BBJJ an unwitting follower of Fascism and the Neo Nazi movement, he is also..."

Catman shuddered here as if the recollection was painful for him—he continued, swallowing hard as he did so.

"A dog lover. As if that situation were not despicable enough by its own merit, he then proceeded to tell me that whenever the chance came by, he would run over cats in his truck. And seeing as how my friends had taken his truck—how I quarreled at the use of the word 'friends' as illustrated by the same brazen act of treachery he took issue with—he would be forced to take out this particular cat with his bare hands. Naturally, I paraphrase and censor the more obscene sentences."

Catman took another step into the room, still pointing at us accusingly.

“I attempted flight. But for a man of such dubious moral character, he was surprisingly swift. I attempted to blend into a nearby hedge, hoping the potent incantations in my cloak would create a chameleonlike effect. Unfortunately, however, BBJJ appears to be immune to my magic,” said Catman, gesturing to a previously unseen nasty looking bruise above his left eye. “After a long and exhausting run, I realized I had managed to lose him. It was no surprise, of course. I once tracked a lioness for three days as I felt I needed a new rug. This was nothing but a stroll along the asphalt for an athlete such as I. From there, it was only a matter of time before I managed to commandeer the use of a car from a local job. You were easy enough to track down, of course. Most of the locals were only too happy to tell me where I could find a man with two faces, a man adorned in question marks, and a man dressed like a clown.”

“I knew we should have bought those fake moustaches when we had the chance!” said Jack, slapping his forehead in disgust.

We turned from him to Blake, swallowing nervously. Joker’s gag had only infuriated the mercurial toff more.

“Tom—we’re sorry—it was the coin—we flipped it—you know how things go...” We didn’t get a chance to finish our half-hearted (literally—Two-Face was proud of his part in proceedings) apology as Blake sprang at us with a roar.

We began rolling around on the floor of our hotel room, leveling punches on each other with neither combatant gaining the upper hand. Then Eddie and Jack joined in. It wasn’t clear who they were supporting, but the vase, ornately carved antique wooden chair, and complimentary shampoo bottle they threw into the swirling melee didn’t really help either man.

Moments later, the shotgun-wielding hotel proprietor politely asked us to leave. We did.

This was actually the second hotel we had been asked to leave. The first was La Concha Hotel in the downtown area. You may have heard of it—it was made famous by Tennessee Williams, as it was here that he rewrote ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ into the famous play that we all know and love today. A plaque on the wall in the lobby also claimed that this hotel had seen such famous residents as Ernest Hemingway and Truman Capote. It seems to us that everywhere in The Keys has a Hemingway story attached to it.

Still, there is no doubt that a musty yet delicious air of history hung over that hotel. Understandably, they didn’t take too well to Jack turning his bed into a trampoline and we were asked to leave.

Consequently, we found ourselves out on our ear for a second time. We and Catman had declared our contest a draw; it was the only conclusion that would not result in more fighting and Blake stubbornly refused to flip for it.

We reached the third hotel, stepped into the lobby, and announced to the assembled rogues that it would really not be suitable. Out of principle, you understand.

We eventually settled for the fourth hotel we came across. It was a little shabbier than the other three, but by this time, we were all so tired that we just didn’t care so long as we could get some shuteye.

We can confirm a rumor: Joker *does* tell jokes in his sleep. And if you thought the jokes he tells while he is awake are bad, then you haven't heard anything yet.

Let's put it like this. Of his dormant repertoire, that one about the octopus and the barman was by far the best one of the evening. We shudder at the thought.

Our merry band walked through the crowded town square enjoying the sights, sounds, and smells that lent this beautiful place its character. It was getting late, having spent the day on the beach again, fortunately this time a lot more uneventfully. For city slickers like us, we cannot begin to explain just how wonderful lounging on a beach is. There is simply nothing like the warm grains between the toes to put us in a good mood.

Being able to wander around or merely hang around in broad daylight was also wonderful. Not having to look over your shoulder every five minutes, not listening intently for the sound of a batarang flying through the air or a siren.

We're not going to claim we don't deserve retribution for many of our actions. Half of the time, when I let things slip, we are a ruthless cold-hearted murderer. That's a terrible burden to live with, but it's one I face up to on a regular basis. It was nice to take a holiday from that too, I suppose. A break from the violence, hatred and anger was just what I needed.

You're probably wondering where Darth Duplicity was during this. We had managed to pacify Two-Face with promises of bikinis and tan lines, and he was far from disappointed. We insisted on buying a pair of sunglasses, however, reasoning that if he was going to leer, we didn't want people to see it and think we were one and the same. It is an easy mistake to make for the uninitiated.

The evening soon dawned. A red sun sank into a dark sea, the night sky orange and immeasurably beautiful. The nightlife in Key West really has to be seen to be believed—we can't accurately do it justice, so we'll leave it to your imagination. Suffice it to say: wild is an understatement.

We had reasoned that we would go off and find Sly whilst the rest of the gang would go and entertain themselves elsewhere. Maybe we weren't thinking straight when we came up with that plan, too busy concentrating on being persuasive to realize the obvious problem with it.

Joker, Riddler and Catman... In a new city? With no-one (i.e. us) to keep them in check? As we would realize later on that evening, the plan had not been one of our better ones.

At that moment, though, we were far too buoyant to be worried. It was a beautiful evening, Batman and his temper tantrums were nowhere in sight, and we would soon be reunited with an old friend.

We asked a local woman for directions. After the initial and expected shock of our appearance, she was most helpful and courteous in explaining to us just where Sly's bar was. She even offered to draw me a little map. We politely declined, thanked her with a warm smile and a peck on the cheek, and wandered off.

As we walked down the cobbled streets, we marveled at the encounter. We are pleased to report it is typical. Everyone around here is so incredibly *nice*! We can imagine why Sly likes it here.

It's like we always say. Nice people plus nice people equals a cacophony of niceness that is simply wondrous to behold. Well, we always say it when we are drunk, anyway.

We reached the bar with little difficulty. We laughed slightly as we saw it. It was very normal on the outside in terms of bars, the only thing to distinguish it was the word 'Sly's' in red lights. We were glad to learn he hadn't changed that much; he never had been the most inventive of fellows.

We sighed heavily. It was now or never. The whole damn point of our trip rested on our shoulders! Now was, in fact, the moment.

We dusted ourself off, inspected our teeth for spinach in one of the car's wing mirrors, dabbed at our hair, took one last long determined breath, and pushed open the door of Sly's bar.



## PART 9: CAT-TALE – ‘FRAIDY CAT

Of all my objections to Jonathan Crane—and it is a lengthy list—the one point I will concede is that sometimes Fear has a purpose. Sometimes, fear is nature’s way of saying: Whoa there, Sundance, you sure you want to be jumping off that cliff, what with the rocky bed of the Colorado River churning 300 feet below?

Sometimes, Fear has a point.

Of all the little expressions having to do with cats—and I’ve heard’em all—the one that really burns my butt is ‘fraidy cat. The cat has eight more lives than you do, Pal. If you’re charging forward and she’s hanging back, you might want to stop and consider the possibility that she knows something you don’t.

‘Fraidy cat.

Intimacy is scary stuff. Much as I... love... Bruce, much as I’m happy to have helped him, I can’t help but feel we’ve crossed a line—a very serious line. Like the masks. The first time we made love without masks. After he was asleep, I crept into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub. I sat there for an hour, naked, staring into the darkness. The thought I couldn’t shake: it was never supposed to happen. We’d convinced ourselves Batman and Catwoman could never get past that fundamental impasse: he is a crimefighter; I am—or was—a thief.

We had done things as Bat and Cat; we’d tasted, taunted, and torn at each other... because it was safe. Everything was allowed because nothing could ever come of it. And now, suddenly, Batman and Catwoman were gone, like a spell broken at the stroke of midnight, and Selina found herself looking into the eyes of a lover who said his name was Bruce. It was a lot to process.

Compared to the cave, that hour on the edge of the tub was nothing.

He was hurting. He was in pain. And I wanted to help. I’m *glad* I could help. But the helping took us somewhere nobody is supposed to go: Inside his head... Inside his soul... I don’t need to understand him that well. I don’t need to understand *anything* that well.

Now what? Was he entitled to crawl inside my skin just as deeply? It sure seemed like it. Inside my heart and my soul. It was never supposed to happen *AT ALL!*

...

...

... I know I’m overreacting.

Lack of sleep will do that to you. Your perceptions go wonky. The last real sleep I had was the post-Iceberg catnap, which, considering the martinis and jetlag, may not count as actual sleep. The cave was draining. And after that, even a lazy evening purring in his lap turned into a nightmare. Literally. We were dozing in front of the fire when I felt this spasm shoot out from under me. It was Bruce’s arm, twitching, and he was moaning.

I’d heard about wives of combat veterans waking up in a stranglehold when those night-terrors take hold. It’s never happened to me, although Bruce’s nightmares are a regular occurrence. Still, these dreams were obviously a lot worse than normal.

Understandable, I suppose. Between Hell Month and the ordeal in the cave, his dreams were worse than normal. The more serious complication was that he was so exhausted he wouldn't wake up. I soothed him as best I could: stroking his brow, whispering that he was safe and at home, assuring him the horrors weren't real, only a dream and an echo. It would seem to work for a while, and then just as I'd start to doze off myself, he would start twitching... or shaking... or moan again. It made for an awfully long night.

Morning came, finally. Alfred brought a tray around seven. Juice, coffee, muffins... I tried to apologize for spending the night on the couch, but in my frazzled state it came out: "About the alfred, sorry, sofa. Too tired, move not..."

That's when he shushed me.

"Don't trouble yourself, miss. It is not unusual for Master Bruce to go wandering the night before the 'anniversary.' I am well accustomed to having to search for him in the morning. This year, the task was much easier than usual, as I see neither of you has moved from where I left you last evening. As Master Bruce is not awake yet, I shall leave the coffee here and go about my business."

There was an elaborate casualness the way he said it: "As Master Bruce is not awake yet..." An overly deliberate airiness I recognized from—it took me a minute to place it—from *the Rogues*:

..."Gotham is so cold in January, I think I'll just pop down to South America and see how many species of orchids grow in the rainforest."

..."Croc visit swamp now. Good time, no tourists."

..."Calloo callay, Hat Expo in Bombay."

..."I left something on the stove at the HA-HAcienda in Mexico, HAHAHAHAAAA."

And now... "Since he's not awake, I'll just leave the coffee here."

It all amounted to the same thing, a fancy way of saying: I prefer to be wherever he isn't right now.

The arrival of a new groupie at the Iceberg Lounge was always an occasion for speculation among the regulars. Whenever a new one arrived, the first thing the villains would do was try to deduce which of them the newcomer admired. The homemade costumes were a good clue, always either mimicking or complimenting the chosen rogue's theme.

In the case of the new girl, her costume consisted of a smoky gray leotard and full-face mask. It was not unlike the getup that made that NightThief character look so much like a potato, but on this girl's trim young frame, the effect was most becoming. Only Scarecrow didn't think so. He likened it to the ruched see-through bodice Gweneth Paltrow wore to the Oscars: "Showing off what, I ask you? Flat breasts ruched down to a non-existent waist."

Mad Hatter disagreed the loudest. "That girl is as frabjous as a Jabberwock!" he declared. Hugo Strange agreed. Both had noticed black curls painted up and down the length of the costume and hoped they were meant to suggest hypnotic spirals. If so, they were both in the running as the villain the girl doted on, and each was mentally redecorating his hideout to accommodate the new henchwench.

When they learned the curls were not hypno spirals but wisps of smoke, and the costume was meant to salute Firefly the pyromaniac, both Hatter and Hugo revised their opinion.

“A frumious bandersnatch,” Jervis announced, causing Hugo to mutter something by way of agreement that raised eyebrows even at the Iceberg bar.

Beneath the newcomer’s mask, Cassie Cain decided the exact tendons she would sever in punishment for that remark when Batgirl next encountered Hugo Strange. She then smiled, pleased that her disguise was such a success. She took a seat at the bar and reveled in her proximity to the adored one, the Adonis tending bar, Gregory Brady.

“Are you wearing those shoes? You might want flats if it’s muddy.”

That was the first inkling I had that he was expecting me to *accompany him* to the gravesite. He brought me to the alley last year, but it wasn’t planned. It’s just the way it played out. Because we quarreled, and because we were together when he had some sort of epiphany about the past.

I rummaged in the little corner of his dressing room where I keep a few things, looking for a pair of flat-heeled shoes and reflecting on the RBD Theory.

RBD Theory is Joker’s brainchild. It says: All it takes to turn one of *them* into one of *us* is a **Really Bad Day**. The Quinn AA-Postulate, added a few months later, is as follows: in the throes of a RBD, *anyone* is capable of *anything*.

The vehemence with which any given individual will argue the RBD Theory depends on whether or not they’ve had one.

I haven’t.

However, I have heard Harvey Dent go off on the subject a number of times. And all I can say is: I didn’t know Harv in his prosecuting days, but when he argues RBD Theory, I get a glimpse of the brilliant advocate he once was. If that acid hadn’t scarred his face, creating Two-Face one RBD in August at the Gotham County Courthouse, I have no doubt he would be Governor Dent, Ambassador Dent, or Chief Justice Dent today.

Was I in the midst of a RBD, I wondered?

The disguised Batgirl first realized something was amiss when the villain known as Crazy Quilt entered the Iceberg Lounge. He looked exactly as he did in his mugshots: a pencil thin mustache... a patchwork costume of yellow, red, and blue... a helmet which threw colored light of those hues onto his victims’ faces, causing disorientation. He sat next to her at the bar, ordered a Mud Slide, and launched into a spiteful diatribe against Robin.

Robin thwarted him in the early days, it was said. He held a grudge. Robin was his particular nemesis—like Sideshow Bob had Bart Simpson. Robin was the ruin of all his great plans. He could a’ been a contender!

He didn't seem to distinguish between the Robin of then and the Robin of today. But that was not what troubled Cassie. What bothered her was that he wasn't supposed to be here at all.

To select a villain on which to model her disguise, Cassie had researched "B-List" rogues recently captured outside of Gotham. That way, she could be sure the villain her 'groupie' cover supposedly admired did not actually show up. There was no shortage of names to choose from; almost everyone was out of town for Hell Month. Crazy Quilt was one of those she considered, gone to Keystone City and apprehended only last Thursday by The Flash.

So how could he be sitting next to her drinking a Mud Slide?

Was I in the midst of a RBD?

Well, I was standing on a hill on a particularly gray corner of the vast Wayne property, where the family has interred their own since Robert Wayne wrested the manorship from the Dutch in 1679. I knew this because the little stone plaque honoring the event was the only place to stand without sinking ankle deep into the snow. It was nearly an hour since Bruce hugged me and disappeared over the far side of the hill where the more recent generations were buried. By now, I could tell you the complete saga of First Manorlord Robert, the first Wayne in America, son of Joseph "the Uncompromising," who left Scotland to seek his fortune in the New World when the family ran afoul of the new English king...

