



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

#32

Cat = Sales

Women Lacking Complexity



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

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WOMEN LACKING COMPLEXITY

When Dick was living in Bludhaven and courting Barbara, the ritual of “family dinner” was a strict weekly appointment. It was a test of sorts; Bruce recognized that even if Dick did not. Dinner at Wayne Manor with Bruce, Barbara and Selina; a chat with Alfred; then Nightwing patrolled with Robin. Dick was testing them all, trying to decide if a return to Gotham was feasible. Now that the return was accomplished and Dick and Barbara were married, family dinners became more infrequent. They still occurred once or twice a month, but there wasn’t any hard schedule. Bruce or Alfred had to call, and everyone agreed on a date.

Tonight’s dinner would be the first in a month, and although Bruce enjoyed Dick and Barbara’s company, he had an ulterior motive in asking them. The Ra’s incident, DefCon4—it had all, perhaps, agitated him more than he liked to admit. And the agitation had led to one of the shortest At-Large lists in years. While Bruce never—excepting that one time Alfred tricked him—accepted the idea of “vacation,” he did from time to time take advantage of lulls like this to visit Tokyo, particularly the electronics district in Akihabara that ran 12-18 months ahead of Gotham and 2-3 years ahead of the rest of the country.

It had been a good trip—although unusual having Selina along. Bruce usually made these trips alone, apart from the one time he brought Dick as a training exercise. But Dick didn’t go shopping in Ginza while Bruce visited the Sony showrooms, nor did Robin insist on exploring the rooftops after dark.

But Selina—or rather, *Catwoman*—was fascinated by the Tokyo skyline. Skyscrapers were far fewer than in Gotham. From the top of one, you looked down onto thousands of smaller buildings so closely packed they seemed to engulf the surface completely. To navigate the city by rooftop, one didn’t seek out highrises as in Gotham; they were too few and too scattered. Instead, you stuck to the lowrises. But not Catwoman. Although each and every one was a dead end, she had to climb up—getting above the light haze of exhaust fumes—and look down on the dizzying sea of smaller buildings. Batman couldn’t figure it out any better than Bruce could. Certainly, from a hunter’s perspective, higher ground had its advantages. You could see more. But this wasn’t tracking prey; it was... *sightseeing*, for lack of a better word. And on higher solitary buildings, there was a greater risk of being seen.

“Feline logic” of course, that was the pat explanation. But feline logic was a phrase that made more sense in Gotham, where “good luck cats” didn’t beckon from every storefront, where you could walk for blocks without encountering a “Hello Kitty” cell phone or backpack.

She was still a mystery. Maybe it was true that you could never really understand a cat.

Still, the enigma of feline logic notwithstanding, it had been a good trip. And now Bruce was impatient to get caught up on happenings in Gotham. The logs were fine as far as they went, but the Batgirl-Giggles episode clearly showed how much they could miss. Barbara, on the other hand—in a relaxed family atmosphere after a good dinner and a glass of wine—Barbara and not Oracle was a far more efficient way to catch up on ALL the news.

Oswald Cobblepot tripped lightly down the stairs from his flat over the nightclub. Today was the day. Lark Starling was coming to the Iceberg. He had only to conduct one or two items of the 'Berg's more *unofficial* business before opening, and the rest of the day he was free to supervise. A little more spit and polish is what was needed around here, a surprise inspection or two, get the staff on their toes. For tonight, everything must be perfect. He wondered, as he opened the till and took out a stack of hundreds, if he should invest in a spa day. A manicure. Maybe a mudpack. For Lark, that dear woman who answered his personal ad, was a refined creature, a bird watcher. He had to look his best.

But first there was work to attend to. Oswald was always in the market to fence items of quality from the city's more distinguished criminal element, but he seldom took new clients from out of town this way. Not until they had established themselves. Gotham was not Bludhaven, after all. He had standards. Nevertheless... Courtship cost money. A refined creature like Lark Starling was sure to have sophisticated and expensive tastes.

The door opened, and his appointment walked in.

"Akiki and Margot Marceau," Barbara said with a superior sneer, "The Marceau Sisters, as they were billed at the Cirque Sensational. Trapeze artists. Twins. Redheads."

Not a fork moved.

Alfred gave a soft cough and left to check on the soufflé. At the head of the table, Bruce's face stiffened into Batman's still deadpan. Across from him, Selina assumed a far away look, as if she was perhaps not listening to the conversation at all. Between them, Dick regarded his wife evenly.

"Actually, they're not twins," he said bravely. "Sisters, yes. Not twins. Margot is three inches taller, about fifteen pounds heavier."

"You... weighed them?" Selina asked through the naughty grin.

Dick ignored the question, ignored Selina, purposefully ignored Barbara (blithering on about how minor physical differences didn't mean they couldn't be twins) and instead he looked to Bruce, to Bruce who taught him partners are there for each other.

"They go by Double Dare," Dick said flatly. Bruce looked on, attentive but impassive. Like he was Robin again, giving a report on some case study Batman had assigned. Dick took this as a cue, and continued in the same vein, a dry, dispassionate report. "In Bludhaven, they targeted Blockbuster's operations for some ready cash. They like hitting criminal targets. Probably figure the cops don't care so much if they hit someone like..."

“King Snake?” Oswald looked from the one woman to the other, “You stole from a blind guy!”

“He may be blind...” Akiki said evenly. “...but he has lovely things,” Margot completed the thought. “Don’t you think?” Akiki asked.

Oswald looked again from one to the other.

“First rate,” he agreed, ‘lovely’ not being a standard that interested him much compared to the value of the merchandise in cold hard cash. “Sir Edmund Dorrance was a wealthy businessman before rising in the Hong Kong drug trade,” he said, the nasal tone creeping into his voice that often punctuated his snobbery. “Ergo, one would not be astonished to find items of quality in his possession.”

“So you’re buying?” Akiki asked bluntly.

Oswald fingered the merchandise carefully. His hesitation had nothing to do with their value. He knew he could get \$5,000 for the inkwell alone. But Snake’s inclination for revenge was well known. His skill as a martial artist was well known. And the reputation of his Ghost Dragons as the best-armed gang in the city was well known. What was less widely known, but carried great weight with Oswald, was the Ghost Dragons’ bar tab. The Dragons embraced a “work hard/play hard” philosophy that was little known in rogue circles. They seemed to regard partying as an aspect of their training, one to be pursued as regularly and intensely as any other. And they had an honor code that demanded they settle their debts in full at the close of each month. With most regulars, Oswald had to take hostages to get a tab settled, and even at that, Joker paid in monopoly money. But the Dragons... If the truth were known, it was the Ghost Dragons that kept the Iceberg’s legitimate operations in the black month after month. There was simply no way he could jeopardize that.

“I’m sorry, ladies,” he said regretfully, pushing the goods back across the desk, “perhaps a pawn shop.”

In his role as comedic commentator of the Bat-Family, Dick got great mileage out of Bruce’s “focus”—or, as he put it during the worst of the Nightwing-Batman tension: “those bat-blinders he puts on to any aspect of the argument he doesn’t want to acknowledge, like the part where you’re right and he’s wrong.”

Tonight, Dick regretted those words. For Bruce listened to the entire history of Nightwing’s encounters with twin redhead trapeze artists without betraying so much as a twitch of amusement. Like a true partner. Like a stand-up guy.

In stark contrast to Barbara—his loving wife who was ruthlessly mirroring his own strategy. Just as he had ignored the women and spoke to Bruce, Barbara was ignoring him and speaking directly to Selina.

“Of course, I don’t hear about *any* of this until months later, when Dinah had a run in with Blockbuster. Couldn’t help but wonder why Dickey never mentioned it...”

Selina shot an amused look down the table and made a gesture with her finger that looked almost like sign language. Dick didn’t understand what it meant, but Bruce scowled.

“...did some digging,” Barbara went on, “and then once I saw their picture...”

Another look and a gesture from Selina, and this time Bruce grunted.

"Let me guess," Selina interrupted Barbara, "they're totally lacking in complexity?"

Both women laughed, and both men looked confused.

"In his log, he calls them The Double-Ds," Barbara grinned.

More laughter.

Unable to continue pretending he wasn't listening, Dick turned to the women with a look of theatrical bewilderment.

"Excuse me," he broke in with a dramatic huff, "'totally lacking complexity?'"

"Inside joke," Selina explained patronizingly, "It means they've got big tits. Complex women of character and substance don't have tits."

"Huh?"

"Look," Selina said, cupping her ample bosom, "Complex..." she pressed inward. "...Shallow" she released, then repeated the demonstration. "Complex... Shallow... See how that works?"

"No, but maybe if you showed me again a couple more times."

"Dick!" Barbara yelled with playful outrage, forgetting she was mad at him. Then after another minute's teasing, she gave a more thorough explanation. "At my shower, we found a chatroom where these..." she paused, looking for a description, "*reality-challenged* gentlemen put forth some—*questionable*—theories about women in spandex."

"Breasts are bad," Selina said crisply, cutting through the euphemisms, "Cup size is inversely proportional to character."

"I'm confused," Dick said.

"That's probably because you have a real, bona fide woman to go home to at night, Kiddo."

"Okay," Dick sat up, assuming a 'solve the puzzle' tone he used approaching Riddler clues, "so a round and feminine beauty that men actually find attractive makes a woman dumb?"

"Right," Selina confirmed the postulate, "And the men who find it attractive are perverts, by the way."

"I see," Dick said, moving on to line two of the riddle, "And these rocket scientists who don't like boobs and insult the women who have them, they're the good guys?"

"Yep!" Barbara nodded, "Because they're so deep and sensitive."

Dick looked deeply troubled. He looked from Barbara to Selina and back to Barbara. Finally, he asked with a voice quivering with anxiety: "They don't... have any similar... eh... 'rules' ... for men, do they?"

Both women broke into heartless cackles.

"You mean 'better shrink down the package if you want to be taken seriously?' No. Curious how that logical extension of their theory doesn't seem to have occurred to them."

Dick refilled his wineglass and gulped in relief.

A silence came over the room, such as happens when a subject has run its course. Dick turned to his mentor, who had been silent throughout the discussion.

"What's your take on this, Bruce?"

Bruce looked thoughtful. Then, after a pause, Batman's voice answered: "I wonder what Two-Face will do when he learns Double Dare are in town."