It was never supposed to happen at all, that's all I'm saying. From scuffling on a penthouse terrace so he won't notice the timer to creeping from his bed so he won't feel me trembling... not supposed to happen. From swinging the whip handle across a throat not shielded by body armor, to running my fingers through hair not covered by a cowl... what were the chances? From "the easy way or the hard way" to "My name is Bruce; I'd like to hear you to say it." From a humid rooftop in July, toying with the emblem on his costume, looking for a moment's indecision to kick an incriminating knapsack over the edge... to a freezing hilltop in January, reading how Robert Wayne infiltrated the Nieuw Nederland colony, earned the trust of the Iroquois by learning their language, and exposed a criminal enterprise in the fur trade.

A shadow fell across the snow, the bottom of an overcoat billowing like a cape. That he could cast a shadow when it was so gray and overcast was one of his creepier mysteries. What was even creepier was the way that, apart from the pointy ears, the shadows looked so similar in costume and out.

I turned and looked at him. He seemed better... There was a tiny mark of a dried tear on his cheek, but apart from that he looked... calmer... Something about the way he stood was both relaxed and resolved. While I paused, searching for something to say, he leaned in and... kissed me. That was, frankly, creepier than his casting a shadow without sun. It was a good kiss; don't get me wrong. Long... loving... tender but... nonsexual, if you know what I mean... Pure...

I shivered.

'Fraidy cat.

"Let's head back," he said finally, "I'm famished."

“My battle against the Batman raged on!” Signal Man narrated with dramatic flare, “Until chance intervened. A bystander, young boy, wandered too close to the fight. The Batman was distracted. The moment’s diversion was all I needed, and I struck! Clubbing him into unconsciousness! I bound his inert form and encased him INSIDE THE BAT-SIGNAL! What a triumph! An anonymous tip called in to that fool Gordon, and he raced to the roof to light the bat beacon! The Batman would have been fried in his own signal!”

“It’s the ‘would have been’ that robs the tale of panache,” Oswald observed dryly.

“That and the fact that you tell it incessantly,” Hugo grumbled.

“You must picture the scene,” Signal Man insisted, gesturing to the bartender to refill his glass with the blend of hot coffee, whiskey and amaretto known as Tennessee Mud. “Imagine my loathed foe waking up to see that bat on the glass right in front of his face! It was a triumph, I tell you!”

The only Iceberg patron that didn’t groan at the outburst was the new groupie they’d dubbed ‘Smoke.’ The rogues assumed she was attentive only because she hadn’t heard the story before, 19 or 20 times, as all of them had. In fact, the reason for her rapt attention was puzzlement. Batgirl had confirmed, through a hurried communication with Oracle, sent over her touchpad-OraCom from the Iceberg washroom, that Crazy Quilt was indeed in Iron Heights prison in Keystone City. Yet he appeared at the Iceberg. Now he was gone, but in his place, actually seated on the same barstool, was another villain that Cassie’s research told her should be incarcerated on the other side of the country!

Green Arrow, the Emerald Archer who had been such a lively guest at the satellite cave that night, had captured Signal Man in Star City last Saturday!

So how could he be sitting next to her now drinking Tennessee Mud?

On the walk back, I jettisoned all thoughts of the RBD Theory. It was comfortable, walking along, talking. Bruce was in good spirits, like a weight had been lifted. He talked about making lunch himself.

Cut to Alfred’s kitchen twenty minutes later, Bruce had me seated on a stool, watching, while he laid slices of lunchmeat on toasted bread.

“Now, heated turkey on one slice, sprinkle with a little pepper, ham on the other slice, sprinkle with a touch of garlic, and just a hint of oregano—the real stuff—very important, not the generic kind from a supermarket. You listening, Kitten?”

I nodded... I may have nodded off actually; because the next thing I knew, there was talk of melting cheese and a dash of paprika.

“Then I do sliced up cucumber... a little lettuce... and a pickle.”

I could have kicked him off that terrace all those years ago and nobody would have been the wiser.

“In the dining room?” he was asking, handing me a plate, “or better still, there’s a fire in the library. It’ll be cozy.”

Cozy. Home and hearth mode. Shudder.

We ate... he talked about his parents... the portrait over the fireplace....

"I remember my mother wearing that dress. It was my father's birthday. She gave him... something to do with ships?"

I listened while he talked. I didn't know if he was aware of my sleepless night. You'd think he should be, great detective and all. It would be obvious from the bags under my eyes. What I really wanted to know was: did he know why? Did he remember his nightmares? Did he know he spent the night writhing and moaning? I'd consider asking, but not after last year. I didn't know anything about Hell Month then. I had no idea why the dreams were getting worse. So I told him. His reaction was... ugly. Hurtful. I'd never seen him like that.

"A model sailboat, that was it, the kind you steer with a radio control..."

Now, Catwoman has a rule: Rule #7. Never EVER cease a behavior or alter course because of what he's said or done in the past. If he went ballistic over a Monet, that was my cue to stick with the Impressionists for a while. Or if he grumbled because I used the signal to call him, I'd make a point of doing it again by the end of the month. But the dreams, well, obviously, that's a different animal.

'Fraidy cat? Or a prudent pussy negotiating a Really Bad Day? You tell me.

The light in the room reddened, and the shadows lengthened. Soon it would start to get dark. So would he...

He told me about the ritual of Anniversary Patrol. It wasn't a ritual in his mind, it was sound strategic thinking: Batman always patrolled the city twice each night: early patrol and late patrol. On this date, he observed his parents' deaths by visiting Crime Alley. But it would be sacrilege if this visit allowed a crime to be committed that he otherwise would have prevented, if innocents were victimized because of his observance. So he would still cover the full route of his early patrol, looking in on all the locations—but he was on the clock.

If God forbid he found criminal activity, they weren't just committing a crime on the hallowed day, they were threatening his schedule. He knew if it took him too long to dispatch the perpetrators and if he suffered more interruptions later, he could conceivably not make it to the alley before dawn. Bruce said he was aware that factor made him more 'agitated' in these encounters. (Dick had a different way of phrasing it: "Like something you only see in Rocky movies," while Tim said: "Tyson fights. Violent, brutal and wicked fast.")

By now, the light outside the window had faded and the city across the river glimmered like a jewel. The sixth sense that told me Batman was near quivered. We'd been together all day, but only now did I feel the tingle. And I knew he was looking at it too... out the window... his city. I knew too that he was about to speak, and when he did, the voice would be the deep gravel of the Bat.

"I better get going."

I smiled, kissed his cheek, and stood to gather my things.

"Just as well," I said, collecting my bag, "you wouldn't know it to look at me, but I haven't had much rest since Paris. I can't wait to get home, draw a nice bath and—"

"No."

"..."

I paused, because that is one of those words you want to be very sure you heard correctly before responding. Giving it due reflection, I was satisfied I had, in fact,

heard the deep Batman gravel saying exactly what I thought it said. But just to make sure, I prodded:

"Excuse me?"

"I said No. I don't want you leaving. I want you to be here when I get back."

Like a spaniel.

Like Krypto, the goddamn faithful wonder mutt.

I was trying to be supportive and patient. I was trying to finesse the whole no sleep, hangover, cave, jetlag, freezing hilltop, and new mood of unnerving togetherness. But there are some things a self-respecting feline simply does not let pass.

"You seem to be confusing me with someone you get to order around," I said, "I don't do 'sit and stay' and I especially don't"

"No. I want you here tonight. Honestly, I don't understand why you haven't moved in full time."

"..."

That's the last really solid memory I have.

I know I was still standing there alone after he'd left, trying to process those last words spoken before he vanished:

"Think about it. We'll talk about it when I get back."

When Firefly, a villain Cassie knew *for a fact* was hospitalized in Keystone City, entered the Iceberg Lounge a scant twenty minutes after Signal Man left, the disguised Batgirl decided to take action. He sat on that same barstool next to her, and began instructing Bartender Brady how to make a shooter called a Clay Pigeon: "Vodka. Apple Juice. Stir."

Her vocabulary was limited, but not so limited that she couldn't tell this imposter, point blank, that the real Garfield Lynns, a.k.a. Firefly, onetime Hollywood F/X wiz turned criminal pyromaniac, ran afoul of a Flash villain called Heat Wave and was currently laid up in the hospital ward of Iron Heights Prison.

The ersatz Firefly pulled her into a quiet alcove away from the bar, near the door to Oswald's office. Those who saw the move tittered, assuming Firefly was picking up his option, deciding to make the devoted groupie Smoke into an official henchwench.

Instead, the moment they were alone and out of sight of the bar patrons, "Firefly" morphed. The hand that clutched Cassie's elbow melted into a thick muddy ooze - that still maintained a surprisingly strong hold on her as the man before her twisted and glurped into a massive bulk of grayish brown clay.

Batgirl's warrior instincts kicked in and she delivered several crippling blows to the creature's arms and torso - what should have been crippling blows - except that the torso just softened on contact, allowing her punches and chops to pass through without resistance, spattering a bit of muck onto the walls, but inflicting no damage on her target.

Screaming for help was not Batgirl's style, but even if it had been, one of the cloying clay appendages snaked around her mouth, making even guttural battle cries impossible. Breathing became difficult when the gooey claw stretched over her nose, and her struggling slowed. An alarming rushing sound rose in Cassie's ears and the

sight of her attacker blurred into spots before her eyes. And then.... nothing. The crushing foe was pulled away from her.

Realization flooded with the first full breath. Leafy vines were coiled through four separate mounds of dirt that had once been the solid mass of her attacker. The vines held the tiniest drops of animated mud in place with tenacious grasping roots.

"Hello, Hagen," the pleased voice of Poison Ivy sang from the doorway, "I would have thought you learned your lesson last time, Clayface. But no matter, a great mass of potting soil like you is just what I require to fertilize my new babies."

I went down to the cave and put on the catsuit. I think better in the catsuit. Usually. Tonight, I only managed to freak myself out even more. At first, I couldn't find the damn thing. I'd forgotten — note to self: I've GOT to get some sleep soon — I'd forgotten I left it in the costume vault when I went in and discovered the shelf smashed to bits.

The catsuit — MY catsuit — Catwoman's catsuit — in *his* vault.

Like Catwoman is something that belongs to him. *"We'll talk about it when I get back... I want you here tonight...I want you here when I get back"*

*... I want you waiting here where I tell you to be, because you're mine now, my little kitty cat. Property of Batman. We'll get that insignia tattooed on your pretty backside any day now...*

*... Selina, I've decided Batwoman would be a more appropriate guise for you from now on. I'll be flying you to Mr. Kittlemeier's for a fitting this afternoon...*

*...of course you can't leave against my wishes, Selina. Remember all those times Catwoman got away when, let's face it, we both know you wouldn't have if you were anyone else... you owe me, Kitten. I'm calling in the marker...*

There was a click and those new, modified Batcuffs were on my wrist. *"We'll talk about it when I get back."* He couldn't possibly think those would hold me. I was out in seconds. Dashed upstairs and... something was wrong. The moment the grandfather clock closed behind me, I could tell something was wrong.

The ornaments, for one thing. It's an occupational hazard. Walking through a doorway, Catwoman catalogues a room's contents like other people wipe their shoes on the mat. The first thing I noticed, there was a bright Impressionist landscape where the picture of Bruce's parents was supposed to be. Instead of the wrought iron bookstand with a first edition of CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, there was a little mound of needlepoint and an old-fashioned wooden tennis racquet. In the corner, in place of Michael the Archangel, there was a spray of rhododendrons, a radio controlled model sailboat, and a roll of wrapping paper.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, dear," a crisp voice said behind me, "Alfred would have offered you some tea, but, you see, we're having a dinner party tonight. It's my husband's birthday, and I'm afraid the setup has proven slightly more complicated than the staff anticipated."

I turned, knowing what I would see: Martha Wayne in the smart, tailored dress from the portrait. She sat at the desk and consulted a sheet of paper as she spoke:

"Now then, Selina, isn't it? I see you're going to be moving in soon. About time he got around to that. Of course, you could have helped him along, my dear. Men want

encouragement for that sort of thing. And, if I may say, you haven't entirely been doing your bit. Considering the way you began, I mean. You used to be the aggressive one, weren't you? 'You're part of the night just like me,' 'How hard do you want it to get,' etc."

Again, she looked at the paper, as if it was a resume and I was a job applicant—actually, more like I was already on staff and that paper was my annual review. When she continued, it was with a tsk-tsk quality that was pure Bat:

"And yet, despite this admirable beginning, it seems as though my son has been taking the initiative since this situation began to develop: sending the note that brought you to the opera house roof for that first date, kissing you in the vault, following to your apartment, inviting you to Xanadu, revealing his identity, he was the first to say 'I love you'..."

"Now look here," I cut in, because Catwoman's Rule #4 states that you never, ever allow that Bat-tsk-tsk routine to go on for more than six seconds. It was seldom an issue with Batman, but with this woman...

"I'm not criticizing," she went on seamlessly as if I hadn't spoken, "you've more than evened the score with that scene in the cave yesterday. That was admirable, Selina, it really was. Opened him right up. Brought you both to the next level."

"..."

"Close your mouth, dear. Ah, I see now, *that's* the difficulty, isn't it? *You* took the initiative this time. So now... what? You're wary of the consequences? You've always done what you pleased up until now and damn the consequences, correct?"

"It's different," I stammered, "I *do* do whatever I please. But sometimes... well, sometimes that's gotten me in over my head. And when that's happened... damnit, whenever that happened he's always been there to get me out."

"Ah. And he obviously won't be doing that if you get in too deep this time... You are quite the 'fraidy cat, aren't you, Selina."

"He didn't even ask," I mentioned, feeling the focus of this little chat had really drifted off the point, "He just told me to stay. TOLD me. Told ME! Like I'm something that belongs to him. Nobody does that, nobody!"

"Look around, dear. It's *Wayne* Manor. You notice that great big 'W' on the front gate? And the one on the mantelpiece. The one etched into every piece of silver in this house, embroidered on the table linens and the bedsheets, embossed on the corporate letterhead..."

While she went on listing items that were branded with the Wayne monogram, I thought of another series of items: the utility belts, the homing tracers, the batarangs, the lasers, the grapplers, the body armor, the handsets, the batcuffs, all with the emblem, the sleek silhouette of a bat...

"...and always inside an oval. It's the way they are, the Wayne men, they like marking their territory. And there is a certain tendency to regard anything within that territory as theirs. But that's nothing smart women like us can't handle, now is it? One day, Selina, I really must show you a set of letters I received on my wedding day..."

"Excuse me, Martha," a warm masculine voice interrupted, "Oh, I see you have a visitor. Selina, isn't it? Thomas Wayne." The new arrival took my hand as if to shake it, then lifted it and touched the fingers to his lips. "I hear you'll be moving in soon."

Well done, Kitty.” He winked then turned to his wife, “I just wanted to tell you Annie Hall is on television in the study. That scene you like so much, where Diane Keaton and Woody Allen move in together. She’s ready to give up her apartment, but he says ‘No, it’s like a floating lifeboat; why cut it loose.’ Ha, ha.”