CHAPTER 2: SALVADOR DALI

Far above Gotham Times Square, Akiki Marceau waited for her sister on a small ledge beneath a great billboard. The passionate embrace of Batman and Catwoman that previously advertised the Gotham Post had been replaced by the passionate embrace of Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez advertising the movie *Gigli*. As before, the ad men thought it necessary to “improve” on nature. In J-Lo’s case, they reduced her famously ample posterior and enhanced her breasts. In Catwoman’s case, they had done the opposite. Akiki wondered briefly if there was some bizarre zero-sum principle governing these choices, or if the slick Gotham City ad men were no different from Russ, the artist who made up their Double Dare posters at the circus. Russ was a good sort, but he drank.

Two stories above, Margot jumped from a similar pedestal supporting an animated cola ad. A slight flutter of her feet and she began the gradual pendulum swing that is the basic syntax of the flying trapeze. She arched her back forward, swung her feet under and threw them forward, a little snap of the legs propelling her to land smoothly beside her sister.

“Ghost Dragons,” she yawned, “No endurance.”

“Well they can’t all be Blockbusters,” Akiki sniffed. The criminals they targeted often attempted some kind of retribution, but few offered such thrilling pursuits as Bludhaven’s kingpin Blockbuster.

“No,” Margot sighed.

Both women were silent and each knew the other’s private thought. Blockbuster’s thugs had indeed come closer to killing them than anyone else, but that episode would have been far less thrilling if that scrumptious Nightwing hadn’t been trapped with them.

“That hair,” said Akiki.

“That bod,” said Margot.

“Those moves,” they said together.

“Pity.”

“Yes. Pity.”

The sisters sighed.

From the darkness above a burned out streetlight, Huntress watched the comings and goings from the Iceberg Lounge. She was looking for a fight.

Criminals are a superstitious and cowardly lot, Batman said. He was as wrong about that as he was about everything. Superstition implies fear of some force greater than you. The scum-lapping vermin didn’t have that kind of smarts. Theirs was the fear of the rat for the jackal, an animal instinct. They didn’t *UNDERSTAND* anything.

Like her costume. These a-holes obsessing about her bare midriff. Fucking morons. Yes, she’d been shot in the stomach. The bare midriff was *meant* to expose the scar. *You want to stop me, you better have something more than hot lead working for you...*

Huntress continued watching the parasites entering the Penguin's nightclub. It was a party atmosphere: women dressed up, men puffed—strutting—like they do when they think their woman is hotter than their friends.' She remembered family gatherings like this from her own childhood. "Family" gatherings, rather. Before her family was slaughtered by a rival mob boss. Her father's oldest Capo was called Giovaccio. His son Matt was about Helena's age, and they were allowed to play together. Occasionally Matt showed up with bruises. Giovaccio thought it made his boy tough. He would come home, set out a belt strap, a stick, & an iron pipe and say "Choose." Choose what he was to be beaten with. When Matt told her the story, she guessed he'd choose the belt. It seemed the least painful. Matt shook his head. "I always choose the pipe... Why? Because FUCK HIM, that's why!"

That is why she bared her midriff. But did they get that, this criminal sleaze? No, they didn't get anything until you pressed their face into the brick so hard it waffled.

What she needed was a really good fight.

Batman paced. Although he wore Bruce Wayne's sweater, Bruce Wayne's trousers, and walked back and forth in Bruce Wayne's study, it was unquestionably The Batman who paced. His life might be a little fuller now, the past year may have blurred the lines between Bruce and Bat in some respects, but at this moment, there was no question: it was The Batman that paced.

Consequences. All choices have consequences. Any choice. Cause and effect. Something will happen. It must. It is natural law. Drop a pebble into still water, the effect radiates out, circle by circle, molecules at rest become molecules in motion. Affecting others. Cause and effect. Consequences. And responsibility for those consequences must fall on the chooser. He who dropped the pebble.

Selina. Catwoman. Catwoman in his life—in his home—in his bed.

It might be the best choice he ever made, but it was undeniably a choice that had consequences—consequences for which he and he alone bore responsibility—consequences he had never stopped to anticipate. Not really. He knew there would be complications, of course. He knew that. He told himself he had given the matter due thought. He *HAD* given it thought, he just... damnit, he hadn't foreseen this.

In his mind's eye, he pictured Catwoman sitting behind the desk, her feet up on the blotterpad. "One tiny, specific, and ultimately *trivial* detail, and you didn't see it coming. Big whoop."

He grunted at the imaginary cat. And she vanished. She was far more obliging than the real one, who grinned and purred and acted like his dismissive grunts were conversation.

"It isn't trivial," he told the imaginary and now departed Catwoman. It wasn't trivial. He was Batman. Keeping that secret identity secret was the overriding consideration in conducting his private life. He'd sacrificed his dignity to it. For its sake, he behaved like an idiot. For its sake, he dated women he couldn't stand. For its sake, he treated those he respected with contempt. Like Lucius Fox. Making Lucius make excuses for him. Making it impossible for the man Bruce Wayne respected enough to entrust with his company to respect him in return.

All for the sake of a secret. All because Bruce Wayne was Batman. And no one could ever know.

Selina Kyle was Catwoman. That everyone knew. Now. Or at least they knew it was damn likely that she was.

Bruce Wayne dating Selina Kyle raised no red flags. He was a playboy. She was beautiful. He was rich. She was Catwoman. Whatever people thought about them as a couple, it never cast suspicion on the secret.

Still. Why didn't he see it coming? She *is* Catwoman. She was a thief—the best thief going. Her expertise was bound to be recognized, sooner or later. He'd done it himself. Within weeks of revealing his identity, he'd hired her for Wayne Enterprises security. So why didn't he see this coming?

He continued to pace.

Down the hall from Bruce's pacing, Renee Montoya sat in the south drawing room watching the spectacle of afternoon tea at Wayne Manor.

"I must admit," she told her hostess, "this is new to me. Meal meetings I'm used to, since my election to the City Council. Breakfast meetings, lunch meetings—not to be confused with power breakfasts and power lunches. I've done them all. But high tea, that's a new one."

High tea with an arch criminal at that, she thought privately. *¿Madre de Dios, a qué hemos llegado?*

Selina smiled politely and offered milk and sugar. She only agreed to this meeting as a favor to Dick. She didn't especially like cops, particularly Gordon's pets from the old days, and Councilwoman Montoya was still Detective Montoya as far as she was concerned. That was why she had brought this case to Grayson Associates—to Dick, supporting a former policeman, professional courtesy and all that. Selina was happy enough to see Grayson Associates finally getting some of the city contracts that Brian Everwood originally promised, but she was less than thrilled with Dick bringing her into it.

The case itself was fairly ridiculous: two assistant deputy wardens and two correction officers at Blackgate were charged with second-degree grand larceny for replacing a costly painting in the lobby with a second-rate copy.

"Tell you what," Selina purred, inspecting a plate of Alfred's cookies, "why don't we cut through the political double-talk and tell it like it is. Then we can give these cookies the undivided attention they deserve."

Montoya was surprised. "Well that's direct at least," she said with a grudging smile, "haven't heard much direct since my days as a beat cop."

"I'd imagine not. Meow. Okay then, here is my take on this Blackgate business. It was obviously an inside job; your own people knew that straight off. Not many people knew the stolen painting was valuable. A Salvador Dali worth a quarter of a million in a PRISON! C'mon, you couldn't make that shit up. Who outside of the Blackgate administration knew the artist donated it back in 1965? Plus, real art thieves that know what they're doing would just take it outright. If they *did* replace it with a copy, it'd be

a good forgery that wouldn't be spotted for months or years, not a shoddy fake stapled into a cheap frame."

Montoya sipped the tea and regarded Selina shrewdly. Selina refreshed her own cup and continued.

"So it was embarrassing. The city got a black eye. And now you have to look like you're doing something about it. Enter Grayson & Associates hooking you up with a consultant. Well Councilwoman, as your art expert and security consultant, here is my professional opinion: don't hang \$250,000 paintings in the lobby of a prison. And do try the chocolate dipped ones, Alfred's specialty, they're to die for."

Selina pointed to the cookies. She wanted to keep the tone light and pleasant, but internally the cat growled at the hypocrisy of law-abiding society. Oh, walking off with an artwork you didn't pay for, that was *stealing*. But taking good money for advice like "don't hang \$250,000 paintings in the lobby of a prison"—*that* is perfectly legal.

In the study, the pacing continued.

Law-enforcement officials like Montoya coming to the house... Blueprints of Blackgate on the desk... Interpol reports on stolen artwork in the browser history... Bruce didn't like it.

It wasn't that it posed a danger to his secret. Selina was living here. Selina was Catwoman. Catwoman was asked to look into this.

But a lifetime keeping crimefighting concerns in the cave and out of the manor was difficult to just set aside.

"So once Brian Everwood resigned after that Ra's al Ghul business, the Mayor and Commissioner approached me to run—mmph. You're right, these cookies are *el cielo*, heaven." Renee mumbled behind thick crumbs of double-dipped double chocolate chip.

With the Blackgate matter dispensed with and the cookies before them, a new and friendlier mood had descended on the drawing room. Renee was opening up. "They said I'd be an ideal candidate: Native Gothamite, 1st generation, put myself through City College—although that was just long enough to get into the Police Academy. Worked myself up from beat cop to Detective. I knew what they really meant: Woman, Latino, PC. Good window dressing."

"And telegenic," Selina observed.

"¿Qué?"

"Telegenic. Renee, you're very pretty. You don't strike me as one of those women who pretend they don't know it—or who pretend something like that isn't useful when standing in front of fifty reporters with cameras."

After a moment's strained silence, Renee reluctantly smiled her agreement.

"And," Selina continued, pressing the advantage, "You're not at all 'complex.'" She winked, "And that helps too."

Bursts of merry girlish laughter drifted down the hall from the drawing room, and Bruce left the study to get away from it. He headed up to the bedroom, stopping on the stairs to see Whiskers poised on the corner of the landing like a gargoyle looking down onto the Great Hall. He grunted at the cat, who reacted just as Selina would, taking it as an invitation to follow rather than a warning to stay away. Reaching the bedroom, he closed the heavy door behind him and pretended not to notice when a half-inch of blue-gray paw forced its way underneath, swatting at the air.

Why was he really annoyed anyway? Blueprints? Browser history? Was it just Montoya's visit keeping him from the cave? He was eager to start work on the video camouflage gear he picked up in Tokyo. Not being able to do so because Selina had a guest...

A meow from behind the door drew his attention back to the blue-gray paw still thrashing wildly through the gap between the door and the floor.

It was good having her finally moved in. It was... more comfortable, returning from patrol and knowing she was there. Often she took the Jag into town to 'prowl' at night, but she always beat him home. The Batmobile would make that final turn from public road onto the Wayne property, cross electric eye omega disabling the hologram, and glide into its place with the graceful ease of a thoroughbred that's run its race. And through it all, he knew she was there. In the cave or in the bed. Waiting for Batman or for Bruce. It was impossible to tell which in advance. Her moods were an ever-shifting mystery.

Like that curio.

For so many years their relationship existed as nuance, an intricate knot of unspoken symbols and subtext. They would always communicate on that level more fully than on any other. It was effortless, almost subconscious. For a woman that prowls the Gotham Night calling herself Catwoman, Selina had kept an astonishing lack of "cat stuff" in her home. Only in one corner of her bedroom she'd hung a little Japanese painting, minimalist, just a few wispy brushstrokes of eyes and whiskers. And on the perpendicular wall, a carved curio cabinet filled with figurines, sculptures and miniatures. When she moved into the manor, she set up her living room, desk, and exercise equipment in the little suite of rooms across the hall from his bedroom. This, they had agreed, was to be her territory. Like an embassy is foreign soil. The curio sat on her living room floor for four days, next to the painting and a cardboard box, with the figurines snugly packed in moleskin, gauze and newspaper. She didn't hang the curio, she didn't hang the painting, and she didn't unpack the figurines. For four days he watched them with Batman's eye for detail, noting their exact position on the carpet. For four days he watched for any repositioning that might mean they had been touched. That night he returned from patrol, and there they were, hanging on the wall of the bedroom. His bedroom. Now their bedroom.

She had really moved in.

Cats do not make mistakes. If kitty walks into the room with a sopping wet tail, that is not because she accidentally floated it in her water dish. It is because at some moment in the recent past, her mind was occupied with the crunchy chows in her

breakfast bowl. When she finished her meal and was free to turn her attention elsewhere, she noticed the proximity of her tail to the water and acted accordingly. That in no way constitutes a mistake; it is a simple matter of timing.

If Selina had first dismissed Renee Montoya as “one of Gordon’s pets,” but was now discovering a woman of complexity and substance, that in no way constituted a mistake. She had had no chance to evaluate Renee before, and now she had.

“Lawrence—Commissioner Muskelli, rather—it was him that really persuaded me to run. You probably didn’t notice, but he is the fourth police commissioner since Jim Gordon stepped down.”

Selina smiled to herself. She was well aware of the turnover in those chaotic months after Gordon’s retirement. It was the period when she and Batman became closer. He started visiting her apartment after patrol, and little by little he relaxed enough in her presence to talk about his day. Each time he had answered the signal and met a different Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner, she heard about it first—along with an hour’s reminiscence about Gordon and speculation of what the new change might mean. Batman had been relieved when Muskelli appeared as Commissioner #4. So had Montoya, apparently:

“He had *estabilidad*, staying power. They were saying that horse was too big for anybody to ride. But Lawrence showed them. He had something to prove. His family was *sucio*, dirty, back in the 20s. They ran the docks. Lawrence wants to make good on that. Restore the family name. So two months turned to three, and then four—and we all realized he was the one that would last. We had a new boss. *Bien y bueno*.”

Selina noted Renee’s continued use of Muskelli’s first name. She wondered if perhaps his urging her to run for office had less to do with her political qualifications and more to do with her leaving the force in order to serve on the council. As commissioner, he could hardly see a police detective socially. Now that Renee was a civilian...

“Most of us knew once he got settled in there would be changes. Two months was enough to see how everything worked, and we braced ourselves...”

So had Bruce, Selina remembered well. What would be the new guy’s take on vigilantes? Nothing was going to stop Batman in his mission, but a supportive GCPD made life far easier for him than a hostile one.

“...But instead of dictating policy straight off, Commissioner Muskelli asked questions. At every level. Gold shields down to patrolmen. He really seemed to listen to our opinions too. He asked about my experiences with The Batman—I had some trouble a few years back, taken hostage—and then later with Mad Hatter. And unlike those *bastardos* in Internal Affairs, *hijos sin valor de lingotes*, Lawrence really listened.”

Cats never make mistakes. And Selina would have to admit that, for a cop, Montoya was not completely uninteresting. “Mad Hatter,” she murmured quietly, “I had a bit of a go-round with him myself once upon a time. How did you handle it, afterwards, I mean?”

“*Madre Virgen del Dios*, it was awful... being rescued.”

Selina nodded. “It’s different for us—for women, I mean. The men, the best of them, I don’t think they can ever really understand. That world out there, the ‘nightlife’ of Gotham, it’s dangerous stuff. To be weak, to be dependent, to need rescued, it’s...” she trailed off, unable to find a word bad enough to express the thought.

"Unthinkable," Renee prompted, surprising Selina with the English word.

Selina nodded. "Yes. Unthinkable. And dangerous. And the only thing it leads to is death, but only after a good deal of humiliation and contempt from people who aren't fit to—" she broke off again and shuddered. "—so we're not. We're not weak, and we're not dependent, and we're not victims. Ever."

"Sí. But the price is, sometimes, somehow, it means you give up being soft..."

"And warm," Selina added, "And feminine."

"...and you wake up one day and you realize you don't know how that happened."

Again Selina nodded. "But then you find a man who's there at the end of the day for that little check on your femininity." She paused, then asked with a knowing smile. "Lawrence?"

"Sí. About a month now."

"Good for you," she winked.

"I don't know," Renee hedged, "I do like that 'check on my femininity' but..."

"Renee. Soft and feminine does not mean weak and helpless. Anybody tells you different, a well placed knee to the groin tends to set them straight."

Gotham Central Park stretched from 59th street all the way up to 110th. The southernmost forty blocks were still called Robinson Park by native Gothamites and those trying to seem like natives. This in honor of the wealthy 19th Century merchant Leopold Robinson. Robinson so admired the public grounds of London and Paris, he campaigned tirelessly for Gotham to build a similar facility: "Providing an attractive setting for carriage rides and providing working-class Gothamites with a healthy alternative to the saloon."

The carriages remained, if only for the tourists, but the park had long ceased to be a *healthy* site for after-hours recreation. It was safer, to be sure, than it had been five years earlier. But it was still a viable location to find lowlives after dark, and lowlives were what Huntress was looking for.

She was still spoiling for a fight. What she'd seen at the Iceberg had only made it worse.

She didn't give a damn if Oswald Cobblepot lived or died, that was for damn sure. It was the woman he was with—a woman who was likely to be the end of him. Lark Starling she was calling herself now. When she married Helena's Uncle Vito, she was Angelica Manetti. She was not a birdwatcher back then, needless to say. She was a good cook, made manicotti and lasagna from scratch. Uncle Vito did love his pasta. When he died from heart failure, the family shrugged. For them, anything short of a car bomb or a hail of gunfire constituted a natural death. It was only years later, when she'd gone to Sicily after her family's murder, that Helena learned about these "Black Widows." Women that married then murdered wealthy men, it was said, frequently targeted men of the Causa Nostra. They were suitably rich and seldom mourned. When they died, law enforcement barely noticed if they weren't gunned down by other Mafiosi.

Was Lark Starling a Black Widow? It seemed likely. If she was, Helena did *not* care if Penguin lived or died. What had her fascinated and repulsed was not Oswald but

Lark... Aunt Angelica... Angelica-Lark had no problem remaking herself. New name, new look, new interests. She was loved for it. On a pedestal. Cherished.

Helena was reviled for it. Whenever she tried to change, she was greeted with derision and disrespect. Because she didn't do it *for THEM*. She pursued her own agenda, she pleased herself.

Lark Starling, birdwatcher. What a perfect little package of delight for a slimebucket like Cobblepot.

To become exactly what he wants—what good would that be? If she towed the line and agreed to do everything Batman's way, then what? It wouldn't be The Huntress he respected. It would be some goddamn paint by numbers Mrs. Potatohead in a mask and sensible shoes.

Fuck 'em.

Fuck 'em all.

Fuck 'em all and let God sort them out.

She was who she was, she did what she did, and she was going to the park to hospitalize some muggers.

Jervis Tetch blinked.

"It's Tweedle Dee and Tweedle DeeDee, hee, hee" he said, before one of the buxom yellow clad strangers sprung into motion. Some kind of vaulting somersault propelled her feet into his chest with the force of a small car. Jervis felt himself thrown backwards until he crashed into his own coffeetable.

"So rested he by the Tumtum Tree," Jervis mumbled, head throbbing, eyes glassy.

Akiki and Margot looked at each other.

"They can't all be Blockbuster."

Bruce took a closer look at the curio of cats hanging in his bedroom. He had seen this collection before, of course, when he slept over at Selina's apartment. The variety was remarkable: from jade, silver, crystal, and porcelain to Pre-Columbian clay and carved bone. There were statuettes, amulets, tiles, and boxes. Every country and material seemed to be represented, and every attitude and posture of cat. Like that blue one: a cat lying down, its tail curled back on its middle, front paws crossed one over the other. An attitude of composure and ease. The creature would have to feel very safe to let its guard down that way. The sculpture was a deep and translucent blue, carved from a sapphire cabochon, most likely. Bruce knew this because he had bought a statue like this once, for whatshername... Greta? He remembered the cat better than the girl; he seldom bought gifts like that himself. Alfred or the personal shopper usually—Candi! that was her name. Candi was the most beautiful of the bimbos.

Bruce opened the curio and carefully picked up the small blue carving with a winsome smile. Funny how we can deceive ourselves. All those years ago, he gave his girlfriend *a cat*.

He turned it, feeling the cool smooth surface against his fingertips. It did look *just like* the one he'd bought for... He turned it over... To Candice, from BW.

CHAPTER 3: COMPLICATIONS

In the many years since he designed Strategic Self-Mutating Defense Regimen 4, Batman always maintained a healthy and detached view of the training program. It was a tool for honing fighting skills, not a malevolent entity. Dick and Tim might call it Zogger and speak of it like a living thing. Anthropomorphism, Bruce noted, or attributing human characteristics to inanimate objects, was a healthy and natural response to the rigors of Robin training. But Batman had more mental discipline than that. While emotion, properly channeled, could be enormously useful in the fighting arts, he reserved his anger for the criminal scum that plagued his city. He did not waste it on a training program.