He winked again... “Nice meeting you, Miss Kitty”... and left. I’m afraid I was staring after him. It was Bruce... Bruce’s face, Bruce’s voice... except... so...

Light.

Charming.

Carefree.

Martha must have read my thoughts because she said, “Almost like the Fop, but not shallow, not stupid... and not faked. Now you understand: What might have been, what’s been lost. Does it really matter so much if he occasionally barks an order instead of wording it as a question? Come now, Selina, you of all people must know, a woman’s role, like a cat’s, often amounts to letting them believe they’re in charge. It doesn’t mean you can’t get the sofa cushions arranged exactly the way you want them, have your catnip and caviar prepared to your liking, and your fur stroked exactly where you please. It merely requires a little feline finesse.”

She paused, smiled, then added:

“So wake up and get to it, Kitten. Kitten. Kitten, wake up.”

I blinked and Bruce was bending over me.

“I’m sorry to wake you, Love, but another night on that sofa is the last thing you need. Come up to bed.”

The little voice in my head was quick to object: *C’mon, girl, come when called, like a good puppydog.* Instead, I looked up into his eyes, and caressed a fresh bruise on his cheek.

“Rough night?” I asked.

“I’ve had worse.”

“Okay then. You can tell me about it in the morning.”

## PART 10: TWO-FACED TALE – SLY’S

Sly’s is a rustic but comfortable establishment on the waterfront. He’s done really well for himself, and we were extremely proud in an odd kind of paternal way.

Maybe that’s what all this comes down to, we wondered. Harv and Gilda, despite their efforts, had remained childless. Although he was a little old for the role, we couldn’t help but think of Sly as a sort of son, our lighthouse in the fog of insanity.

Things had, of course, become complicated during the Roxy Rocket affair. We suddenly realized we hadn’t really spoken to Sly properly since. We cursed ourselves for our lack of forethought. We knew it had hurt him, and to see him hurt had hurt Harv in turn. Masochism is quickly becoming our trademark. The unresolved issue would no doubt make this potentially volatile discussion even trickier.

A smell of “Floribbean cooking” hung in the air, spicy and fragrant. For those who have never experienced it, you cannot imagine a smell so wonderful. It seems to caress your senses like a lover.

*Ever the old romantic, eh Harv?* Shut up, Two-Face.

There was a deck with some tables at the back of the bar. The deck looked out onto the sea—a picturesque setting to enjoy a drink that puts Oswald’s *faux* ice chandeliers to shame. Inside, there are dollar bills taped to the walls, a tradition whose roots lie in the past. When sailors or fishermen were fairly well off, they would sign their name to a dollar and tape it to the wall. That way, if they were broke on some future visit, they could still be assured of a drink. Somehow, this idea has never caught on in the Iceberg.

This unique decorating gimmick started us thinking: Sly is often seen as laboriously normal by the rest of Oswald’s clientele. This is not at all fair. He may be conventional compared to many of us, but that does not mean he is boring. He is a man of hidden depths previously obscured by the bizarre nature of those around him. This bit with the dollars on the walls: an attempt to please both the regulars (by showcasing their proud heritage) and the tourists (by presenting them with quirky decoration) was evidence of his clever business brain, one of his many qualities that would previously have remained hidden. We smiled as we looked around, noting iceberg-shaped salt and pepper dispensers on the tables that littered the room. It seemed to prove our point. What the locals undoubtedly saw as a note of whimsy had hidden significance to those of us in the know.

We looked up. The bar itself was a small island in the center of the room, the tables like little ships circumnavigating it. And there was Robinson Crusoe himself.

Sly squinted at us in disbelief.

“Mr. Dent? Is that you?”

We nearly laughed out loud. Who else could it have been?

“You bet it is,” we said, striding towards him, a warm grin on half of our features.

“How have you been, Sly?” we asked, reaching out our hand for a handshake.

"I'm good!" Sly said, wiping his hand on a novelty towel that depicted a map of The Keys before taking our outstretched hand and shaking it. "Good to see you, Mr. Dent, sir. Awfully good to see you. Far from home, aren't you?"

"We could say the same for you, son," we said, deciding to try and keep this as light as possible. Besides—telling him that we had driven for three days solid just to try and tempt him back to Gotham might not have been the best way to break the ice. "What made you come all the way out here? We miss you! 'We' as in the gang en masse, not 'we' as in us... Oh hell," we said, feeling the color rising to our cheeks.

The sensation was strange. We hadn't felt this way since we tried to work up the courage to ask a young woman by the name of Gilda to our high school prom.

Sly chuckled amicably. "Of course, sir." Without asking, a double shot of double malt scotch whiskey appeared in front of us. We laughed happily.

"OK. We take it back, Sly. 'We,' as in *us*, miss you."

"Aw shucks, Mr. Dent, you'll embarrass me," Sly said, adopting a farm boy accent, dodging the compliment like a pro. We laughed again.

"Point taken. So... how have you been? What have you been up to?"

"Oh, I'm getting by. Getting adjusted. Learning all my new customers' names and preferences." As he said that, one of his regulars walked in. Before he had even reached the bar, Sly had prepared his favorite drink with a friendly nod. They exchanged a few pleasantries before the man retired to a table, allowing ourselves and Sly to continue talking.

"Impressive," we noted. "So... how've you settled into the area, then?"

"What's not to like? It's just like Mr. Nigma's letter said. The weather is wonderful, we're right on the beach, the women.... oh Mr. Dent...the women come in off the beach in bikinis. Won't see anything like that in Gotham. And of course the locals are very freespirted folks, just like the Iceberg except... well..." He trailed off. There was an awkward pause. We knew full well what he had stopped himself from saying, something to the effect of 'the locals here are flamboyant without being homicidal.'

The conversation was turning in a way we didn't like. Sly seemed happy here (we silently cursed) and actually seemed quite negative about his old watering hole. Two-Face stumbled into the argument like Killer Croc at an antiques roadshow.

**"Hey! We have attractive women in Gotham too! And the locals aren't ALWAYS... what was your word? Freespirted..."** We thought of the mayhem of this trip so far, realized it was not the best illustration of our point, and decided on a change of tack. "Well, I'm glad you're enjoying things here anyway. So when do you plan on coming home?"

"Coming home?" He had a look in his eye like he was about to tell us our hamster had died. "Oh... well, it's not like I don't miss everybody back at the Iceberg, but..." Sly paused. We felt our heart sinking. "This is home now."

"Oh. OK." We silently digested that, pain welling up in our chest.

Sensing this, Sly desperately tried to change the subject. "How is, er, everybody?"

Our lawyer instincts began working in overdrive. We had been reminded in earlier conversation of Sly's weakness for women—one of them in particular, whom he seemed to be alluding to now.

"They're all fine. *Roxy's doing well.*" We mentally bitch slapped Two-Face back to his kennel. This was going to be a very delicate train of conversation and we could do

without his clumsiness. "Truth be told, we haven't seen much of her since... uh... the incident... we aren't seeing each other anymore, by the way." We could almost see his ears pricking up. We pressed on. "She talks about you a lot, though, and how much she misses you. Something about you being the only guy in the 'Berg who treated her like an equal rather than just another gimmickless wonder? We don't know..."

We trailed off, realizing that, for a guy who claimed to not see much of Roxy, we seemed to know a lot about how she felt. This momentary slip could bring us back to square one!

Fortunately, only four words of our rambling had mattered to Sly.

"She talks about me?" he asked, almost in wonder. Sly had clearly stopped listening to us at that point in our diatribe, as we had expected he would. Our impassioned speech appeared to be having the desired effect. What can we say? You don't get to be D.A. without being crafty now and again.

Sly served up a basket of grouper and fries to the flamboyant locals. It smelled heavenly. We eyed it hungrily. Seeing this, Sly pushed a small basket our way and topped up our drink.

We knew what his game was, but we were too hungry to care. What can we say? You don't get to be D.A. without taking the odd bribe here and there. And we were more than happy to swap information about Roxy for some of those sumptuous fries.

"Yeah," we said, "She does. She says how much she wishes she could see you again. Sly, we've got Hugo Strange running your bar at the moment. All he does is stare at her breasts all day. She misses the conversations you two used to have."

Sly tensed, like a dog hearing a suspicious noise.

"Dr. Strange is ogling her?" he said, twitching slightly.

"Kind of... we guess..." we said, moving away from him slightly. We fully expected him to rip open his shirt to reveal that blood red 'S' in the golden triangle, comb his hair into a kiss curl, and burst through the roof of the bar in a blaze of glory. We pressed on despite ourselves. "She always talks about how she could do with some nice guy to take her away from it all."

"Think she'd like to come to Florida?" Sly said, eagerly. We suddenly deflated and sighed, exasperated.

"That's not quite what we... uh... she had in mind. We think she's got family or something in Gotham. Besides—it's a big step to completely sever all links to a place and move away. It takes a lot of thought—can't really be done on impulse. We were worried you'd think you hadn't given it enough thought and would regret your decision..."

The basket of bayfries was slowly withdrawn as we spoke. We silently cursed again. There was a slight commotion over by the jukebox. We turned. The locals looked pleased with themselves. The opening chords to a familiar song were heard. Jimmy Buffet. Sly visibly slumped.

"They play an awful lot of Jimmy Buffet music down here."

We shuddered. "Yeah, we know." We looked longingly at the fries. "In the short time we've been here, we've become thoroughly sick of the old guy."

At the chorus, the locals started singing.

*"Changes in latitude, changes in attitude, nothing remains quite the same... If we weren't all crazy, we would all go insane."*

We groaned. We hate songs in which the lyrics could be applicable to the current situation.

"We really don't like him."

The fries inched closer.

"Neither do I. He's the one thing they don't tell you about in the brochures."

"You know, Sly," we said thoughtfully, "the jukebox in the 'Berg has no Jimmy Buffet stuff on it at all... ok, so there's far too much Brian Adams for our liking but still..."

Sly laughed. It was a strange, almost evil kind of laugh.

"Yeah, and if they ever had a singalong like this, Mr. Joker would shoot 'em all and let God sort them out."

Now we expected him to pull off his wig and reveal his true green hair and bone white skin. We inched away again.

"Can you imagine a sing song in the 'Berg?" we said, turning the screw as only a lawyer can, "Jeez, and you thought our karaoke parties were bad..."

*...Changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes, nothing remains quite the same, through all of our running and all of our cunning, if we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane...*

We made a mental note to ask Jack if he was a Jimmy Buffet fan. The basket of fries was inching closer. It seemed to us that it was acting as a barometer for how we were doing. The closer it was to us, the weaker Sly's resolve... the Jimmy Buffet medley was working its horrible magic... If we could just sneak a bite...

"Why just the other day, Roxy was telling us how much she hates Jimmy Buffet..."

"Stop it, Mr. Dent."

"What?"

We looked at Sly. He was smiling. He offered us the basket of fries. We took one and bit into it. Our palate was in raptures.

"I know what you're up to, Mr. Dent. I have from the minute you walked in here." We cursed. Maybe we should have taken Jack's advice about the sombrero? Sly continued. "And I'm flattered, I really am. It means an awful lot to me that you'd come all the way out here just to try and get me to come back to the 'Berg."

We held our breath.

"But I just don't know, Mr. Dent. If I was to come back..."

We were so close. We had almost got him. We weren't going to let him off the hook now. We were far too close!

"...What would I do about this place?" Sly continued. A waiter was passing, and we grabbed him by the arm, dragging him into the conversation.

"What's your name, sonny?" we snapped, our nerves beginning to fray as our desperation grew.

"Ken, sir."

"Look at this man, Sly! Ken can clearly be trusted! Ken is a name you can trust!" You would be forgiven for thinking we were running his election campaign, we thought ruefully. "You've got a whole host of loyal staff here, any one of them more than capable of running this place in your absence, we're sure."

He seemed to be wavering.

“Come on, Sly! Any of them would be able to handle the day to day operations of this place. And then you could mastermind the overall administration yourself. Think about it, Sly! You as the Mastermind, Ken as your loyal henchman — minion — deputy. We meant deputy. We said deputy, right?”

“But it’s miles in between here and Gotham, Mr. Dent! How would I look after the books over such a distance?”

We wavered, caught off guard for a second, but managed to roll with the punch as any good lawyer should.

“Internet! How does anybody do anything these days? On the Internet! You should see what Eddie can do on a PC. Other than setting a new Tetris record every time he turns the damn thing on. He could set up everything you’d need, explain how to use it, trouble shoot if you had any problems... And think how impressed Roxy would be by a Mastermind clever enough to run his own business from miles away.”

He began to say something, but we cut him off, second-guessing what he would say. We were shamelessly pulling out all of the old courtroom classics here, and it seemed to be working.

“And don’t worry about them,” we gestured airily at the regulars. “They’ll be here when you get back—that’s what makes them regulars. And when you do come back and visit, you’ll have all kinds of things to talk about, firming up your already strong friendships.”

The words were forming on his lips. We could tell. All he needed was one last push. We played our trump card.

We leapt off the stool and strolled over to the jukebox. We fished a quarter from our pockets, and looked over at Sly. He was fixing at us with one of his patented, ‘Don’t you dare’ glares he had perfected during Jack’s infamous ketchup rampage of last year. We grinned, and placed the coin into the slot. The familiar strains filled the bar, the locals cheering the old favorite.

*Changes in latitudes, changes in attitudes, nothing remains quite the same, through all of our running and all of our cunning, if we couldn’t laugh, we would all go insane...*

We looked at Sly. He looked at us.

Case closed.

“Tell you what,” he said, “I have got a great deputy here—the best. I’d trust him with my life. And I’m going to trust him with my bar. You’re right, I can still do all the admin for this place in Gotham. I’ll come back occasionally to oversee it, obviously, but you know, I have missed the Iceberg and its crazy inhabitants. Tell Mr Cobblepot if he’s got any bar jobs going, I’d like to apply.”

We said nothing, merely looking at him passively. We motioned for him to wait for just one moment. We fished into our breast pocket, and pulled out our silver dollar. We flipped it. Sly was looking a little nervous—understandably. He looked positively terrified when it landed in our palm scarred side up.

We grinned wickedly at him. Leaping over the bar, we buried him in a monstrous bear hug. He laughed.

“OK, OK. Mr. Dent? I can’t breathe.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

We stood up, dusting ourselves down, before giving him a hand up.

“And if it had been unscarred side up?”

“We would have patted you on the shoulder and told you how glad we were to have you aboard, soldier.”

“Just my luck,” Sly grumbled, before breaking into a grin.

We turned, giving Sly one last rueful smile. He waved back, smiling at us before resuming his duties behind the bar. With our heart lifted, we pushed open the door.

Immediately, we were blinded by what seemed to be a myriad of light and noise of almost biblical proportions. We raised a hand to our eyes, grimacing under the fusillade, completely caught unaware.

With gritted teeth, we managed to steal a glance at what lay before us. A huge crowd of reporters and photographers. We had what seemed like a hundred microphones thrust into our face. We stammered, no idea whatsoever what to do.