Usually.

However, holding the jacket of his hand-stitched gi slashed nearly in two by Zogger's vicious slicing arm, Batman regarded Strategic Self-Mutating Defense Regimen 4 with the grisly scowl usually reserved for alley-dwelling gangbangers playing cop-killer rap.

"This was new," he told the control console, showing it the ripped fabric before pivoting and walking off to the costume vault. A brand new, hand-stitched gi, two months in the making by one of the only craftsmen left in Japan that still practiced the nearly lost art. Prior to the 1940s, a hand-stitched gi was the martial artist's practice garment of choice. But mass production edged out more and more of the skilled artisans, and soon a hand-stitched gi became more expensive than most martial artists could afford. Craftsmen became fewer and fewer, the price rose higher and higher, and as the market shrank, the craftsmen became fewer still.

But Selina said he should treat himself. What was the point in splurging on expensive scotch he didn't even drink just to play the fop at d'Annunzio's if he wouldn't do as much for an extravagance he might actually enjoy? They were in Tokyo, he was one of the best martial artists in the world, why not indulge a little?

He caved. He let her tempt him. Why did he always let her tempt him?

Damnably woman.

Impossible cat.

Thief.

He changed into costume, leaving the gi on the vault floor for Alfred to find and send for repair.

Jervis Tetch enjoyed spreading other people's news more than his own. He had told the story once on arriving at the Iceberg. That was necessary to explain the lump which caused his signature size 10/6 hat to slope lopsided upon his throbbing head. He told the tale once already, and once a ready tale is told once, one oughtn't to tell it again, for then it is told twice, and twice is twice once, so it can't be a once told tale, once it's told twice...

"And as time is money, it follows that money is time. And these women took all my money, so I haven't any time to tell the tale again."

Two-Face made an angry gurgling sound that Sly recognized as imminent rage.

"Now Mr. Dent," the bartender warned, "Mr. Hatter has a concussion. You have to make allowances." As he spoke, Sly sat two double shot glasses on the bar before Two-Face and filled each with 22-year old double-malt scotch.

"We do not make allowances," Two-Face growled, "He is *always* like that. And even if he weren't, it is double-talk. We do not make allowances for double-talk."

Despite his dangerous tone, Two-Face sat quietly and sipped the drink on the left. Tempting fate, Jervis looked at the second glass.

"Did I mention those women took all my money?"

Two-Face shot a look at the unflappable bartender as if to say: Even you must realize this is too much; the little shit is asking for it.

Out came the coin, and even before it was airborne, the bar patrons scurried like townsfolk in a cheesy western.

The coin was flipped. It was caught. And Two-Face looked at its shiny, unmarred surface in disgust.

"Join us for a drink, Jervis," he said with the flat monotone of a hatted drone, for indeed he had no more choice in the matter once the coin had spoken.

"Happy to," Jervis twittered and pointed to the second scotch. "Sly, my good man, would you pour this into a larger glass with soda water and lemon juice, add some powder sugar, an egg, and three dashes of Curacao."

"One Derby Fizz," Sly said, reclaiming the shot glass and preparing the drink.

"You would do that to good scotch?" Harvey Dent's voice sounded horrified, the indignant prosecutor outlining a ghastly crime for the jury. He looked back and forth from Jervis to Sly before pronouncing his verdict, "You fiends."

"It's my job, Mr. Dent," Sly said apologetically, setting the drink before Jervis Tetch.

"Sly," Harvey said, assuming his most congenial and persuasive courtroom manner, "You were here earlier when Jervis told this famous story we have yet to hear. Surely, after making us witness this horror of our best 22-year old double malt being transmogrified into a—shudder—*Derby Fizz*, you will kindly have the good grace to tell us that story."

Sly looked to Jervis for approval.

"The heel marks still sting most piquantly," Jervis said with his hand over his chest. "From the one, two! One, two! Where the vorpal shoe went snicker-snack. I'll rest a wee under the Tum Tum Tree. You tell the tale."

Sly nodded as if it all made perfect sense, and Jervis took his drink to a quiet corner booth. Sly turned back to Harvey.

"Mr. Tetch was the victim of what I think they call 'a home invasion.' A couple women burst into his hideout, beat him up and cleaned him out."

The eyebrow on the Harvey side shot up, and on the Two-Face side, a curious rolling preceded the R as he enunciated a single word, "rrrReally?"

"Yes indeed," Sly confirmed it, missing the smarmy inflection and continuing in tones of shocked dismay with which civilians discuss crime befalling someone they know. "And from what I hear, they've done it before. The Ghost Dragons said King Snake sent them after this pair after they ripped *him* off just two days ago."

“A pair of lady thieves who strike criminal targets at two day intervals?” Two-Face was fascinated. The coin materialized in his fingers, and after a flip he asked, “What do you know about their costumes?”

Sly glanced towards Jervis, safely out of earshot in his booth, and at Roxy, safely out of earshot at the jukebox. Then he looked back to Two-Face. In that brief span, Sly was transformed from ‘a civilian’ to ‘a man.’

“They wear yellow PVC halters trimmed in black. Matching bikini bottoms, gloves and boots.”

Two-Face downed his drink in a shot.

“Two women in two-piece costumes of PVC halters and matching bikini bottoms are on a two-day crime spree?” he said with a shaky voice, as if trying to wrap his brain around the image.

Sly nodded. “I think the outfits are their circus costumes. They’re supposed to be a high wire act or something. The Merlot or Marso sisters.”

“Sisters?” Two-Face asked weakly.

“Yep. Twins.”

Two-Face fainted.

Criminal parasites preying on his city. Batman found them outside the music conservatory, lying in wait like vultures. There was a Paganini program tonight, not the A-list beautiful people, but an affluent, respectable crowd: Lots of Wall Street and plastic surgeons. Lots of BMWs and Lexus. It was the latter the vultures were circling for. The more straightforward scum were here to steal the cars outright. They were not hard to identify: their motion on the street—checking the makes of the cars—checking sight lines—and then little nods to each other. Straightforward car thieves with orders to fill, specific makes and models.

He hated it, but Batman let them continue their foul work unfettered. He could easily intervene, but that would spook the deadlier scum. All he could do was snap a few pictures with the infrared camera and send them to the BatComputer to begin the 30-point analysis against mugshots in the database. Once they selected a car, he would see if he could risk firing a tracer-bug. It all depended on which car they picked. He wouldn’t chance the tracer if his firing it off could be seen by the greater threat: that pair by the portico. *That* pair, that were not sizing up the cars but the patrons. From their position, they could see a few of the cars parked in the street, but mostly what they would see was the plaza where the patrons came for a smoke at intermission. They would see who was bejeweled, and who had a gold cigarette case. And then, after the show, they would lock on to those targets and strike. Carjacking was not so efficient as stealing an empty vehicle, and those pros now driving off in the Lexus would not dream of it. Dealing with the victims was messy, and the punishments when they were caught would be severe. But that pair by the portico, Batman knew their kind and how they thought: the jewels on the doctor’s wife would compensate them for the extra risk.

Jewels.

Not that anyone in this crowd would have anything to Catwoman's tastes back when she... ..Damn her... ..At least it was the music conservatory and not the opera house.

In the shadows, Batman watched the scum at the portico sizing up their targets, his fist curling into a tight coil of rage.

They deserved this. This would be Justice. The righteous fury of virtue against vice, the triumph of decency over thuggery. And they would make a very satisfying thump when they hit the ground.

Gotham City had more single people per capita than any other location in the world. The dating scene was an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of restaurants, clubs, and trends. For Lawrence Muskelli, the status of carriage rides was particularly hard to keep track of: they were in, they were out, they were romantic, they were hokey, they were for tourists, they were for anyone with a true love of the city and the park.

Renee had thanked Lawrence for a wonderful meal, and they strolled from the quaint bistro on 64th street south towards the edge of the park. There they could easily grab a taxi from the queues at the many hotels or pop into the Plaza for a drink. And there, as the rows of hansom cabs lined Robinson Park South, he could point them out and gauge her views before asking.

Unfortunately, when the moment came, he found himself stuck for a suitably noncommittal remark. "Carriage rides bring such a sense of continuity to the park" would sound like he was hosting a travel video. And "Some of the drivers still wear livery" would make him sound like a dork. So instead, he just pointed out the Maine Monument at the southwest entrance.

Renee looked towards it—and then there was a stream of unintelligible Spanish as she stormed through the Merchant's Gate into the park. Lawrence had been dating Renee long enough to know that Spanish in a stream meant trouble. A word or two every few sentences was a good sign, it meant she was unwinding. But when it flowed like water as it had just now, that meant she was pissed. He was pretty sure nobody hated the hansom cabs that much, so he assumed she'd seen something past them in the park itself that offended her.

Huntress had the perp strung up by his ankles, hanging from a cypress tree that overhung the bridle path. She prodded his middle with an arrow as she questioned him.

"Your supplier, Maggot! Tell me now or—"

When from behind her, she heard the crunch of feet on twigs. Someone behind her, not bothering to disguise their presence. A Bat-somebody, no doubt, ready to weigh in with the objections: Loose Cannon. Irresponsible. Violent. Rash.

"Let that man down."

It wasn't a voice she expected, and Huntress turned with a petulant sneer to see who it was. It was that policewoman turned sellout, Montoya, looking at her like she was a rowdy teenager pulled out from a rock concert for climbing the truss. Who was she to be barking orders anyway? Let the maggot down, indeed.

“Or what?!” Huntress challenged, practically spitting the words.

“You are a selfish, ungrateful brat,” Montoya declared. Helena recognized the tone. It was the same one she used in the classroom, with the inner city kids that weren’t half as tough as they let on. “I stood up for you people. I said vigilantes do good in this city. I said we need them to fill the void and do what police can’t. They can be trusted to do that, I said. And *this* is what I get in return! You’re a disgrace to everyone who wears a mask. You make the others look bad by association and you spit on everyone who stood up for you. You let that man down or I put you over my knee right here, right now.”

The horizon was beginning to purple by the time Batman returned to the cave. By the time Bruce reached the bedroom, it was pink. By the time his head sank into the pillow, the first shafts of luminous glow cut through the morning mist, infusing the air with a tart grassy smell of unripe grapes.

A kiss brushed his cheek.

“My, but you’re late. Rough night?”

“Go away, Kitten.”

“Oh, one of those moods. Well, I’ll let you sleep it off if you’re that tired, Handsome. But I had hoped we could talk. I haven’t seen you since before Renee left.”

“I... wasn’t avoiding you,” Bruce lied. “I went down to the cave.”

“Ah, playing with the new toys?”

“The video camouflage gear,” he corrected automatically. “No. I wanted to work out.”

“Well you didn’t miss much. The Blackgate thing was a joke. Not that I’ve ever seen the place up close and personal, but one would imagine they’d have better security than that...”

Bruce seethed. She was flaunting her criminal past—flaunting it right in his face. No, she’d never been in Blackgate. She had to ask Barbara to pull the blueprints off the city systems because she’d never even seen the lobby! Catwoman had never been captured and she had to rub it in. That’s what that curio was about. Rubbing it in. Flaunting it. “Never caught me, Handsome. Not up to the scratch. Reowrl.”

“...if security is even the word. I mean a painting like that...”

“It’s a prison,” he pointed out, controlling his growing anger, “I don’t think guarding the artwork is a high priority.”

“That’s my point. Why have it there at all? A painting like that in the lobby, security doesn’t even enter into it. Owning any work of art is a privilege, and if they don’t have the sense or judgment to put it somewhere appropriate....”

Bruce sat up in bed and stared at her in wonder.

“Sense. And *JUDGMENT*?” he exploded at last. “*SENSE AND JUDGMENT* to put it somewhere *APPROPRIATE*??? Like in someone’s house, right? That is where stolen property belongs, isn’t it! In the home! Selina, what were you *THINKING*?”

She looked confused, which only enraged him further.

“What the *HELL* were you thinking??? And what the hell did this *MEAN TO YOU*???”

The silence was probably much shorter than it seemed to Bruce. To Bruce it felt like a minute.

"First," she said finally, a calm poised tone, "this isn't a rooftop, and it's not a cattle drive, so I'll ask you to reconsider your tone of voice. Second..." she paused and then bit off each word crisply, "thinking—about—*what?*"

"You know *EXACTLY* what I'm talking about, *Candice.*"

She looked more confused than ever.

"Ex-cuse me?"

His voice dripped with uncharacteristic sarcasm as he pointed into the corner towards the offending cat sculpture and spat, "I figured that must be one of your 'aliases,' considering the carving in the curio."

Again she paused, cocked her head, and then smiled broadly. Her delight, Bruce would later realize, was nothing more than simple relief in having finally figured out what he was talking about, but at the time, he only saw Catwoman basking in the glow of her felonious victories:

"Oh, the little blue one! Isn't he the cutest thing? I always loved that one. A little kitschy, but cute."

"Kitschy. But expensive enough though, right?"

"Well not compared to some," she smiled.

"Then why steal it in the first place?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"I would have thought that was obvious, Stud. *It's a cat.*" She looked amused as hell.

"How astute," he grveled.

"Just checking: you *did* know I was Catwoman when you asked me to move in, right?"

"Of course I did, Selina. But I expected a little more courtesy than you bringing the spoils of your illicit activities here."

"Time out. 'The spoils of your *illicit activities?*' If you're going to be this pompous, you might want to pop downstairs and change, because the judgmental jackass bit really doesn't play so well in the bathrobe."

"Neither does your sarcasm. And it's not the judgmental jack—the law and order thing; it is *not* the law and order thing. It is a simple matter of *respect*. It is stolen property—"

"Bullshit. It is *ME*, and you knew that from day one."

"Yes, I knew. I just didn't expect you to flaunt your criminal..." he broke off, sputtering, choking on indignant frustration "...right in front of me..." he broke off again and glared, then resumed, calmer and resolute, "Then again, why wouldn't you. It's not like you haven't been doing it all along."

"And you loved it," she said simply.

"NO!" he shouted, winced at the lapse of control, then repeated the word in a calmer tone, "No. I loved—love... *you*. But I never loved what you did, because what you did was wrong."

"Well that refrain was overdue."

"Impossible. You are the most maddeningly impossible woman. Selina, don't you ever regret *anything* you've done?"

"Cats... do not... regret."

"I didn't ask about cats, I asked you."

"Same thing, lover."

"No. It's not."

CHAPTER 4: LINK

This was the true consequence Bruce hadn't foreseen when he asked Selina to move in. It wasn't visitors like Montoya coming to the manor. It had nothing to do with blueprints or Interpol reports. Ultimately, it wasn't even about a stolen cat statuette in his bedroom. It was that link he had with Catwoman.

In the minutes before he'd discovered that cat in the curio, Bruce thought about how he and Selina would always communicate nonverbally more fully than they could in words. The 'whatever it was' between Batman and Catwoman existed for so long as shadow and nuance, they connected on a level that was mutually understood but never admitted, a primal, physical and subconscious bond.

It was there when they had a whole city to get lost in after they clashed. Why hadn't he realized what it would be like with her right across the hallway? Or right across the breakfast table?

There she sat. She didn't have to say it. He knew: She saw his reaction to the stolen cat as a rejection of a fundamental part of her, a part she thought he'd embraced long ago. The accusation was as clear as if she screamed it. He felt it as acutely as if she screamed it.

And she knew his grievance too; he could tell that also: He felt betrayed and disrespected by her bringing stolen property into his home. She knew that, and she was defensive. ("Cats do not regret." Impossible woman. Catwoman was never defensive. Catwoman gave as well as she got, he knew that better than anybody. It was Selina who was hurting... who he had hurt. Bruce thought back to that little bit of blue carving that started it all: the front paws crossed one over the other—a relaxed attitude—the creature would have to feel very safe to let its guard down that way. Yes, she brought a stolen cat into his house. He asked her to move in. He watched for four days to see if that curio went into her rooms or into his. He'd wanted her to make it *their* home and not his. And when she finally did...

So okay, she was defensive.

That didn't change the fact that he was a crimefighter and bringing the spoils of a crime into his home was a mockery of all he stood for. It was regrettable that she couldn't see that...

He felt a chill and looked across the table into hostile feline eyes. It was almost as if he'd said it out loud, for he could see the sound positively hovering on her lips: *Pfffffft.*

Typical. The answer when she didn't have an answer.

No, the green orbs shot back, *it's the answer when you're being too pompous and stupid for even Feline Logic to apply.*

Feline logic, he mentally sneered at his own expression. *Moral relativism, that's what it is.*

He didn't say it aloud. He hadn't said anything out loud, and yet she stood and left the room as if he'd insulted her.

One thing I'll say for all the masked melees between Batman and Catwoman: You knew where you stood. You could tell when one was happening and when it wasn't. A grab could go wrong and I'd find myself pulled by my own momentum into an iron pin, a disorienting lead, and an unceremonious drop to the floor. But I knew where I stood—even if it wasn't standing at all but an ungraceful heap on the floor.

Technically, the fight was over in the sense that we stopped talking about the cat in the curio. But somehow... it didn't feel over at all.

He can't *really* be surprised, can he?

World's Greatest Detective.

Pffft.

He knows I'm Catwoman. He knows what business Catwoman was in. It never dawned on him that in the course of a thousand prowls, a hundred robberies, I might have kept a piece or two that struck my fancy???

He ASKED me to move in. He knows I'm Catwoman. He doesn't get to act surprised.

Neither do you, Kitten.

He might not have said it out loud, but the implication was clear enough from that glare burning through the backside of Alfred's menus. It said:

*Yes, I asked—and YOU moved in. You **knew** I was Batman. And you **knew** Batman is a judgmental jackass. You didn't know this was coming? Of course you did, you had to know sooner or later there would be an issue. You just figured you'd do what you always do: purr in my ear and play with the insignia. And if that didn't work, you'd bait me 'til I tripped over my own pomposity and fell on my face. Then you'd smile and meow because you love me anyway, and we'd slip back into the old banter without even realizing it. Bat and Cat, life goes on.*

Maybe he didn't say it, but it was implied. The contempt was very definitely implied just by the way he chewed his toast. He knew that collection was a reflection of me. He knew cats and thief. Why couldn't the World's Greatest Detective make that jump, hmm? That just MAYBE there would be a piece or two in there that was stolen? World's Greatest Detective, why couldn't he make that jump?

I'll tell you why. He's Batman!

Same reason he expects the JLA to follow his plans, the same reason he didn't feel the need to explain his presence at a meeting with Scarecrow that only Bruce Wayne knew about:

He's. Batman.

He says so.

He wanted us to be together. We are.

He wanted Catwoman to stop stealing. I have.

He wanted me to move in. I'm here.

It's automatic. He wants it and it shall be thus. So naturally there couldn't be something he doesn't approve of in that curio or in me, or I would have sold it off ages ago! Given the proceeds to charity! Donned sackcloth, ashes and a scarlet A!

Well, guess again, Dark Knight.

I stood and left the dining room.

Cats do not wear sackcloth.

Bruce threw his napkin down angrily beside the crumpled daily schedule Alfred left beside his breakfast plate, then he followed Selina from the dining room.

How is that insulting, hmm? He silently asked the hallway carpet. *Catwoman always admitted she was a thief. If she wasn't downright proud of it, she was certainly proud of her forthright admissions about it.*

The hallway carpet had no answer, nor did the hardwood floors of the morning room. Indeed, the clunk of his shoes on the tiles of Jeffersonian parquet oak evoked the clunk of Batman's boots landing on a rooftop. That only affirmed his arguments:

She didn't ever deny her criminal activity. Catwoman's code of conduct is her own. Society's ideas of right and wrong don't apply. She understands what they are just fine; she isn't insane like the Joker. She just blithely ignores whatever little rules and laws don't suit her version of things.

But she can always be counted on to do the right thing as she sees it.

Bruce looked around the empty morning room. Selina wasn't there; she must have gone up to her own suite.

But she can always be counted on to do the right thing as she sees it, Batman repeated. It was the Batman part of him, the stickler for Justice. Yes he was mad at her, he was disappointed, and he was hurt. But he would not stand by and see her falsely accused. She was many things, a thief among them, but she was not immoral, dishonorable, or unprincipled.

She COULD be counted on to do the right thing as she saw it. She just didn't like admitting it.

She used to steal. And now she doesn't.