A burly man was bustling his way through the crowd. We felt our heart sink as we recognized the familiar gait of a detective. When you're in our line of work, you can spot a cop a million miles away, and there was absolutely no doubt in our mind that this one had our number.

Sure enough, before we could even say travesty of justice, he had shoved his badge in our face and quoted us our rights. We silently mouthed the words with him as we were led from the bar, so accustomed as we are to hearing them, the throng of reporters clamoring behind all around us.

As we reached the squad car, we paused, shrugging his hand off our arm so violently that we found ourselves staring down the barrel of his pistol.

“Look, buddy,” we said, genuine confusion in our eyes, “Just what is it we're supposed to have done?”

“Public order offences,” he stated sharply, not lowering his gun, “Disturbing the peace. Criminal damage. Get in the damn car.”

We sighed. So much for our holiday.

Edward Nigma cackled gleefully as he discovered the quaint little Key West souvenir shop. Unbeknownst to all but his closest friends, he had a real weakness for souvenirs: the cheaper and tackier, the better. Suffice it to say, in this regard he was not disappointed by this particular tourist trap.

Carrying his question mark topped gold cane under one arm, he strolled into the shop with a friendly nod to the proprietor.

Suddenly, a particularly ugly porcelain dessert bowl caught his eye. He whirled to get a better look at it, knocking a whole host of equally hideous ornaments off the shelf with his cane as he did so. Performing a dive from the counter that many would not have thought a man of his years capable of, the storeowner managed to catch the falling crockery.

Turning to see what all the commotion was about, Eddie managed to knock off another of the dishes off of its display stand. It dropped, inevitably landing with a crash on the storeowner's head. He cursed violently.

Grinning weakly, Eddie apologized, walked over to the counter, and placed \$10 on top of the cash register. Seeing something else catch his eye, Eddie wondered, goggle eyed, over to the section of the shop dedicated to ornamentally carved glassware.

The storeowner, who had been strapping on his trusty baseball glove, cursed violently again, and dashed over to grab Eddie by the shoulder and stop him from destroying any more of his merchandise.

As he caught Eddie by the shoulder, Eddie whirled around instinctively, expecting to see Robin bearing down on him with a roundhouse kick. With his flailing arm, he managed to knock off a whole row of glass animals that were perfect in their ability to induce nausea in art lovers.

Somehow, in the resulting melee, Eddie's gold cane became lodged in between the storeowner's legs, causing him to stumble, crashing precariously into a shelf of novelty Florida Keys snow globes (despite the area not being famed for snow scenes).

The shelf snapped in half under the impact of the man's head, causing all of the merchandise to slip with a crash onto the floor. Always one to know when best to slip into the shadows, Eddie grabbed his cane and flew from the store, slamming the door behind him.

The building was old, a true relic of times gone by. The door slamming caused the shelf nearest it to topple. This in turn slammed into another shelving unit, causing it to topple in the inevitable dominoes effect. When the crashing and toppling finally came to a halt, there was not a single piece of merchandise left intact in the entire store. After a moment's silence, there came a scabbling from underneath the rubble.

The storeowner looked around in utter shock and horror, his livelihood destroyed.

OK, so he could buy everything he had lost for fifty bucks, so deliberately worthless (and thus attractive to tourists) was it, but that was completely beside the point!

Remarkably, the counter and cash register had remained largely unharmed. There was a phone he kept behind the counter. With shaking hands and a pretty good description of the question mark man in his mind, he dialed 911.

We knew we were in for a rough night when we were led in handcuffs down a flight of spiraling stone steps towards where we were told our cell was to be. There had been a crude rope handrail erected at the side to aid climbing and descending the stairs, as they were treacherous, to say the very least. We wondered how many wanted felons had thrown themselves down this flight to avoid capture. Quite a few, we reasoned, judging from the extremely tight grip with which our shoulder was held as we descended.

Key West, we had heard, was an old pirate colony. As we were led downward, the arresting detective verified this, and also told us that this building had been a police station for centuries and had held its fair share of smugglers and pirates. He noted, with a slight smirk that only a cop can pull off, that the conditions hadn't improved that much since then.

Fantastic, we thought bitterly.

Catman had chosen to explore the back streets of the Keys, which are in many ways just as fascinating than the better-known tourist areas, if not moreso. He looked in awe at the ancient buildings, enjoying taking in the air of history that hung over the place.

Suddenly, the most delicious aroma invaded his nose. He twitched, his moustache trembling, as might the whiskers of a cat.

Feeling he had very little say in the matter, his feet moving almost without his commanding them to, he floated towards the epicenter of the smell. He found his stomach growling even more ferociously than that lion he had bagged last fall. He recognized that smell... it was... it was... As he came to the restaurant, he finally recognized it... *Pizza*.

The way to Blake's heart, being a true blue blood, was most definitely through his stomach, and it was for this reason that he marched imperialistically into the restaurant and sat down. He clicked his fingers. Nobody came to serve him. He tried again. Still nothing. Beginning to become a little perturbed, Catman angrily looked around him. There was no staff to be seen. There was merely a hugely fat ginger cat sitting on a table. Surrounding the cat was the most heavenly looking pizza imaginable. Unsure of what to do in these odd circumstances, Catman walked over to the cat and began stroking it. It started purring, much to his delight.

Next to the cat was a bowl containing a good couple of hundred dollars in small bills and coins. Blake's eyes goggled. He looked around, still bemused. There really were no people around that looked common enough to be staff. There were a couple of diners he noted, but he really didn't want to lower himself to their level and ask what he was supposed to do.

It dawned on him. It appeared that one simply took what one wanted in terms of pizza and then paid the cat, so to speak, dropping the money directly into its bowl.

Blake scoffed. A ridiculous idea. Surely it wouldn't work? This was a smuggler town, after all! What was the point of using the honor system, for this is what it appeared to be, in a town like this? It was like that time The Cavalier left his PlayStation in the recreation room back in Arkham and expected it to still be there when he got back. Insanity.

Blake looked at the pizza. He really was very hungry... and the wonderful aroma coming off of them was making him feel even more famished. Shrugging, he chose a suitably large piece (the anchovy and tuna piece particularly appealing to his feline senses) and retired to a table to devour.

Five slices later, and Blake was feeling rather full. Conscious of the effects of an expanding waist band on his magic cloak, he tottered over to the cat and its dish, looking like a particularly haughty version of Humpty Dumpty.

To his horror, he saw another diner get up and walk towards the door without paying.

Blake cantered over to the diner and tapped him on the shoulder. The man (who Blake suddenly realized was a lot more intimidating than at first glance) turned around.

"Sir," said Blake, suddenly less sure of himself, "You have not paid for your food."

"Yeah?" said the man sneering, "And who's gonna stop me? That cat? Get outta my way, Shorty!"

He pushed Blake back with one ham fisted hand. Blake, as with many people born with a silver spoon in their mouths, was very quick to anger when they felt the spoon was in danger of being forcibly removed, and this situation was no different. He began to remove one of his leather gloves.

“Actually, sir, THIS cat does intend to stop you! You have insulted the honor of my ginger friend, and as a fellow cat, I feel equally affronted!”

Catman slapped the man hard around the cheek with the now empty glove.

“Sir, I challenge you to a duel! Sundown! Bring your dueling pistols, you incongruous oaf!”

As we neared what was to be our cell, we heard a sound that we have come to loath. Bickering.

There was no doubt that the voices belonged to our esteemed colleagues: Catman, Riddler, and Joker. The fact that they were in the same cellblock that we were being led to could only mean that one of them had somehow managed to get the rest of us into trouble. Guilt by association, it’s called.

This was the Florida Keys. The people around here are more easygoing than the entire cast of *Cool Runnings*. Then you take into consideration that the whole group was in trouble - not just the perpetrator, but the entire group. Whatever had happened must have been really bad. Taking these factors into consideration, we came to the obvious conclusion:

Jack.

As we came to the bottom of the winding staircase, we saw them. Catman, Eddie, and Joker were attached to the wall by wrist and ankle shackles. We should have expected no less, we thought with a sigh, but sight still came as a shock. We stared at the guard incredulously. He merely grinned toothlessly back, pointing to an empty set of shackles.

We had a really bad feeling about this. We glared furiously at Joker. What could he have done this time? He met our anger with a bright grin. We could almost see his halo tilting in the non-existent breeze.

Unable to contain ourselves any longer, we strode over to him and shook him violently. He jabbered like a Furbie as we did so, which infuriated us even more, so we shook harder. The guard pulled us away angrily.

“For that,” he said panting, “You’re gonna hang upside down.”

The bad feeling in the pit of our stomach had officially developed into a full-blown pain in the ass.

Whistling a jaunty tune, Joker strode into the *Cheese Burger In Paradise* restaurant. He nodded to the bemused looking greeter, who had temporarily forgotten he was supposed to greet him. Joker made encouraging hand motions. The young man eventually understood, and welcomed him to the restaurant. Joker smiled, patting the man on the shoulder, putting the Smilex canister back in his pocket with his free hand.

He sat down, folded his arms, and smiled warmly at the equally bemused looking waitress. Taking a deep breath, he ordered.

Six of Jimmy Buffet's famous burgers later, Jack was feeling contended.

"Whew," he said to the waitress, as she began clearing his table. "That was great. How do you make those burgers?"

She smiled at him. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that, sir. It's a secret recipe."

Joker laughed, then became serious. "HAHAHAHA—no, seriously. I don't wanna traipse all the way to Florida each time I want a quality burger. What's the recipe?"

"I can't tell you, sir."

Joker sighed. "Look dear, much like the Conan O'Brien show, where only the host may dance, in my presence, only I may tell jokes. Now, I'm gonna ask you again: how do you make 'em?"

"Sir, I can't tell you..."

"I was afraid you'd say that, Samantha."

"Sir, my name is Anne."

"Daphne?"

"Anne."

"Dana?"

"Anne."

"Look Billy, it doesn't really matter," Joker said, drawing the Handi-Dandy Extendo Boxing Glove he always carried for occasions like this, "because if you don't tell me what I want to know, then you're gonna find out how Mike Tyson's trainer feels."

"Nobody move!" he said, putting the glove close to Anne's eye, "or Dave here is going to make *Rocky* look like *Sesame Street*! Now—here are my demands. I need paper, a pen, and the head chef."

"YOU DID WHAT?!" We managed to stutter, anger causing our body to shake and our vocal chords to catch in mid-rant.

Fortunately, the guard's threat had proved hollow. We were upside down for about ten minutes, just long enough to bring on a nasty headache as the blood rushed to our brain, but after that, another guard came and released us. Only to shackle us the right way up to the wall.

Joker grinned at us sheepishly.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"This," pronounced Catman, "is just wonderful. A scintillating end to an infamous trip!"

"Do you even know what those words mean, you cretin?!" Eddie yelped. He had about as much as he could stand of Blake's whining.

"Naturally, Edward. Why? Don't you?"

"Yes, I do, or at least I think I do. Why don't you tell me what you think they mean—then we can compare notes!"

Catman blanched visibly. "Well... they mean... I don't intend to lower myself to your level, you insubordinate youth!"

"Alright, alright, keep it down." This was a new voice to us, and we turned to see whom it belonged to. A cop, judging by the posture and days of unshaved stubble on

his chin. The Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian style shirt had thrown us a bit, but there was no mistaking that badge as it was flashed in our faces. Joker wolf whistled at this, which brought a scolding glare from the detective.

"So, what can we do for you, Officer?" we asked, with a sneer, "You'll have to forgive our inhospitality—we'd normally offer you a cup of tea or two—but we seem to be all tied up at the moment."

"Then you'll be glad to know that you won't be for much longer, won't you, Dent?" the cop said, with a snarl.

"Question: What on Earth are you talking about?" Eddie asked.

"Tomorrow, you're being deported back to Gotham," the cop said, with disgust.

"WHOOHOO!" Jack said, grinning broadly. "And there are no cops in Gotham City, and the streets are paved with bodies..." He sung.

"Shut up!" we snarled at Joker, "What are you so happy about? Don't you understand, you idiot clown, that I am an innocent man? I have committed no crime! I am a patsy! A patsy!"

"Really?" Joker asked. "I'm a Libra."

We could feel the vein in our forehead sticking out at an alarming angle. We turned to our side to deliver a scathing response, but the police officer cut in.

"So, you're an innocent man are you, Dent? Then how do you explain the graffiti we found on the 'Southern Most Point In Continental United States' monument? The graffiti that reads '2face woz ere' ?!"

I gasped.

"I was framed!"

"*Sure was. By us!*" we snarled, jerking a thumb at our left hand side. I shrieked in horror.

"Whatever!" snapped the cop, "Sort it out in your own time, Dent, you sick freak. Here's the long and the short of it. You made bail. It was paid half an hour ago by one Mr. Bruce Wayne."

We gasped. What with all the revelations and resultant gasping and shrieking, we were becoming quite short on breath. Joker cackled.

"Brucie! Is there any end to that man's talents? Hell, I'd give him a rousing round of applause if I could move my hands."

"Shut up!" spat the officer. "Mr. Wayne said something along the lines of how your plight had made him feel sympathetic enough to part with the required bail. He also said that if you guys are gonna serve time, then he wants it to be in his city. It makes me sick. That man could wipe his ass with dollar bills. Why's he wasting his time on lowlifes like you? I just don't know. It makes me sick."

He paused. We are glad to report he was not sick, although he could have been with the amount of bile he must have built up on his diatribe.

"Anyway, tomorrow, January 25<sup>th</sup>, on flight number CO9173, you four are to be deported back to Gotham to be dealt with by the local authorities. Frankly, I'll be glad to see you go. Between the four of you, you've caused more trouble than Key West has seen in years! People like you make me sick to my stomach! We're gonna be a damn sight better off without you. And frankly, when you're on that plane headed back to

Gotham, there'll be a grin on my face even wider than Laughing Boy over here." He gestured angrily at Joker.

Who was no longer smiling.

Neither were we. Eddie and Catman looked positively horrified.

"Did you say..." we managed to stammer.

"January..." Joker said, with a frightened snigger.

"Twenty..." Catman said, without his usual pompous sneer.

"Fifth?" Eddie fittingly finished the question.

"Yeah, I did. That a problem for you guys? Doesn't work with your schedule? Well, tell you what, you have your people call my people, they'll tell you where to shove it, and I'll be back later to take you to the plane. You people make me sick!" he said, angrily, stomping up the flight of stairs. His sandals on the flagstones made an eerie ringing noise in the stunned silence of the old cell.

Our head was beginning to swim.

January 25<sup>th</sup>.

Hell Month.

In full swing.

And suddenly He was to be presented with four new chew toys. Toys that were, so far, untouched. Toys that in His eyes were surely due the chewing of a lifetime just to make up for their protracted absence.

"If you guys are gonna to serve time, then he wants it to be in his city," the guard had said. What an unfortunate choice of words, we reflected gloomily. His city... Serving time in His city... Hell Month...

Jack succinctly summed up the mood.

"We're doomed," he sighed.