It was true enough. And she hadn't done it for him, that was for damn sure. She'd always made it clear, those thousands of times he tried to reform her: she was who she was, and she wouldn't tone herself down to suit somebody else's idea of what she should be. She had stopped stealing and not for him, which meant it had to be because she recognized—because she allowed herself to recognize, finally—that it was wrong.

Right?

That must be it. It was the only progression that served logic, feline or otherwise.

Feline logic. What a contradiction that was. And how it suited her. Military Intelligence. Jumbo Shrimp. Feline Logic... Catwoman. She'll decide all on her own that stealing is wrong, but she'll keep the spoils of her criminal past and not give it a moment's pause.

What was he going to do with her?

You know what pisses me off more than anything? This is all about that little blue cat. Condo full of stuff, I found a cute little carved sweetie that was too darling to fence, so I popped it into the curio and never gave it a second thought. THAT is what he chooses to bite into like a rabid rat with wings. Does he even notice the Egyptian Sekhmet from the museum? Oh no. First time I ever escaped from Batman with the loot. That he can't be bothered remembering. But he notices some sentimental hogwash on the bottom of the blue one. "Candice," for pity sake.

Way to make a girl feel appreciated, Stud.

I'll bet this is how he treated the bimbos: *"Were you the one that wore green on our first date? No, no, you must be the one that likes Van Morrison... Oh, I know, you're the purple one from the rooftops, the non-complex one that won't change to accommodate me. Been through it all before, Babe, so I know exactly how it will work out if I let it continue. Better have Batman step in and take full control of the situation, because that always works so well."*

Arrogant jackass.

Climbing the stairs to the bedrooms, Bruce noted an absence on the landing. Whiskers was not in his usual "gargoyle" position overlooking the Great Hall. Making a left at the hallway, he knocked on the doorframe of Selina's suite. The door was open, and yet he knocked. She should appreciate a gesture like that. He'd seldom knocked at her apartment; it was almost a running joke.

"Yes?" It was a flat voice. Not *Come in*, certainly. More like *What do you want now?*

What do you want now, Jackass? The Catwoman in his head amended the quote.

"I was, um," he began, and then broke off as he took in the scene. The closet door was open, and somehow, she had already managed to recreate the hellmouth that existed in her apartment. She was squatted down, searching through a stack of clutter spilled out over her feet. Whiskers and Nutmeg climbed over the mounds of disorder like Sherpas, while Selina muttered curses at the mess.

It was quite endearing, and he allowed his lip a half-twitch.

"I thought you were going to sort through that stuff when you were packing, clear out the junk."

He didn't mean it to sound like "That's far enough, Catwoman." Playing it back in his head, he was quite sure it didn't sound like "That's far enough, Catwoman." Yet she reacted like it was Sotheby's vault at four in the morning with a sack full of other people's property dangling from her delicate wrist.

Or... she didn't *really* react like it was a vault. The pause at his words was the same. And the slow turn to face him. But then she didn't say anything. No springy comeback. Not even acknowledgement. Just an angry stare.

"Never mind," he said, turned, and left.

Huntress was livid. Something beyond mere anger had taken hold when Montoya challenged her. Who was this miserable bitch to interrupt her interrogation like she was pulling over SoccerMom for running a stop sign?

"You understand nothing—" she had spat. She broke off, not because of the hard dark eyes promising they would make good their threat of a spanking, Huntress would not be intimidated that way. She was simply... at a loss to say what it was Montoya didn't understand.

"No?" Renee said simply, humoring a child. "Then explain it to me. Tell me what I don't understand about the need to stop this man from hurting people without crossing the line and violating his rights, hmm? Tell me what it is I don't see."

In frustration, Huntress made a fist and punched her victim squarely in the stomach, then looked to Montoya with a snide 'take that.' Renee was unimpressed and said

nothing. She waited with seeming patience for an answer. Finally Helena began to speak, slowly at first, her words gaining speed and passion as she continued.

"You... don't understand... what it is to be out here night after night because you want to do good... And for that, you get no respect from your allies, no respect from the people you protect, and the lowest, slimiest filth think they have a piece of you simply by your existing... You dare come out into the Gotham night, you are theirs to define with their own sick twisted measuring stick of—" She paused, stuck for words, and pulled back to punch again, this time aiming for the villain's crotch. Her elbow was seized and a numbing jolt like electricity shot up her arm from the wrist, dropping her to one knee.

"I don't know disrespect?" Renee said simply as if, instead of delivering a paralyzing *nikyo*, she had merely admired Helena's handbag. "Have you seen the papers? I'm a lesbian. Lady cop must be gay, right? That's the natural order of things. And if I deny it, I look bigoted and *adios* to reelection. And why? I'm a woman and I live in Gotham, so I'm fair game. That's all they need to smear you. You don't need to wear a mask. These *chorra pichacorta* are threatened by any woman that... you think I don't know disrespect, Little Miss?"

Huntress snarled and stood.

"Spare me the sisterhood crap, okay? You want sisterhood, *Ellen*, go back to your boyfriend over there and let me do my job."

"Torturing this man because life kicks you in the *alimentos*, no. You're going to learn to behave, Little Girl, or you wind up alone in this world. You don't make this man and everybody else a scapegoat because you're unhappy. You're gonna grow up and now: You want respect, you earn it. You start by cutting him down and drop him at the 21st precinct, or else I take you both in."

That was how the scene had played out. Huntress told herself she complied with Montoya's outrageous demands because there was no choice. The woman was a city official and could make plenty of trouble if unappeased. And Helena knew she would get no support from the Bat-family. On the contrary, he'd let her swing: Told you so. No good. Violent. Rash. Loose cannon. Lost cause. Cut bait.

The pig. The control freak bat-chauvinist bat-prick.

Huntress's stomach seized on the word and her mouth soured with the taste of stomach enzymes and rage.

Renee Montoya, a woman. When she accused Huntress of the same things Batman did, it was not so easy to shrug it off as a pigheaded man pissing on her parade. She might or might not be a dyke, but she was certainly not a bat-chauvinist bat-prick.

Again Helena's stomach seized. The very idea that the lack of respect was her own doing heaved through her insides, and she knew she wouldn't stop tasting bile until she proved Montoya—and therefore Batman—wrong.

She had to do something, some gesture, some stupid gesture. Something the holier than thou Bat would preach—COBBLEPOT! She would warn Oswald Cobblepot his new ladylove was a black widow out to kill him. He was a corrupt, worthless slimebucket, and she would save his worthless life. And when the world was no better for it, she would be proven right and they would be wrong.

And a vile sleaze like Cobblepot would owe her his life. That, at least, would be satisfying. How she would make him squirm to repay such a debt.

Yes, it was an excellent plan. Already, Huntress felt her guts unclenching.

Like any establishment that serves alcohol, the Iceberg Lounge had a policy for customers who lose consciousness in the bar. The proprietor, Oswald Cobblepot, was not an unworldly man. He appreciated that sometimes a patron had a little too much Jack Daniels and required a nap. And he appreciated that sometimes a patron played *Red Red Wine* once too often on the jukebox and Killer Croc found it necessary to put them through a wall.

But whatever the reason, it was unseemly having customers passed out on the floor. So Two-Face, like any other incapacitated client, was neatly deposited in a back room beside Oswald's office.

Behind closed eyelids, Harvey saw himself as Indiana Jones running from a giant two-headed coin, a coin not rolling but flipping towards him, a bat emblem emblazoned on both faces. Mere seconds before impact, his theme music swelled and he skidded through the escape hatch, reaching back to retrieve his dusty fedora. Then he heard Sly's voice: "Yellow PVC halters trimmed in black... bikini bottoms, gloves and boots." The words repeated. The voice sounded again—and again—like chanting. The chanting opened the ground beneath his feet and Harvey felt himself falling through a whirlpool of yellow and black... "PVC... matching bikini bottoms... from their circus act... sisters."

Indiana Two-Face landed hard on solid ground, the fedora tipped back slightly as he rolled his head backwards onto the floor. "Twins," he muttered, "Why did it have to be twins?"

Then he blinked... he felt hot and sweaty... and he was staring at acoustic tiling. He sat up and looked around. The Iceberg, the back room, damn.

He stood and shrugged off a wave of dizziness in the doorway. In that moment's hesitation, he chanced to hear voices across the way—Oswald's office. A woman's voice... was that... No, it couldn't be. Huntress?

"Listen, you miserable little shithole..." Yes, that was Huntress. "...doing you a favor you don't deserve. And don't have the—"

"My dear good woman," Oswald's voice interrupted with smug condescension, "I fear that caped hooligans like yourself simply cannot understand a refined creature like Miss Starling..."

"You CAN'T be so stupid as to think that's her name."

"As I say, you cannot begin to understand: Lark Starling is a *lady*."

"She's a black widow, you stupid bird. She marries men with money and then she kills them, inherits everything they've got and disappears. You're going to be next. You're going to be Mr. Lark Starling and then you're going to be the late Mr. Lark Starling, and then this shithole of a bar is going to be sold off to Donald Trump and he'll put in a fucking Starbuck's..."

"Enough. Huntress, I must ask you to leave. You have slandered my fiancé, and now..."

"...and a Bugaboo Creek Steakhouse..."

“Get out of this establishment now, you Wallowing Wannabat!”

“And a donut shop. They’ll put in a Krispy Kreme right where the bar is now, and there will be a constant stream of cops in and out of here whenever that *Hot Donuts Now* sign is lit.”

There was the unmistakable sound of an umbrella thrashing through the air and hitting a filing cabinet.

“Bony-bottomed batslut!” Oswald called as the door opened and Huntress stormed away in a huff.

Two-Face appeared not to notice, seeming to look through her at the spectacle of Oswald, brandishing his umbrella like a rapier as he ran after her to fling a final “Callous castoff!” at her retreating form.

Two-Face rummaged in his pocket, retrieved the coin, and looked at it. Harvey knew what he had to do. Two-Face knew what he had to do. In his mind, the staccato trumpets of a Hollywood theme song resumed, he tipped his imaginary fedora to Penguine, and returned the coin to his breast pocket, unflipped.

CHAPTER 5: CONFIRMATION AND COUNTERFEIT

Harvey Dent knew what it was to learn your ladylove wants to kill you. His pre-Two-Face engagement to Pamela Isley turned out to be just such a setup, and Harvey had refused to believe it just as vehemently as Oswald did.

His Two-Face persona *also* knew what it was to arrive at the Gotham General E.R. with life-threatening injuries inflicted by a woman he'd once called darling. The only difference was that Two-Face didn't have the luxury of denial. Harvey got to assure Bruce Wayne that No, his beloved fiancée Pamela could not possibly have been the one that poisoned him. And Oswald could eject Huntress from his office with cries of "Wallowing Wannabat" when she broke the news about Lark Starling. But Two-Face had the evidence of his own eyes as to who stabbed him with pot fragments screaming "DIE PLANT-KILLER DIE! REVENGE FOR IVAN! REVENGE FOR IVAN! EAT WEED-KILLER, YOU FESTERING MOUND OF SLIME! CAN'T YOU WORK A SUNLAMP? DIE PLANT-KILLER DIE!"

Unlike his lighter side, Two-Face wasn't sentimental. He didn't see any need to involve himself in the possible impending murder of Oswald Cobblepot—not for its own sake. That was the kind of thing Harvey got worked up over. Harvey the Dogooder, like it was any of their business what Ozzy got himself into. If it were a matter of intervening just to save Oswald's life, Two-Face would have insisted on a coin toss.

But there was a *second* consideration. Two-Face was well aware that the demise of Oswald could mean the demise of the Iceberg, possibly in the very way Huntress had outlined. That was *not* to be risked on a coin toss, nor on the vague hope that Huntress was wrong or that if she wasn't, Oswald would realize in time and take steps.

Hence why he hurried from the Iceberg: He hoped he could catch up with Huntress before she disappeared to wherever it is vigilantes go when they're not prancing around ruining perfectly good crime sprees. He had little difficulty finding her. She was still on foot; in fact, she was still doing that angry stomp she'd started at Oswald's office door.

"Excuse us!" Harvey called down the street, breaking into a run. "Huntress! Wait up!"

She spun around instinctively, into a defensive judo stance, then relaxed slightly with a disgusted snort.

"What do you want, Maggot?"

"Aren't you the feisty wench," Two-Face leered, then he blinked into a direct, businesslike tone. "Two minutes of your time is what we want..." He blinked again and added "...*please*." The last word dripped with condescending irony and Huntress felt an urge to put an arrow through his eye. Harvey took her murderous glare for consent and continued. "Back in the bar, we couldn't help overhearing your conversation. You think Oswald's lady friend is out to kill him. Why?"

“For his money,” she sneered, “why else would anyone have anything to do with him.”

Harvey winced, but Two-Face laughed.

“A *cynical* feisty wench, we’re starting to like you. But you misunderstood: We were not questioning her motive but yours. What evidence do you have to back up these accusations? How certain are you of the charges you bring? And why...” An arrow pressed against his nose and Harvey felt it was best to stop talking.

“I know because I know, *Counselor*. I recognize her; she’s done it before. She gets away with it, too. Now if you’re finished with your cross-examination, I have to getuoomph—”

“You’ll have to excuse us,” Two-Face said, rubbing sore knuckles, “We would normally allow *him* to handle anything as mundane as browbeating a witness. But we dislike having arrows shoved up our noseuuungh—”

“And you’ll have to excuse me, I don’t let scum-lapping maggots get the last word.”

“Fair enough,” Harvey said simply, massaging his jaw. “Sorry about that. Darth Duplicity. He gets excited around women in boots. Not to worry, he’s back in his kennel now. So the things you told Oswald: You’re certain of them; that’s all I wanted to know. Thank you, Huntress. I appreciate your time.”

He offered his hand as if they’d just concluded a business meeting. Huntress stared at it, then at him, then back at the hand. The words ‘You’re a sick fuck, Dent’ hovered on her lips, but the sight of that extended hand had her mesmerized. It was almost like respect. Reluctantly, she shook it, then turned and began walking away.

“MumumumumMama,” Two-Face called audibly, “don’t know why they call you Bony Ass.”

Lawrence Muskelli lit the Bat-Signal and waited. He knew from experience that Batman could take ten to forty minutes to respond, depending on his location. While he waited, Muskelli thought about Renee.

For all that Latin temper, she had a dignity about her. It was the first thing he’d noticed. After the Mad Hatter incident, there was an Internal Affairs probe, but unlike most cops she didn’t get belligerent with the IAD guys. She went through the victims’ counseling too, because it was required. No grousing. No ‘don’t treat me different because I’m a woman’ song and dance. She went through all of it because that’s what you do. Mature. Dignified. True grace under pressure through the whole thing. He was impressed. He would have liked to get to know her better, but it wasn’t possible then: a detective under investigation when he’d just taken over the department. Scandal waiting to happen. So he put it aside.

Then when he asked for input on vigilantes, she gave it. She took him at his word. She came to his office and told him what she thought. No paranoid suspicion, like from some of them. No assumptions that it was a trick question. No telling him what she guessed he wanted to hear. She was a straight shooter.

Those qualities made her ideal to serve on the city council, but iffy for the political life that went with the job. Like that story in the Post purporting to “out” her. As with the IA investigations, Renee handled the smear campaign with dignity and class. Publicly...

“By next week, everyone will have forgotten it. I’m actually quite surprised that it made the front page... Next week we’ll read that Jade is Riddler and Poison Ivy’s lovechild or something, and this will all be forgotten.”

...But privately, Lawrence knew Renee was troubled. He didn’t feel close enough to ask a confidence if she didn’t volunteer it, but he had his suspicions. Her old colleagues on the force, there was speculation and probably wagers about her sexual orientation. Maybe too, some questions from her family. Not everyone understood the extent to which tabloids lie. Some had a childlike faith in whatever they read in print, no matter how absurd —

“Yes, Commissioner?”

Muskelli started at the dark caped presence suddenly standing in front of him. With a resigned grumble, he put thoughts of Renee aside and briefed Batman on the counterfeiting sting the Feds were warning “the locals” to steer clear of.

Harvey returned to the Iceberg, shuddered as he ordered a Derby Fizz from Sly, and took the bubbly concoction to Jervis Tetch’s table.

Two hours later... Harvey sat in the Mad Hatter’s hideout sifting through the rubble of Double Dare’s attack. He couldn’t understand why Jervis, who was such an incessant chatterbox about trivial nonsense, was such a tight-lipped nincompoop about this Double Dare. When Riddler “made such an impression on Auntie Maud,” Harvey, like the rest of the Iceberg, had listened. But now that there were matters of actual *importance* to be shared, Jervis sealed up like a ziplock!

Two hours later... Two-Face and Mad Hatter robbed Kingston Electronics. The tech firm that supplied dozens of the dotcoms operating out of “Silicon Alley” was able to replace all the micro-electronics Double Dare destroyed in their attack on Jervis’s hideout. After a successful heist together, Two-Face felt sure his companion would be more forthcoming. “So tell us, Jervis,” he began, “about these, heh, Doublemint Twins...” ...Alas, even after Two-Face helped re-outfit his hideout, Jervis Tetch remained a monosyllabic nincompoop.

Two hours later... Harvey again waited in the hideout while Jervis worked. He worked feverishly on a chic beret of green and yellow felt. “Nice colors,” Two-Face remarked, “is that the same shade of yellow as the Double Dare costumes?” Nothing. The weaselly little hatter just hunched tighter over his workbench and tweaked the tiny microchip.

Two hours later... a “hatted” Lark Starling was on her way to Wisconsin to make cheese. A weary Two-Face turned to his equally exhausted partner and asked pointblank: “Is *everything* in the same proportion?” Mad Hatter looked at him with disgust before answering...

“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe...”

“And did they at least gyre and gimble in unison?” Two-Face asked, trying to make the most of the only answer he was going to get.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bandersnatch... Take the hint, Harvey. The vicious vixens beat the crap out of me and I don't want to talk about it. This Oswald-Lark business isn't over yet. Go home and get some rest before we start Phase 2."

The Batmobile made the final turn from the public road onto the Wayne property, but Batman's mind was far from "homecoming mode"...

Things that went on in other cities did **not** happen in Gotham. Feds did not come in and do as they pleased. They did not get to hide behind 'classified information' and 'need to know.' They did not get to treat city cops like errand boys. They did not get to warn 'the locals' off 'their' investigations. Not in his city.

Muskelli didn't know that. He was still new. He would learn.

...The Batmobile crossed electric eye Omega, disabling the hologram ahead...

Commissioner Muskelli hated the Treasury Department warning off the GCPD, but he went along because that's what goes on in other cities. He'd passed their warnings on to Batman: a sting operation was in place, Federal, stay out of it. Gordon would have done the same, Batman knew, but Gordon would have known what would happen.

...The Batmobile glided into its place in the cave with the graceful ease of a thoroughbred that had run its race. But for some reason, Batman could not feel equally content in his triumph...

Oracle had an off night. It took her six hours to confirm the counterfeiting investigation and pull all their "evidence" off the agency systems. By that time, Batman had already located the superbill printing presses, apprehended the operators, and traced the magnetic ink to its source: Embassy Row. "Imagine my surprise," he had whispered into the still night air.

...Batman settled in at his workstation, typed up the log entry, and linked it to the related files in the database...

When Special Agents Flaherty and Rollins reached the scene, they'd found the men, the presses, the ink, the paper, and the evidence linking back to the Korean Consulate and the Chinese arms dealer where all those counterfeit hundreds were headed. They also found their return plane tickets to Washington.

Oracle had made up for her initial stumble with a bit of bravado. She saw in Flaherty's personnel record that he had an anniversary coming up, and since he'd now be getting home in time to celebrate with his wife, she noted this when she changed their flights and bumped him up to First Class.

It was, by anybody's yardstick, a total triumph: for law-enforcement, for Gotham, and for Batman.

And he was rightly proud of it.

A win was a win. It wasn't any less satisfying from a crimefighting standpoint, for Justice was served. That is what mattered.

...Entering the costume vault, Batman removed his costume and changed into a kimono, black and slate gray silk woven in a tight herringbone pattern with black piping, Selina's gift. It was so silly, she said, going to all the trouble changing into Bruce Wayne's shirt and trousers after patrol just to walk from the costume vault to the

bedroom... It unnerved him. It was a gift for *Batman* and that was strange enough. But it was a gift that showed an intimate understanding of Batman's life, of this most private corner of Batman's life, and yet had no practical value in relation to the Mission. The very concept of Batman and not Bruce Wayne having a life unrelated to the Mission, it seemed like an absolute contradiction—(Feline Logic!)—and yet he was wearing the proof of it...