## PART 11: CAT-TALE - MOUSE

Cassie Cain, aka Batgirl still disguised as the Firefly groupie Smoke, was uncertain how to proceed. Her initial training under the master assassin David Cain dictated that the mission objective superseded all other considerations. Her training under Batman taught that the safety of civilian bystanders was paramount. No undercover assignment was worth risking harm to the innocents of Gotham.

Although undertaken for personal reasons, her infiltration of the Iceberg Lounge was, in a manner of speaking, an undercover operation. Her objective, being close to her adored Gregory Brady, was defeated when she was attacked by Clayface, rescued by Poison Ivy, and her rescuer spirited her away—away from the Iceberg, away from Gregory—and towards Ivy's lair in the wilds of Robinson Park.

Cassie didn't want to leave the Iceberg, but she went along at first because she simply couldn't find a way not to. Poison Ivy was being quite ridiculously helpful: brushing bits of Clayface dirt off her leotard, assuring her "the murdering fiend" hadn't done her serious harm. This wasn't the way the villains of Gotham were meant to behave to one such as her... then she realized that, in her disguise as a groupie, she appeared as one who admired them, who hoped to be recruited to work with them.

Nevertheless, Cassie refused at first, shaking her head "no" when Ivy offered to take her back to her lair.

"You don't talk much, do you?" Ivy observed.

Again, Cassie shook her head.

"Did he knock the wind out of you?"

He had, so Cassie nodded yes. There seemed no reason to lie about it.

"Let's have a drink then. A Cosmopolitan is what you need."

It wasn't. But a drink meant returning to the bar and Gregory, so Cassie nodded and went along. There she saw the villainous criminal menace Roxy Rocket, decked out in a tight new costume, throwing herself—positively *throwing herself*—at Greg Brady!

"Joker," the slut cooed, "you worked for the Joker, how marvelous! That's really the big time, Mr. G. Is it okay if I call you Mr. G?"

"Eh, it's Giggles, ma'am, just Giggles," he stammered, obviously embarrassed by the hussy's brazen advances. "Or Greg, if you like," he added with a wink that crushed Cassie's hope that he was embarrassed. She turned her thoughts to the feasibility of tying Roxy's hair to her motorcycle and dragging her through the streets.

"Disgusting," Poison Ivy muttered, watching the pair. And Cassie began to realize that, for a villain, Ivy was much more insightful than the typical Gotham badguy. "Setting her cap for the new bartender, tsk, tsk, and all because Sly chased her and that got her noticed by the right people."

Poison Ivy turned to Cassie and announced: "I have no desire to watch this disgusting exhibition, do you? Let's at least split a cab. If you help me getting the, heh, *fertilizer* to my lair, I'll give you a ride home."

The objective of staying near Greg Brady was no longer an appealing one—certainly not if it meant witnessing what Ivy so rightly described as "the disgusting exhibition"

with Roxy Rocket. And Cassie was somewhat curious what Poison Ivy intended to do with Clayface, and if it was something she, as a crimefighter, ought to prevent. So she nodded and followed Ivy out of the Iceberg Lounge. A mass of vines followed them, each holding fast to a large clump of brownish gray formerly known as the shape shifter Clayface.

Outside the lounge, Cassie detected the distinct smell of a misty jungle, sultry, warm, and slightly sweet. The cab that had been sitting idle snapped on its ON DUTY light and edged forward, stopping just before Poison Ivy when the IN SERVICE light popped on.

“Robinson Park,” Ivy ordered while the vines that held Clayface packed themselves into the trunk. “Same as last time.”

The driver merely gave a dazed nod. Cassie hesitated, but her training said the safety of innocent civilians took precedence over all other considerations. Clearly, this driver was in a diminished condition, in Poison Ivy’s thrall, and Batgirl should not abandon him to the villainess’s dark purpose.

In Robinson Park, the dark purpose became clear: Ivy was going home. The moment the taxi slowed to a stop, she ordered the cabman to open the trunk, and the vines unpacked themselves and their captive clumps of Clayface.

Hence Batgirl’s dilemma: should she stay with the incapacitated cabman and make sure he got home safely, or should she continue in her undercover capacity as Smoke and find out just what Poison Ivy was up to?

“You’re kidding,” Bruce turned his head to conceal a twitch that threatened to erupt into a full-blown smile—if not an actual laugh. He thought the better of it when he turned back, face composed, and saw the look on her face. Of all the times he’d faced Selina as Catwoman, there was only one occasion when he’d seen that particular expression. At the time, he’d totally misjudged its significance.

It was the financial district, not one of her usual haunts, near a brokerage house Bruce Wayne knew was an Old Money institution with an even older alarm system. He had cautioned them numerous times, and always the reply was the same: tradition, we cling to the old ways, the established ways. What was good enough for the founders was good enough for their sons, grandsons and great grandsons.

It was not good enough to stop Catwoman.

He saw her on the rooftop of the Vishnu Trust, heading uptown... He saw in an instant she had already hit her target and carried the proceeds in a small sack. He could tell by her movement it weighed less than twenty pounds... from her path, he traced back in his mind the direction from which she had come and deduced the target: Chamfers & Sons. Bearer Bonds. He wouldn’t learn until months later how she learned of Chamfers & Sons and the childlike faith they placed in their antiquated security. All he knew that night was she was at the top of her form: lithe, agile, fast, and bewitchingly beautiful... heedless as always... carefree... obviously not troubled by the tabloid reports of her capture and imprisonment.

Or so he thought.

It always seemed to play out the same with her. He drew a line, and she laughed at him. He laid down the law, and she pressed against him. He scowled, and she

fingered the insignia on his costume. This time, it would be different. It was an experiment, he told himself, test and adjust. Change one thing on his end, and observe the result. He would alter his manner, just a little, and see how she'd respond.

He fired the grappler and swung northward to intercept her in... four buildings, the Dressily Complex. 'Purrfect,' he thought. The Dressily Roof was better lit than most, glowing with intermittent splashes of warm reds and cool blues from a huge animated billboard. Batman watched, fascinated, as the hues made the rich purple that wrapped her body flush pinker...then a deeper purple....then pinker.... He realized with horror that she was now on the roof with him. She'd seen him. She'd stopped. She was standing there... They were... seconds or... longer? minutes? into the encounter and he hadn't spoken a word.

What was worse, he felt himself smiling. The sight of her like that, not laughing, not taunting him, just standing... It felt like a Joker grin, the irresistible pull on stripped muscles through the cheek and jaw when exposed to even a small amount of those horrid toxins. Selina would eventually tell him it was only a twitch, but at the time, it felt like Bruce Wayne's most lecherous playboy leer.

To save face, he made eye contact and graveled, "I thought you were in jail."

That's when he saw the look, the same look that bored into him now in response to "you're kidding." The first time, he merely thought her startled, stunned in fact, for he was able to recover the bonds without a fight. But he thought no more about it. He had no idea until weeks later that that one simple twitch lit a fuse that would explode into Cat Tales. The stage show changed their lives, but Bruce was still wary of the trigger look's reappearance. A fuse was burning. Because he said "you're kidding," a feline fuse was burning, and he meant to find it and defuse it—or at the very least, detonate it in an unpopulated area.

"You're not kidding," he said carefully, "Never mind, my mistake, I understand now."

"You do?"

"Yes," he lied.

"Really?"

"No."

"Bruce!"

"I understand everything but the part about the closet."

"It's *all* about the closet. The closet is making a noise. There's something moving in there."

"And you sent in the cats on a search and destroy mission."

"Cat singular, Nutmeg doesn't go in for that sort of thing. Whiskers is the hunter, but he ran out like something scared him. That's got to be one big-ass mouse."

Again, Bruce felt the sharp tug of Joker toxin pulling at his lip. He hid it (he hoped) behind a thoughtful massaging of his chin. People said he had no sense of humor. JLA, Rogues, Dick, Gordon, Alfred... even Selina implied it from time to time. Selina, who was standing here telling him *Catwoman* was squeamish about fishing a mouse out of her closet. She stood toe to toe with Batman, with Ra's Al Ghul, with Prometheus... she modeled herself, not just her costume but her whole mindset, on cats... and she was freaking out *over a mouse???*

The Joker toxin won; he smiled. It was one of Bruce's more charming playboy smiles, and he hoped that would count for something. He was careful not to let even a hint of Batman creep into his voice as he said, "You want me to take care of it, Kitten?"

In his new role as potting soil, Matt Hagen was philosophical:

The phrase "feet of clay" is biblical. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a statue with a head of gold, but made of cheaper materials lower down. At the very bottom, the feet were made of iron and clay. The statue was struck on the feet, its weakest point, and shattered.

Fools, Matt Hagen reflected, have peculiar ideas about what denotes strength.

Consider Croc: undisputed arm wrestling champion of the Iceberg Lounge, 257 bouts, undefeated. No one would ever conceive Catwoman or Poison Ivy challenging the mutant steroid case in a physical confrontation. And yet, in terms of true strength, indeed, by any measure of clout and of raw power in the Rogue community, both women were heavyweights, while Croc was a ninety-pound weakling.

The strength of clay does not lie in being able to support a 40 foot gold statue. It lies in its inner resources, its malleability and its patience.

Poison Ivy was no different from Cameron, the director whose GhostRider trilogy skyrocketed Matt Hagen to fame. Cameron was what is politely termed "a gifted director," Hollywood parlance for a delusional narcissist prone to psychotic tantrums. Matt learned early to keep his head down, weather the storm, meekly agree to whatever was asked for, and then blithely play the scene however he wanted. At the end of the day, the director would see a full crew running into overtime, see four days of costly F/X shooting on the horizon, see the studio scrutinizing his budget, and decide Matt's way would work fine.

The Gotham underworld's "gifted director" Poison Ivy, the photosynthetically-crazed zealot that still reviled him for a stupid little bag of potpourri, had already forgotten about him. She was busy talking to the girl from the bar... She must be lonely, Hagen reflected, to bother bringing a groupie to her lair... So much the better. Lonely. Talking. Engrossed in the conversation. He would wait a while longer, to make sure she was wholly occupied and then... he would simply ooze away... And these miserable weeds sucking the calcium from his body would starve. That would fix her.

Batman knew his enemies well. Some were easier to predict than others. Catwoman was always an enigma. But even she could be counted on to respond in certain ways to certain events and stimuli.

Selina was a cat in every sense: she was strong, independent, and above all, proud.

If she thought she had appeared weak, if she needed to ask for help, if her pride... if her *fur* was ruffled, she would compensate. She would make a point of proving it a fluke. The night of their first date, Batman knew she would strike out with a bit of felonious bravado. She'd want to prove—to him and to herself—that she was still a cat and a thief. He anticipated her target, and left a note and a gift. It ended well.

Bruce was just as certain now that the mouse would demand a reaction.

“You’re kidding” he had said when she told him. It was a chance remark, uttered without thought or weighing of consequences. Catwoman spooked by a mouse in her closet, “you’re kidding.”

But the fuse was burning. She freaked out, he made a chance remark, and now there was going to have to be a demonstration that: despite whatever ‘fraidy cat episode might have occurred, she was still all she thought herself to be.

Like the jewelry store she went to burgle on their first date, Bruce was sure it had a better chance of ending well if he could predict it and take steps.

Poison Ivy was finding her new companion most agreeable. She listened. Harley never listened like this. Her beloved plants were good listeners, of course, but it had to be said that, on some subjects, their understanding was limited. This Smoke was human. Like all animals, that made her an inferior creature, but she *could* grasp the pangs of the heart which the callous oaks of Riverside Park did not.

Indeed, the girl had a pang of her own from the look of it. Why anyone would devote themselves to the likes of Firefly was a mystery, but still, it was an experience on which to build.

“You’re young,” Ivy told her frankly. “And when you are young, they call those feelings a crush. It is a good word. It means to squash, squeeze, press, mash, pound, defeat, or rout. We should keep that word. It would prevent so many false expectations. But we don’t. Once the pimples clear up, we start calling it ‘love,’ and that’s when the root rot sets in. All those ridiculous romance trollers that think every man and woman are a couple, they come together, fall in love, get married, have children, live happily ever after. Root rot.”

“...” was all Cassie could think to reply.

“I had a crush once,” Ivy continued, encouraged, “After Harvey, before Two-Face. He was a nice boy, for a human. He volunteered at Wilderness Warriors, so committed. ‘We are going to save a million square feet of rainforest by the end of the year,’ he would say. He was called Allaine. Everybody knew him because he always wore his University of Maine sweatshirt. ‘Remember, it’s Allaine from Maine’ he would say. It was light blue and dark blue, school colors, which brought out his eyes very nicely. And he was very tall.” She paused, then sighed. “He’s dead now,” she added flatly.

Cassie continued to listen.

You can’t tell that man anything. I am the expert on cats. And I explained—in language so clear and plain it could not be misunderstood—that there are two schools of thought in the cat world regarding mice:

#1: the mouser view goes like this: YUMMY!

#2: the princess view, the Nutmeg view, which also happens to be *my* view is this: Sitting here on my cushion, the one strategically selected to compliment the color of my spots, if pointed to a mouse will simply look up at you as if to say “and this concerns me....how?”

But you can't tell him any of that!

Yes, I am Catwoman. Yes, I am a predator. Yes, I am the proud owner of an ocelot, several leopards, lynxes, caracals, servals, cougars, panthers and a tiger. And YES, I didn't want to be the one to go into the closet and kill the little bugger if I could get anyone else to do it for me. And after Whiskers—who FLED (that has to be one scary mouse!)—Bruce was my next choice. He just happened to be there, so why not? Tell me that, huh? *Why not?* Why not at least ask?

It's not that I'm especially terrified of mice (although there was an hour with Ratcatcher once upon a dark and stormy night that I'd rather forget). But I really don't like going in that closet. I don't like routing around in reminders of the past. I don't even know why I keep most of that junk, but I'm sure not interested in finding out.

But can you tell him any of that? Of course not. He'd just wind up saying the closet is a hellmouth and my moving into the manor is a perfect excuse to clean it out.

"That's why he was so committed to the cause," Poison Ivy continued the sad tale of Allaine from Maine, "he was terminal. It wasn't love of nature that made him so determined to save the rainforest; it was a mark, something he could leave behind. The rat... the miserable two-timing rat..."

This is how Poison Ivy expressed the pain of a bitter irony: she had an immune system that shrugged off the deadliest poisons, and she fell for a man who had, by the end, no immune system at all.

"And that's when I swore off men," Ivy concluded, "an unreliable gender. Can't be depended on. Oh, I know what you're going to say: What about Two-Face?"

Cassie blinked. She was not going to say any such thing.

"That's another matter entirely. Just sex. No emotional entanglements whatsoever. It's long over anyway, but even before it was, I had no feelings for the man. He was a conquest when he was District Attorney, nothing more, and he is still nothing but a conquest."

"..."

"No man can resist me, you know."

"..."

"Remember the taxi driver?"

"..."

"Obviously, I can have Two-Face back any time I wish. I need only subject him to my lure."

"..."

"He will be a slave to his own lust."

"..."

"You're right, that would be cheating."

"..."

"Maybe I could make him jealous!"

Night again.

The feline fuse was burning.

After I left Selina's apartment, I went home, then down to the cave. I thought the logs of our old encounters might shed some light on this.

Unproductive.

I should have realized it was all too recent. Only days ago, I had picked her up at the airport, dropped her at her apartment, then came to the cave to scrutinize the logs for the ritual... to do it all again—her apartment to the cave to the logs—and then read about her, well, I couldn't concentrate. My mind kept drifting away from the events in the log and back to the more recent scene... with her and the logs and the cave... I couldn't afford to get bogged down in that now. I needed to study the past, work out what she would do.

So I left the logs and suited up. It was still an hour before my first patrol, but this time of year, it gets dark early. I settled on the rooftop of Sterling National Bank. Next door to Cartier and three floors taller, this spot affords the best view of the famous jeweler's rooftop. Cartier... Catwoman's favorite. She considers it our first rooftop... December 18<sup>th</sup>. Feline logic, there's no arguing with it. Our first encounter was October 10<sup>th</sup> on top of the Gotham Central Train Station. After that, there were six more meetings before Cartier in December: bank vaults, art galleries, museums, but none of them count for some reason...

I will admit, though only to myself, that I used her back in those days. She was a welcome relief from the insanity. She was an escape from the demented clowns and the bisected psyches, a dose of relative reality in my surreal nightlife. I remember every encounter, every run-in with her. I hold those memories in a special place in my mind, stored away like hidden treasure: my nights with Catwoman.

There were those nights—those nights when I seemed to be losing the battle, those nights when it seemed like every step I took forward, the city would take two steps back—when I needed a release. Subconsciously—I don't ever recall doing it purposefully—I would search for her. When I felt lost or frustrated or fed-up with everything, I would glide aimlessly from rooftop to rooftop to find solace in my city, only to discover myself on Museum Row or the diamond district, the park-front condos or this roof with the eagle's nest view of Cartier... all her normal haunts... or else in some neighborhood where I suspected she kept a lair... anywhere I might run into her. She rarely disappointed. Eventually, I'd catch a glimpse of that purple, bounding across a roof or balancing on a balcony, and I'd swing into action.

The fights were physical to be sure, but not overly violent, never vicious. In all these years, she was the only one I ever pulled a punch for. I'd forgo furious jabs and kicks for more grapple-style moves: judo tosses, wrestling grabs, blocks and holds. Anything that involved extended physical contact. More effective with her, I told myself. And it was true. I knew she knew how to fight, that much was obvious. She could hold her own against anyone in any style of confrontation. Yet when I grabbed her, putting her in a hold that had six different counters, she would pause. She would let me hold the maneuver a little longer than necessary. Then, when she finally did counter, she would pick the move that, while not necessarily the most efficient, was the one that forced her body momentarily closer to mine before breaking free. Her counters always involved a little more "incidental contact" than necessary; an errant hand, a snaking thigh, her

chest pressing hard against my own while her lips pressed in dangerously close to mine.

Then she would break free and run, leaving me standing alone on the rooftop, my mind swimming. The chase was on. Our little game of cat and... bat. Perhaps I stalled a little longer than necessary. Maybe I'd take the route that let me watch her lithe body spring and twist... from roof to fire escape to alley to roof.... High above the city streets, she was truly magnificent to behold. Eventually, I would catch up; I'd land on a rooftop just as she made the other side of it. I'd call out, tell her to stop, and unlike her other... compatriots, she would actually listen. She'd stop, her hip cocking to the side ever so slightly, and then turn... slowly... so slowly, making sure to give me an eyeful of that profile, the city lights dancing around her like a thousand twinkling stars. Then she'd start to move... toward me... not threateningly or menacingly, but surely predatory. She'd have that sly smile as she sauntered towards me, her whole body alive with movement. She'd always make some comment ("Well, now you've got me, Dark Knight. What are you going to do with me?") that I would reply to with a growl or a glare. Then she would be on me, so close, that smell of her skin, vanilla and lavender, invaded my senses. Then came the touch: a light teasing along the edge of the cowl, a slow claw down my arm or a gentle fiddle with the edge of the cape. Or possibly even the worst... and best... move of all, the one move that would thrill and numb me into a feverish daze. She'd come in close, her hand slowly raising up to my chest, and my heart would leap into my throat as her fingers danced over the emblem, lightly caressing the oval, slowly tracing the outline of the bat... I'm sure there's something obnoxiously Freudian about that, but I long ago decided to ignore it.

That's when The Bat would take over. I'd reach up and forcefully grab her arms, growling something about that being "enough." She'd smile wickedly, break free of my grasp and launch off the roof and into the night. I wouldn't follow that time; the game was through. We'd go our separate ways, knowing we'd return to play again another night.

To be fair, it wasn't always like that. There were nights when she toyed with me, trying to steal my attention away long enough to kick a knapsack of loot off the roof. There were the nights when she frustrated me beyond belief. She had this insidious knack: she could infuriate me and turn me on at the same time. And she knew it. She'd come at me with her defiant independence, her cavalier attitude and her undeniable sexuality. She'd banter and prod at me, trying for any reaction she could get. I may have remained stoic on the outside, but internally I was screaming to grab her and kiss her, or hit her, or both at the same time. It was those nights I'd end up going a few rounds with Strategic Self-mutating Defensive Regiment 4 before heading off to the shower and bed.

Regardless of the nature of the confrontation, I always ended up frustrated, excited, happy, anxious, and furious—all at the same time. It has long been said that emotions can get in the way, interfering with your ability to perform your duty. Catwoman did affect my emotions, on so many levels. But I don't recall that ever hindering me.

...except possibly in the sense that I let her get away...

But subconsciously, that was the price I was willing to pay for what she gave me, for all that she did for me. She made me feel things I'd tried to forget, tried to suppress in my role as the city's defender. In a word, she made me feel... alive.

With a start, I realized it was time for patrol. It was *six minutes past* time to begin patrol. I'd been on that roof for an hour, and I hadn't accomplished a thing. This wasn't meant to be a stroll down memory lane, it was meant to determine exactly what Selina might do after the mouse incident to demonstrate that she was still as much a cat as she ever was... Oh... of course... I could see the answer clearly then, not because of the hour's thought I'd given it, but because it moved, shifted actually, three floors beneath me, on the roof of Cartier, our first rooftop, purple coated in moonlight.

Oracle's finger stroked the control button thoughtfully without depressing it. She preferred waiting a full ten days after the anniversary before resuming usual contact protocols for Batman. In Hell Month, she would certainly not bring him anything this thin—a maybe of a maybe of a maybe. She would make damn sure Nightwing was missing, that it was not some flukish interference with the OraCom and GPS. He'd gone much longer than this without checking in, they all had. It didn't mean there was a situation... And there was nothing particularly sinister about the OraCom and GPS going out together. It wasn't like it was all coincidence. Any number of environmental factors could flood the frequencies or play havoc with the encryption sequence on both devices. Once, Robin fried his communicator and transponder just by landing on a TV news van with a satellite dish... Of course, if Nightwing noticed his communicator was out, it wasn't like him to ignore it. Usually he'd find a pay phone and call that way, something safe and innocuous on an unguarded channel. Most often, he'd pretend to order a pizza with pineapple and anchovies... but he might not have even noticed the communicator was out. Or if he did, he might not be able to get to a phone. He would be counting on the fact that she was a professional that knew what it was to be in the field, and not some excitable newlywed jumping to conclusions because her husband didn't call... And yet... the fact was, Hell Month technically ended with the anniversary. There was no rule that said she had to wait ten days before resuming normal procedures, and under normal circumstances, she would certainly call any information in to Batman regardless of the certainty of what it meant...



## PART 12: CAT-TALE – VINE AND CARTIER’S

“Banned!” Oswald Cobblepot declared, pointing at Poison Ivy.

“Banned!” he repeated, pointing at Hugo Strange.

“Fired!” he yelled, pointing at Greg Brady.

“Banned!” he cried, pointing at Roxy Rocket.

“Fired!” at Gina the washroom attendant.

“Banned!” at Jonathan Crane.

Then finally, the tip of his special machine gun umbrella pointed to the petite groupie covered in vine leaves. He considered for a minute, as a king might weigh arguments of clemency for a first time offender. “BANNED!” he pronounced finally, then turned and left the exiles in the street outside the Iceberg Lounge, returning alone to the ruin that was once his nightclub.

“Root rot,” Poison Ivy hissed. The birdman would come around. And if he didn’t see reason on his own, a whiff of jungle mist would bring him around. Having a tantrum because his precious bar suffered a little damage. Why, if anybody should be complaining... she was the one who was humiliated! She had honored his bar with her presence, she had honored his bar as the site to unveil her new creation to the world, and this is how she was being repaid???

Certainly it was her prerogative to take this sweet young thing, so naïve as to be infatuated with Firefly, under her wing. “Smoke,” she decided, was a promising seedling that chanced to sprout in unhealthy soil. She needed to be transplanted to a more fertile environment. Consciously, Poison Ivy saw an open and malleable specimen she could mold into something great. Unconsciously, she was lonely and knew she had found a sympathetic listener.

“First things first,” she had ordered, “you’ll need a name. Leaf? No. Sounds like a contestant on American Idol... Petal? Er, no. Harvey called me that once when we were—Never mind... Flora! How about Flora? No, you’re right. That’s a middle-aged cafeteria worker in a hairnet... Oh, I’ve got it. VINE!”

Then came the weaving of leaves into a becoming tunic to replace that leotard. The girl was hesitant at first, but Ivy made her understand the great honor: She herself, Poison Ivy the Irresistible, Chosen of Gaia, was to be her mentor. Ivy would train her. They would begin... well, we had to run before we could walk... they would begin at the Iceberg, by enticing that new bartender away from Roxy the Rocket Harlot. That brought the girl around, and Pamela preened herself on her powers of persuasion.

Vine started off well enough, entering the room with a grace and majesty befitting one decked out in leaves. She approached the bar as instructed, emitting a silent aura of irresistible sexuality.

The object of her seduction seemed appropriately awed and receptive, waiting, it seemed, for an order from his goddess. Ivy waited for her protégé to exert her power.

...

Then, as sometimes happens in cultivating a new hybrid, things took an unexpected turn. The bartender got tired waiting for his goddess's command and asked outright: "What're you drinking, beautiful?"

He was only waiting for a drink order. A setback, to be sure, but one that could have been dealt with if Roxy hadn't chimed in that "the little sprout" didn't look old enough for more than a Shirley Temple. Snickers led to slaps which led to hair pulling which led to...

Hugo Strange really was a vile pustule on the buttocks of Mother Earth. It could have all been handled if he hadn't pushed her buttons with that smarmy suggestion about mud wrestling. *Women*, nature's chosen vessels of life, slathered in *mud*, the earthy soup from which all plants spring! For the gratification of loathsome, drooling, slimy cretins like that... that... that... *STRANGE!* Poison Ivy could not contain her disgust and she let fly as any sane woman would! And if that *WASHROOM ATTENDANT* was so wanting in sense that she actually saw Hugo Strange's desecration of all that was beautiful and magical in female sexuality as something *POSITIVE*, then the traitor to womankind would have to be punished along with the men... While Ivy was distracted with these matters, the repugnant Jonathan Crane, the only lowlife low enough to hang with a human weed like Hugo Strange, went to work on the bartender.

"Fearsome choice before you, I fear," the Scarecrow began, warming on his favorite subject.

Greg Brady did not see it that way.

"You mean the girls? Girls, girls everywhere, I don't know that that's anything to quake about, sir," he answered respectfully.

"Two of those girls are wearing leaves, boy," Scarecrow insisted. "Around here, leaves mean trouble. And usually a rash."

Compared to the dangers at his old job, a rash didn't seem so terrible a fate, and the former Joker henchman said as much. "An exaggerated immune response to nothing much. Bring on the rash," he quipped.

Cassie and Roxy both heard, and the bar was assaulted with a hail of tables, chairs, bottles, and novelty Iceberg Lounge glassware.

It was just like the Ha-Hacienda on movie night, Greg thought, before Poison Ivy's special wood-free polymer table hit him in the sternum.

I think better in the catsuit. Always have. It's a sensual experience, not "changing into" but "becoming" Catwoman: the caress of butter soft leather pulled tight across my skin, pulling on the gloves, patting them smooth, tugging on the folds, then the same with the boots... pulling on the cowl and adjusting the mask, drawing my hair out the rear flap... something about it makes all the complicated questions simple and clear.

All but one.

Tonight, the caress of the leather only stirred memories of another caress, great hands, warm knowing fingers... and when I pulled my hair through the flap, it tilted my head back, like he does, running his fingers through, kissing me over and over...

Actually, the catsuit might not help me think when *He's* the quandary I'm thinking about. But it was either this or a trip out to the Catitit to see Nirvana, and I was already here so...

"Here" was Cartier, our first rooftop. First time it got interesting, anyway. I don't want to think about that right now, though. Something about Hell Month, all his rituals, it all gets bogged down in the past. All the junk in that damn closet. That was then and this is now. It wasn't "those jewels don't belong to you" anymore, it was "I don't understand why you haven't moved in full time."

I still didn't understand how we could get there from here. From *here*, this very roof and "those jewels don't belong to you."

Reflexively, I began thinking through how to get to those jewels that don't belong to me, how to get there, into that vault, from here, northwest corner of the roof: Attach a jammer to the Phoenix relay and pop the vent hood over the power conduits. Swing to the alley and disarm the floor alarms from the electrical panels, in through the service door and attach a thirty-second video loop to the surveillance feeds. Back out the service door and return up here, in through the office ventilation ducts, left, down, left, left, down, right and squiggle. Drop out in the corridor between the private showroom and the main vault. 0010-048-73. Jewels that don't belong to me. Then the tingle... and the voice...

"That's far enough, Catwoman."

The jolt back to reality was almost physical, as if I was physically sucked out of that vault in my imagination through space and time back to the rooftop here and now.

Catwoman's Rule #12 states that you never ever react with surprise when he makes an appearance, no matter how sudden or unexpected. But Catwoman's Rule #12 was written when I really was opening the vault, not just thinking through how. Catwoman's Rule #12 never anticipated anything this surreal.

What was he doing here?

And "That's far enough, Catwoman." What the fuck?

Batman was irked, just for a moment, that he hadn't anticipated this. He'd wanted to predict Selina's response to the mouse, and here it was: Catwoman. Looking to play. Watching her alone on that roof, there was no need to confine himself to a twitch, and he felt a full smile melt over his features. He'd just been remembering this, how she'd show up whenever he subconsciously needed one of their run-ins, and now, here she was. He fired the grappler to the cupola of the Frith Building, a spot he knew was high enough not to be heard on Cartier's roof, yet afforded the perfect angle of descent. He swung down to meet her, his mind locked on old times, fully in the mood to 'play.'

He landed.

"That's far enough, Catwoman!" ...in his best BatGrowl, expecting the obvious, "It's never far enough, Dark Knight."

...except...

All he got in reply was shocked silence.

It took him a moment to process: She looked like she just got caught at something... and wasn't expecting to... In the old days, there was always that hint that, regardless of how careful she was being, she *expected* to get caught by the Bat. That was part of the thrill. This time, she honestly looked like she never expected him to show up...

It threw him...

Hard.

He began to suspect something was wrong.

In the spirit of Hell Month, he began to suspect the worst.

"What exactly is *Catwoman* doing on Cartier's roof?"

The moment had passed to register surprise or not at his appearance. The only choice now was banter or a serious reply. "That's far enough, *Catwoman*," he had said. A stunning *Catwoman* rejoinder was called for, and it came out "...". That led to "What exactly is *Catwoman* doing on Cartier's roof?"

The only choice now was *banter* or a *serious reply*... The fact that it was a rooftop, this rooftop especially, argued for banter. It would be an insult to all that Cartier meant to fall back on something as mundane as the truth. And yet, somehow I heard myself saying: "Thinking. Just thinking."

The un-cattiness in my voice startled me much more than his entrance had. What was I saying? Like I owed him some kind of explanation? Like I needed him to know I wasn't here to steal?? Like there was something wrong with all the times that... *oh screw it!* "I come here to think, okay, I don't have a cave."

Shit! The catty edge was certainly back in my voice, but at what price? "I don't have a cave!" where did that come from? If the son of a bitch had his way I *would* have a cave. *SHITSHITSHITSHITSHIT!*

"Thinking?" he asked. I don't know if it was Hell Month or what but it came off like: "YOU, thinking, since when?"

"Yes, *THINKING*," I shot back, "You rub two brain cells together until they make a spark."

Okay, that was a little more like her, so he grunted. But still, there was something else behind it. It was more "catty" than he expected, even from her. No playful innuendo, just... hostile. There was something behind it all. Concern? Anger? ... *Fear?! He decided the best course was to get to the heart of it quickly.*

"And Cartier helps? What exactly were you thinking about?"

Without even realizing, he scanned her for an empty loot bag—then immediately shifted his gaze back to her face when he discovered what he was doing.

Did he think I didn't see that? The once over, he just glanced down at... I felt insulted, and at the same time I wondered why. I decided to turn the screw. What was I thinking, he asked?

“Just thinking about old times...”

Maybe it was nothing after all! She was in the same frame of mind that he was, a return to the rooftop games. Except, why the new reaction if she just wanted to play?

“...vent, left, down, left, left, down, right squiggle, vault, 0010-048-73.”

Not thinking about old times like he was.

He felt his blood freeze, and something leapt into his throat from the vicinity of his heart. His worst fear was becoming true: She was stealing again.

“You *know* that’s not going to happen,” he graveled, trying to hide the shakiness in voice, hoping the growl didn’t betray him. Why? Why was she doing this?!

“Careful, Dark Knight, that sounded a little like the voice of the master.”

For just an instant, two fingers on her right hand twitched ever so subtly towards the whip...

This couldn’t really be happening. Not Selina. Not *his* Selina. This wasn’t banter; this wasn’t play. It was real. This was like what their confrontations *should* have been all those years ago. Crimefighter vs. Criminal. Good vs. Bad. Right vs. Wrong. It was suddenly all too much, like a bad dream. He started to feel something he hadn’t felt in eons: Fear. He was afraid of what this meant, for him, for her... for “them.” And with Fear, came The Bat. The Psychobat, the Hell Month Bat. Ready to handle the situation like he would with *any* of Gotham’s criminals. He stepped toward her, almost daring for her to go to the whip.

“If you’re talking about a crime, in *MY* city, then ‘master’ is the least of your concerns.”

The reaction was not that of any of Gotham’s criminals, only this one: eye to eye, nose to nose, never been impressed by that routine and never would be...

“If you’re talking about cutting off the last link to my own life and moving lock, stock, and Whiskers into yours just because you say so, then a crime in your city is the least of *YOUR* concerns.”

*Lock, stock, and Whiskers?* What did she mean by that? Bat, Psychobat and Bruce himself stared in deathly silence, until one of them forced out a bewildered “*What?*”

It did not defuse the bomb.

“Why haven’t you moved in yet—like a good little housecat—little shelf in the vault, little bowl with my name on it in the kitchen—how about a collar with a bell! Have Alfred change my water now and then. Insufferable jackass—”

Batman began dissecting the words like one of Nigma’s riddles. Move in? What was she talking about? Where did she get an idea like tha-ah. In his mind, it was almost as though Bruce tapped Batman on the shoulder as the memory clicked. The previous night, before patrol, a remark blurted in the heat of the moment... a casual, simple remark, that was all it was. It had been in the back of his mind since missing her in Paris, but he never meant to... It was the anniversary, he was going on patrol, he didn’t want to have an argument about her staying the night or not. Why were they even wasting time discussing it: Kitten, you’re here so much, why not dot the i and cross the t?

His stomach knotted. OK, she was freaking over his suggestion to move in. She felt cornered by it, and struck out. But all of that led her *here?*!

"So that's what this is? You're going back to stealing just because I ruffled your fur a little?"

The incredulous "WHAT?" that answered him echoed his own confused outburst a moment before. But Batman was still at the helm, and Batman knew the criminal mindset: Denying it, like they all do.

"You heard me," he growled, "You're trying to get back at me and you think *this* is the way to do it?"

The moment hung suspended in the icy stillness of a Gotham rooftop in January until an invisible string broke with a silent plunk. Nothing had changed, neither had moved or spoken, but suddenly, everything felt different.

The first thing Batman noticed was her eyes—while he was not actually being laughed at, the amused "you're so cute when you're stupid" expression was aimed directly at the tip of his nose.

"Yes, that's it exactly..." came the answer at last, a blend of sarcasm, amusement and affection as only Catwoman could deliver them. "I came back here to ventleftleft-downrightsquiggle-001004873-jewelsthatdontbelongtome, all to get back at you for ruffling my fur. That's it exactly..."

Wait for it.

"...I salute you, World's Greatest Detective."

Banter. For the first time ever, it was music to his ears. She really was *just thinking*, stewing over what he'd said. He still didn't quite understand what that had to do with Cartier, but then he didn't understand how Cartier could be their first rooftop when it came 69 days and 7 encounters after the train station.

"Fine," he grunted, then realized that simple sound was a throwback to the old way. This was a new game and new rules were called for. Perhaps the truth:

"Was it really that bad a suggestion?"

Bruce's voice. Cheap shot, Dark Knight.

"It..."

Still.

"It... .."

My heart was racing.

"... .."

I love him, I had to admit, both of him. All of him. I love being with him. He brings out the best in me.

"... .."

I like myself with him.

"... .. It's an awfully big mouse," I whispered finally.

TwitchSmile. Does he know how sexy that is?

"But catchable," he said. The combination of Bruce voice and choppy bat syntax is freakier than I can begin to express. It unnerved me. And not wanting him to think he had the upper hand, I felt I better make it clear I wasn't rolling over like a spaniel.

"If I were to say yes, I'd need to have my own space, totally mine, like an embassy is foreign soil."

"No."

Instantaneous answer. Compromise has never been a happy notion for the right & wrong crowd. "No chance," he said with another sexy lip twitch.

This, I decided, was no different than getting to leave with the diamond necklace. It only required a little feline finesse. I leaned in close and stroked the edge of his mask, just at the cheek. I felt him tense and I drew a claw down his arm.

"A little space of my own," I repeated, fiddling with the edge of his cape. "Totally mine..." I purred, fingering the insignia on his chest, that oval he uses to mark all his possessions. "...Like an embassy..." There was a rumble from deep in his chest as I traced the batwing on the emblem. "...Foreign soil."

There was one final pause, not at all awkward. He was thinking. And then...

"Do you want to pick a room or should I build you a new wing?"

I'll admit I wasn't ready for the win. And I knew I only had seconds before the window of opportunity closed.

"Just a room or two on the second floor will be fine," I soothed, "and an acre on the grounds for Nirvana's pen." Was that greedy? Yes. Why not. Cats always take what they can get.

"We'll talk about it later," he brusked, pulling away, "I have to get to work."

It stung. I should have expected it, the gruff "that's enough" dismissal from the end of every encounter, but still it stung.

"That was only 'if I said yes,'" I reminded him, letting him off the hook. I turned to go, hoping he'd stop me but knowing he wouldn't, when...

"Wait!"

I turned back, floored, and saw him pressing his hand to his ear.

"Say again, Oracle... How long ago? ... No, I'll check it myself... Batman out."

In one lightning move, his hand dropped from the ear to the utility belt, drew the grappler and fired. "C'mon," he ordered, extending the free hand, "Game over. It's Nightwing. He's missing."



## **PART 13: TWO-FACED TALE – DEAR DICTAPHONE**

We pressed the record button with practiced flair, listening to the soothing hissing noise as the tape began rolling. We immediately felt our taut muscles beginning to loosen.

There is something about talking about us that puts us in a good mood. We are a subject very close to our own heart. We suppose that's why we write these little memoirs of ours? Our fondness for ourselves, however, does often result in the most outrageous acts of digression, of which this is one.

Placing a trained hand to our brow in true Oscar Wilde fashion, we began speaking to the recorder with a voice that we believed conveyed pain, anguish and the sufferings of a man before his time.

"Personal log—entry number 18. We hope that you do not mind, dear Dictaphone, that we number these entries only with even numbers, this in fact only being our ninth entry to your hallowed library since our return from the accursed Florida Keys. We doubt rather strongly that you mind—you are a Dictaphone, and your kind are not known for their free thinking attitudes. We have resisted the urge thus far of making any record of that fateful trip—the first eight visits to this machine being confined to our last will and testament parts one through two. But that is immaterial. We shall say this about our quest: In essence, it was successful. Our good friend and favored barman, Sly, is to return shortly. However, as we know only too well, every coin has a flip side. Due to circumstances totally beyond our control—partially—we were deported back to this hideous place. Fortunately, Catman, Eddie, Jack and myself were able to forcibly commandeer the little plane and then make good our getaway once back in Gotham Airport. There ends the good news."

We rose, sighing dramatically. Suddenly, our entire demeanor changed. Gone was the befuddled look from our eye, the quizzical pout from our lip. In its place—anger, hatred, and fear. Howling as if in pain, we wrenched up the chair we had been sitting on and threw it into the wall. It shattered into many pieces. Losing interest in it as soon as it had left our hands, not even turning to look on the beautiful destruction, we turned our attentions to the coffee table on which the Dictaphone perched. Scooping the machine up in our arms like a protective mother, we flipped the table up and over, letting it spin in the air, landing with a delightful crash on the floor. Moving next to our desk, we swept all of the papers on it away with a flailing arm, howling as the whirlwind of documents blew up around us. Like Frankenstein, a prisoner of our own creation, we staggered blindly through the assorted stationary, looking for something else to destroy. Gibbering like a monkey, we proceeded to pull our PC from its moorings and throw it onto the floor—a surprisingly pleasurable task that everyone should make a point of doing before their death.

"WHY?!" we shrieked, dancing amongst the debris as if we were performing intricate steps in a rain-dance. "WHY?! Why is he ignoring me?! THIS IS HELL

MONTH! IN GOTHAM! Catman was found beaten to a pulp inside a suitcase on a baggage carousel. He didn't even manage to leave the airport before being taken out! As for Eddie, well, what happened to him is too horrible to contemplate... Every day, there are stories in the news of random clowns being found beaten senseless in the early hours. The newspapers are baffled, but we know the truth, we see the correlation. So why—WHY—have we been spared?! WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO DESERVE SUCH TREATMENT?!”

We ran our hands, cold and clammy, through our already sweaty hair. Our eyes were wide and staring.

“What on Earth can it mean? What does he have in mind for us? For us to have survived for so long can only mean that when the sword of Damocles falls from on high it will land in our midriff, resulting in a slow and ultimately painful death as opposed to the joyous relief of a swift end. We do not mind admitting to you, a machine without a tongue to mock or eyes to scorn, that we are afraid. Indeed, we have never been so afraid in all of our close to forty years. Never. We know full well that there is a terrible burden hanging over our head—an unspeakable punishment for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He strikes like a disease at the heart of the rogue community—merciless—without reason. Why have we been spared? Why?”

We were close to tears. We held our hands out in front of us, and laughed tautly at the shaking we beheld.

“Look at us. A wreck. A miserable, nervous wreck. We need coffee. Yes... Coffee will soothe our pain.”

We looked around with jerky movements of the neck born of paranoia, looking for our coffee machine. A thought struck us, and we slowly looked downward, hoping against hope we were wrong.

It had been on the coffee table. It was now in pieces, its component parts hanging out of it as if to mock us. We fell to our knees, and openly wept.

“No... the first victim of this pointless conflict. WHY?! Why did this young one have to die? Never again to imbibe its protector with its sweet sepia goodness. OK, so we pushed the little guy hard over the past few days—today alone, we've had a good eight mugs of the stuff—but even so. A tragic waste.”

We looked away, unable to bear it any longer. Drawing some of the scattered papers from our desk towards us, we covered the poor little machine, allowing it the honorable burial it rightly deserved. We stayed at its side for a while—drowning in a sea of tears and self-pity.

What could we possibly have done? What did Batman have in mind for us? What was to become of Harvey Dent?

Our head sank. The situation was hopeless.

“Mental note,” we said mournfully, “Buy new coffee machine.”

Patting the mound of paper respectfully, we turned to stand and leave this scene of reckless carnage.

It was then that we spied it.

It had apparently been hidden in one of the piles of paper we had swept from our desk. We were amazed we still had it. We clutched it in outrage, the grip growing tighter all the time, our arms and hands shaking ever more violently.

Spying the dictaphone to our left where it had fallen, we reflected verbally on the issue of the gossip rag we had just found—the same issue we had bought on the way to Key West.

The issue with Nightwing and Ivy on the cover.

“Nightwing,” we hissed through clenched teeth. Our teeth were so tightly locked together, it was beginning to hurt.

“Nightwing. The boy who became a man. The man who promptly stole our beloved Poison Ivy from us. How we HATE you,” we breathed, our breath coming out in short and painful bursts. “For all her many innumerable faults, Ivy was ours, and ours alone. As far as we are concerned, Nightwing, you have crossed a line. And now you must pay the price.”

We stood and turned menacingly. We advanced towards him, grinning evilly, our head throbbing. We watched him squirming in the chains we had placed him in, hanging upside down from a hook deliberately installed for such an occasion.

Beneath his rubber facemask, we saw his eyes: Fear and panic mingled together—a joy for us, his tormentor, to behold. We watched him frantically trying to tell us something through the duct tape we had placed roughly over his mouth. Even if what he said had been intelligible, we wouldn’t have listened. We were in no mood for his lies.

Marching towards him, our eyes clamped open, a Smiley grin fixed to our face. The cold wet skin of our hands as we wrung them did little to calm our fluctuating mood. Anything to hide the cowardly shaking from him.

Unable to contain ourselves any more, we ran towards him and kicked him hard across the jaw with the steel capped toe of our boot. He flew backward, only to return to his original position, the hook making the chained Nightwing into a human punch bag. He groaned beneath the gag.

“SHUT UP!” we screamed, punching him hard in the stomach. He hacked, his body attempting to curl into a fetal position but unable to do so for the chains. “What do you people want with us?! First, you take Ivy from us. We cannot even begin to emphasize the pain and consternation that single act of selfishness has caused us. You nearly destroyed us, Nightwing! We care for Ivy more than a worm like you could possibly imagine—to find out in such a public manner of your theft was more than we could take.” He shook his head frantically, and tried to speak more. We kicked him again. “SHUT UP! We don’t want to hear your lies OR your apologies! Then we take into consideration the second factor. Soon, your master, the puppet master, will beat us to within millimetres of our lives just because he feels like it—or so it would seem. This in itself, we would not mind. But it is the waiting, waiting for the inevitable, waiting for the hammer to fall... IT’S KILLING US! When will the blow come? Tell us, Nightwing. TELL US!”

We punched him again, in the back this time. The punch soon became a flurry as we let our frustration overwhelm us.

“We really shouldn’t be admitting this in front of witnesses,” we said, gesturing to the Dictaphone, still clinically recording the proceedings, “but maybe it was a little unfair of us and twenty of our finest hired help to jump you in that alleyway. But

don't worry, we left that little old lady you were trying to save well alone. We had snared our prey."

We shook our head, grinning in wry disbelief.

"How could you do what you did to us, Nightwing? How could anyone be so callous? Now, it is not only our face that is broken in two—our heart falls into the same category."

We stalked away from him darkly, tears threatening to well up once more in our eyes. We blinked them away as we neared the work surface on which we had conveniently placed a handheld electric drill. We stopped as we reached it, suddenly feeling weak at the knees.

"I hope you enjoy your time in the afterlife together," we said, not turning around. We could hear his frantic pleading through the gag.

Our hand hovered over the drill. We could hear Nightwing's muffled grunting increasing in volume and urgency.

We continued to hover.

And hover.

There was nothing for it. With our free hand, we reached for our coin. We do not make apologies for who we are and don't believe anyone should. An occasion as monumental as this simply had to be flipped for.

We spun the coin into the air with a practiced flick. Nightwing's eyes were fixed to the coin—watching it arc. Watching it seemingly hang in the air, agonizingly. Watching it fall.

We caught it.

Looking down into our palm, we looked at the coin impassively.

There we had it. A decision had been made. There was no disagreeing with the coin. It was time for action and screw the consequences. Pun very much intended.

Sighing heavily, we reached for the drill.

"And then what happened?! Don't leave me in suspense, Harv!" Eddie said, tensely grabbing us at the elbow. We slowly turned to him, trying to keep him and him alone in our vision. We find the drab grays and dirty whites of Arkham's hospital wing depressing at any time, but the effect is multiplied in January and or early February, for hopefully obvious reasons.

"We don't know, Eddie. The memories, like the lumps on our head, are a little painful..."

"TELL ME!" Eddie hissed aggressively, taking a tighter grip at our arm. We could feel the circulation being cut. Swallowing, we smiled meekly at him.

"You know, Eddie, before we do continue, we just want to make it clear that, at the time all of this took place, we were on something of a caffeine rush. Although it could be argued, of course, we were going through some kind of cold turkey transitional period after the death of our beloved coffee machine... Note to self, additional: Make sure the new machine has an espresso feature..."

He cut us off, violently jerking our arm to an angle we knew couldn't be 100-percent healthy. We yelped like a wounded puppy.

“OK! OK! You twisted our arm. So... we had Nightwing chained up, reaching for a hand drill...”

We considered the drill. We longed for its grooved faceted handle. We yearned to give Nightwing yet another orifice to worry about.

But the coin had spoken.

Sighing heavily, and with some force, we moved our hand away from the drill and further down the work surface. Hesitantly, we snatched up a small wrinkled piece of paper. We had scrunched it into a ball in an earlier burst of petulance, and now reluctantly sought to smooth it out.

“Now listen,” we said, sheepishly wandering back over to our captive, speaking in a tone that was riddled with shame. “We’re not very good at this kind of thing. We never have been one for male bonding—Hell, we don’t even like him very much,” we said, jerking our thumb at Harv’s side of our face. “So this isn’t going to be easy for us. Please do your best to be understanding. This is, believe it or not, all for your own good. Someday, young grasshopper, you’ll actually thank us for our words of wisdom.”

We weren’t sure if it was possible to convey scorn whilst chained up and hanging upside down, but Nightwing did a very reasonable job of it anyway. We snarled, drawing our foot back to kick the insolent brat hard in the face. Remembering the coin’s ruling, we sighed heavily and began.

“The first piece of advice we can give you is to get used to the idea that Ivy is always right. Whether she is or not is totally immaterial. She is *ALWAYS* right. Get what we mean? Deuce, the horrors we could tell you about daring to question her authority. Take it from a couple of guys who know—don’t do it. Let’s see... If it’s your turn to do the food shopping, make damn sure every single item in that cart when you get to the checkout is organic or, at the very least, has the Ivy seal of approval. You’ll learn by trial and sometimes painful error which items do and do not have said seal. Let’s see... Don’t assume she’s done with you until she says she is. Along those lines, the following two words are a must. ‘Yes’ and ‘Petal.’ Repeat after me. ‘Yes, Petal.’ ‘Yes, Petal.’ Let the words roll off your tongue—oh, you can’t. We put that gag on you, didn’t we? Oh well. Practice when you get home. Aerosols: they’re a no-no. Roll on deodorant is not as comfortable, in our experience. But frankly, the hassle it will save makes it more than worthwhile to just take the extra minute in the mornings and flap your arms until it dries. Not to mention, if there’s a giant cactus rolling around in your underwear drawer, it doesn’t much matter which deodorant you use.”

We paused, looking at him thoughtfully for inspiration.

“As for that hair of yours, you may favor the greasy unkempt look, but she most certainly doesn’t. And seeing as you’re going to have to be washing your hair, you’d better make sure your shampoo is organic. No more of that anti-dandruff stuff for you, young man!”

The hair was a cheap shot, and we admit it. It was Harv’s idea, blame him. In essence, Harv is a man of a certain age, and such men tend to be naturally jealous of

younger rivals vying for Alpha Male status, especially rivals who think bald patches are a myth invented by their parents to make them eat their broccoli.

What? Oh, grow up, Harv! No we don't care about your dignity. It's not like you have any left anyway...

"Is there anything we've forgotten?" we said thoughtfully. "Oh yes. You're known amongst us rogues as something of a wannabe comedian. A joker, in the innocent sense of the word. In other words, we've noticed the little quips you come out with as you pound our faces into the sidewalk. Stop it. Ivy hates smartass comments. The one and only time we and she robbed a bank together, we told the bank clerk that she had better stop giving Ivy money or she'd just get up and dance. We don't wish to divulge what she did to us for that, but suffice it to say, it involved ice cubes."

We shuddered uncontrollably at the memory. Running another hand through our hair, which by now was thick with grease and sweat, we slowly fought our frayed nerves.

"And seeing as we're digging up our repressed memories, we shall say this—and if you choose to ignore everything else we've said, for your own sake, please listen now. Never buy Ivy flowers. Never. It took the doctors eight hours to remove the shards of terracotta from our anal passage. And yes—it hurts twice as much as it sounds. And never—and we mean *NEVER*—take advice from Bruce Wayne in matters of the heart. Naturally, there's no reason you should. We doubt you and Brucey move in the same circles, but still. Should the opportunity arise, run. Run like the wind."

We paused and panted heavily. We had worked ourselves into quite a state during our diatribe. We looked down into Nightwing's face.

The shock in his glazed eyes was only equalled by the sheer horror. We sympathized.

"Finally..." We paused. We swallowed hard, clenching and unclenching our fists.

There was no point in denying it any longer. The better man had won.

"...Good luck," we whispered bitterly, worried our voice would betray the hurt in our heart. "And consider this. We have given you the tools that you will need to maintain a healthy, passionate relationship with Poison Ivy. Run that thought through your mind. And then try and figure out just which side of our coin came up."

We turned to leave and abandon Nightwing to whatever fate had in store for him. Hanging our head as defeatism gripped us, we did not see the black armor-clad chest until we walked into it. We stopped in surprise, and looked upward slowly, eyes eventually settling on the yellow oval in the center and the black bat that adorned it.

"Hello, Harvey," Batman said, his voice like finger nails on a chalkboard. Although, to us, it sounded like a beautiful heavenly chorus.

With a cry of ecstasy, we leapt at him. Before even he could react, we had clamped him in our arms in a tight embrace of sheer gratitude. With a swift movement, he flipped us over his shoulder and onto the floor. We scrambled up, meeting his scowl with a wondrous stare, a grin tugging at our mouth. His lips were forming into a snarl like the crack on a tombstone, his eyes cold and suspicious.

We were so glad to see him that, for a moment, we could not speak. Eventually, in a tone we had last used when taken to see Santa as a boy, we spoke: "Thank goodness you're here, Batman."

If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

We craned our neck, arching our chin forward, fighting the urge to burst into joyful song by pointing to our jaw cheekily.

“Go on,” we said, giving in and smiling wide, “Right there.”

When the blow came, it nearly knocked us clean out of our skin. Our head swam. Colored shapes danced in front of our glazed eyes. We were monumentally happy.

It may have been the concussion setting in, but the punch (a real Hell Month classic!) had been a tremendous release. We had been waiting for nine days for our inevitable punishment. We had been waiting so long that, before we knew it, we found ourselves tearing off the final page of January on our calendar and welcoming in February.

We had survived an entire Hell Month without a beating from The Bat. We knew that this fact, coupled with the vengeance we had exacted on his protégé, meant that when he did finally catch up with us, he would be less than amused. Ironically, in the end, it was the waiting nearly killed us.

Still, he hadn’t disappointed. It was by far the hardest we had ever been punched by anyone—and that’s including the time we accidentally spilt Killer Croc’s drink over his new suede shoes.

We staggered backward like a drunkard, our head hanging loosely on the axis of our neck. “Thank you,” we murmured.

We had somehow managed to turn so that our back was now to him. Our dazed eyes saw what looked like Nightwing freeing himself from the last of the restraints we had placed on him.

We did a double take. Yup.

He ripped the duct tape from his mouth with a yelp.

This wouldn’t end well.

“WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU ON, TWO-FACE?!” he finally exploded, doing his mentor proud. “There is NO me and Ivy! There never has been and there never will be!” He acrobatically kicked us in the jaw with one well-placed boot. “And *that’s* for the mental image. You know which one I mean,” he said, shuddering.

We were spinning again. Our vision was clouding.

No relationship...?

If we hadn’t been about to collapse, we would have cartwheeled across the room. The wood panelled floor rushed up to meet us. We embraced it with open arms, feeling the cool wood against our cheek. We were in Paradise.

We were dragged roughly to our feet. Batman held us by the throat a good foot off the ground.

“Two against two...” we rasped thoughtfully, choking violently as his grip tightened. “Hardly seems fair...”

“Shut up,” Batman snarled, shaking us with all of his considerable might. We felt ourselves beginning to lose consciousness. He was shaking, howling, snarling like a slavering madman. Or a bat.

Suddenly, a strange, surreal calm overcame his features. The clench on our neck loosened. There was a strange twitching at the corner of his lip. We squirmed, genuinely terrified. This was, in many ways, far scarier than the psychopath who had so nearly snapped our neck like a twig earlier. We’d have taken that version over this any day of the—Dear God—was that a smile?

“Welcome home, Harvey.” he grveled.

We didn’t even see the blow coming. There was the slightest breeze, and then the left side of our face exploded in pain. We flew backwards, landing hard on our shoulder on the wooden floor. We skidded along the smooth panels for what seemed like an eternity, the cotton of our shirt burning our flesh as we slid. Eventually, inevitably, we came to a rest next to the remnants of the chair we had so easily destroyed earlier—a broken pile of a man.

But by the coin... we were happy.

## EPILOGUE

"Taken down on February 2<sup>nd</sup>," Harvey Dent's visitor said aloud as she wrote the words on his cast, "You really are Fate's bitch."

"Don't be catty, Selina," he objected. He would have liked to point a finger at her, tsk-tsk style, to hammer the point home. But the traction table that held his limbs fast made any such movement a pipe dream. Instead, he opted for eloquence: "From the ruffraff of the Arkham Infirmary, we expect scorn and abuse for our misfortune. Only this morning, Catman organized a game of ringtoss around this cat's cradle of weights and pulleys, the object being to bring the cast on our left leg into contact with the cast on our right arm. From his kind, we expect this treatment—no less so because he does have a certain grievance connected with being left at the side of the road somewhere in the Carolinas with a stolen BMW and a neo-nazi auto mechanic name of Billy Bob Jonah Jim—but from you, Selina, we hoped for a little sympathy."

Cold green eyes surveyed him dispassionately. It made Harvey uncomfortable. It made Two-Face horny.

"Sympathy? After what you did? You're lucky I didn't bring the claws."

"When did Pussycat become such a prude?" his darker half asked. "We've done worse. What did we do that's so terrible, roughed up Bridge & Tunnel Boy a little?"

"It's not what you did to Nightwing," Selina insisted, eyeing the knob that controlled tension on the traction table, "It's why you did it. Harvey, really, the Tattler? The Gotham Tattler. You *BELIEVED* something in one of those gossip rags!"

"He told me to do it—No, we didn't—Yes, you did!" came the frantic reply.

Selina sighed. What the tabloids had written, what some continued to write, about Catwoman was too repugnant to utter. She didn't care about fools, the ignorant mob, but in her own circle, she took citing tabloids as a personal insult.

And then there was Bruce.

Even if she put the Tattler angle aside, there was no question Harvey's little stunt extended Hell Month. Every night Batman returned to the cave without finding Nightwing, his fury compounded. Rage and fear merged into a dread that could bore through solid rock, through time and space, through human flesh... a dread that could fasten to the spinal column and shake a soul into a gibbering mass of slime. She'd seen him do it: to an Iceberg snitch, a Crips tagger, a Maroni soldier, and a homeless guy who did nothing more than take a refrigerator box from the alley where Nightwing's communicator was found. She'd never understood the way other criminals fear Batman—but she'd never seen what he became in Hell Month... nor when someone he loved was threatened.

How was she supposed to ignore that? Write it off as one of Harvey's little quirks?

No, Harvey was her friend and she would always love him as such. But he needed to be punished. It was that simple. Batman got to take his shot, and now it was her turn.

Glancing at the knob again, Selina assured herself the tension was such that Harvey couldn't move his arms more than an inch to either side. Then she smiled...

...for what he did to Bruce, for what he did to Dick...

She reached into her coat, and took out the gift.

...and for what he did to her, nine nights of Hell...

"It took some doing to get these for you, Harvey. They had to be specially made; only one man knows how to do it. And he wasn't at all sympathetic when I told him who they were for, so I had to ask very nicely..."

She removed the napkin covering the basket and a rich, heavenly aroma tickled Harvey's nostrils.

"*Double* dipped, *double* chocolate chip. These are simply the best cookies ever made... Doesn't that smell delicious? I'll leave them right here on this sidetable. Enjoy!"