The counterfeiting case *was* a win. It was an absolute win, and it wasn't any less satisfying from a crimefighting standpoint, for Justice was served and that is what mattered.

But perhaps it was not a betrayal of the Mission to admit there was another satisfaction, a different kind, in coming home at the end of the night and...

Barbara's contribution wasn't any less valuable because Dick was there to share in the victory. He'd heard them, a murmur and a giggle in that second before the OraCom muted. The job was done, and now they each had someone who understood to pat them on the back, relax with, and bask in the satisfaction of a job well done...

He liked coming home to her.

He liked telling her about his day.

He did not like having a stolen cat in his bedroom.

He liked having someone in his life that understood the life.

He did not like having a stolen cat in his bedroom.

A butler's first responsibility, Alfred reminded himself, was to give good service. That was his primary concern. He saw that nutritious meals were prepared and served in an orderly and elegant fashion. If Master Bruce and Miss Selina chose to eat those meals—or not eat them, as the case may be—in tense and glaring silence, that was their business. If they chose to create an atmosphere of high pressure storm systems brewing behind the salad, making their way to the green beans, and threatening to erupt into a deluge over the Leg of Lamb *a la Pennyworth*, that was not his concern... not in his capacity *as butler*, and in the dining room, his role as butler must be paramount.

It was one thing to give a gentle nudge when the Batman-Catwoman situation seemed, at last, to be developing into something more. Particularly when that nudge required only a phonecall to Master Dick on so innocuous a subject as his Father's Day gift... It was all entirely within the realm of Alfred's traditional role in the family.

But to meddle in personal matters between the lady and gentlemen of the house, that was clearly out of bounds. He wouldn't do it. He would not even consider it.

Certainly not yet.

If the situation persisted...

A knock at the door spared him having to work out just exactly how long the situation might persist before he reconsidered this wise policy. He opened the door. Seeing who the visitors were, Alfred hid his surprise behind the cold reserve of a professional servant.

Selina stood alone in the little garden outside the study, looking across the river at the Gotham City skyline. This view is why the house was built where it was. This was the view from the main dining room, the south drawing room and the library: neat symmetrical lines of arched six foot windows looking out on the river and the gleaming city beyond. His city.

Selina preferred the view from the garden. It was the same view, but without the borders of drapery and window frames. The borders created by the windows: framing it like a painting, made it seem like a part of the house. It was *not* a part of the house. The city was its own. It was not Wayne property.

Property. The sacred word. Stealing, taking other people's property.

His city.

Like he could just claim it.

It was a free thing. You don't get to take a free thing and say it belongs to you, now it is yours, and any deviation from what you want it to be is... theft... criminal... wrong.

Behind her, she felt a silent presence arrive.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Selina. A Mr. Dent to see you. I've shown him into the library."

In the cave, Bruce began testing the flexible polymer that would eventually become the ultimate camouflage suit. In Tokyo, he had seen how running electrical current through the thin film of poly(p-phenylene vinylene) caused it to give off a faint glow, and how tweaking the plastic's chemical composition could vary the color. By embedding tiny "pixels" of red, green and blue light-emitting plastic close together on a sheet of fabric, he would have the raw material for a wearable video screen. If the screen was then fed computer coordinated images from microcameras positioned around the wearer's body, the result would be near-perfect camouflage.

A soft, respectful cough from above reminded him that the *most-perfect* camouflage needed no such high-tech enhancements.

"Yes Alfred?" he said without looking up from the worktable.

"A visitor has called for you, sir. A Mr. Jervis Tetch. I've shown him into the south drawing room."

CHAPTER 6: DEAR OSWALD

The south drawing room was the most formal, and possibly the fussiest room at Wayne Manor. It was a room built with entertaining in mind, where diners would withdraw for cards, music, or conversation after a formal meal in the dining room.

When Bruce was forced to entertain, whether on Foundation business or as a snare for Batman's enemies, he didn't give dinner parties. He favored large receptions in the Great Hall or else outdoor teas or barbecues on the grounds. Both kept the guests far from the rooms in daily use.

In the days when Martha Wayne had given dinner parties, she preferred to have her guests gather after dinner in the intimate little parlor off her morning room. And so it was that the south drawing room was little used and had not, in fact, been redecorated in decades. Its white silk curtains trimmed in turquoise, gilded molding, and silk brocade wallpaper still reflected the graceful but decidedly Edwardian taste of Bruce's great aunt, Elena Wayne.

Jervis liked it. He was eagerly examining a *petit pointe* firescreen when Bruce entered.

"Simply frabjous! Is that scene the Roman forum? '*London is the capital of Paris,*' as Giant Alice told the Rabbit, '*and Paris is the capital of Rome, and Rome—no, that's all wrong.*' But it's a frabjous firescreen all the same. Hello Bruce!"

Outwardly, Bruce smiled the smile of the airhead Fop, but inwardly his mind searched the Lewis Carroll quote for some clue to what Tetch might be doing here. His eyes scanned his visitor as well, searching for any indication if Tetch had come for criminal purposes as the Mad Hatter, or in his less dangerous but equally annoying persona, Gossip Gertie.

"...and an orange tree, that's very interesting to see. Well Pammy, you know, but outside the greenhouse you don't see many tropical plants in Gotham, even indoors. I guess that's the point of having one. Calloo Callay. Oh, and in a *beautiful* Chinese planter! Is that what they call a fishbowl?..."

It was Gossip Gertie, Bruce decided, for he was jibbering. Mad Hatter might spout nonsense during a crime, but he wouldn't use it to waste time before beginning one. This was different. This was shilly-shallying. This was Patterson from Marketing making small talk about his kids' little league because he didn't want to discuss the fourth quarter sales projections.

"What can I do for you, Jervis?" Bruce asked, abandoning the fop persona for that of the businessman. It was a minor risk, for Bruce the businessman was necessarily smarter than the Fop, and Bruce preferred to remain wholly stupid in front of the rogues. But in this situation, the risk was necessary. If he maintained the Fop façade with Gossip Gertie, they could be here all day.

"Well...eh... it's rather awkward, Bruce," Jervis hedged. "Bit of a situation down at the 'Berg. A pool of tears, a pool of tears. Alice drowning in a pool of tears... You know Oswald got mixed up with this woman. 'Lark Starling' she calls herself, and if

you believe that, my fine Dormouse, I'll tell you another. Lark Starling indeed. Some bimbo, we all said. Gold digger!"

"Er, no, I hadn't heard about that."

Jervis clicked his tongue, lamenting the evil in the world. "Oh yes indeed, by the Queen's tarts, she was a gold digger all right. But it turned out to be worse than that." He paused dramatically. "She is a *black widow*; Ozzy's little love bird was out to *kill him*! Well you know what Alice says: if you drink much from a bottle marked poison, it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later."

Bruce offered no comment. He had once hoped, he reminded himself, that the relationship with Selina would reveal unknown weaknesses among his enemies. He was finally getting inside dirt all right, but this wasn't like kryptonite or J'onn's vulnerability to fire. This was... ..oh hell... ..it was really quite sad.

"So we took steps," Jervis was saying.

"Excuse me?"

"Harvey and I, we took steps. Had to be done. But that still leaves the problem of Oswald."

"What do you mean you *took steps*?" Bruce asked cautiously.

"*I can't explain myself, sir*' said Alice, '*because I'm not myself, you see.*' But that's no nevermind. I tell you the lady is quite out of the picture now. Gone for good from Gotham. The felt beret is most persuasive. But that doesn't solve the matter of Oswald. The man's not a fool. He's going to notice if he never sees her again. Can't just have Lark Starling vanish into thin air like the Cheshire cat, now can we? So you see we simply must have a letter."

"I don't understand," Bruce said honestly. He was relieved these 'steps' the rogues had taken stopped short of murder. From the sounds of it, they merely hatted the woman and sent her out of town. But the ongoing HatterSpeak was beginning to take its toll, and Bruce felt a headache forming behind his eyes.

"Now that Lark Starling is gone from Gotham, we need a way to break the news to Oswald. Telling him the truth is out of the question. He won't believe a word said against her, and there is the risk of getting banned from the 'Berg if he's provoked. So really, the only way is for Oswald to receive a Dear John letter."

"A... Dear John..."

"Yes, of course. From Lark. *Dear Oswald, it was wonderful while it lasted. Gone to Wisconsin to make cheese. Love and Kisses--Lark* That sort of thing, I expect. How would I know? If I knew, I wouldn't be asking you, as the Lion told the Unicorn..."

The room used as the Wayne Manor library was, Selina felt sure, not originally intended for that purpose. A library shouldn't have those big windows; all that direct sunlight, it was bad for the books. It was probably a music room or something originally, right next to the drawing room and all. Bruce would have adapted it because he likes spending his evenings in the library and with those windows—that striking view of the city—he'd be sure to see the Bat-Signal.

As she entered, Selina found her visitor peering at leather bound spines of 19th century essayists.

"I seriously doubt Bruce has read Theophile Gautier," Harvey noted, a trace of Harvard inflection creeping into his voice.

"I'm quite sure he hasn't," Selina said simply. "How's it going, Harvey?"

"It's going." He smiled. "It will be going still better if you'll help us out, Selina. We have just learned of an opportunity the likes of which does not come around twice in a lifetime. On this matter alone, we are prepared to set aside our principles and not hold out for a second chance."

Selina raised an eyebrow but then broke, inexplicably, into the naughty grin.

"Ah, you've heard about Double Dare."

"We have heard about Double Dare!" he declared loudly. "Criminal twins in two-piece costumes on a two-day crime spree! Needless to say, we are enamored."

Selina smirked. "But Harvey, they're *both* bad. Doesn't that wreck the whole Feng Shui?"

He looked shocked.

"Perhaps you didn't hear us correctly, Selina. They are *TWINS!*"

She laughed. He laughed. And then he sobered and came to the point.

"We need a favor."

"A good favor or a bad favor?" she asked, repeating his question whenever she asked for something.

"Ha, ha," he smirked sarcastically. "Its placement on the ethics scale is... ambiguous. We would like to borrow your cat pins."

Selina stared in silent shock, so Harvey continued.

"The ladies have a penchant for criminal targets. And two such stunning pieces of jewelry, identical twins themselves all studded in diamonds, such a prize—properly advertised to be in the hands of a rugged and daring criminal kingpin like us—how could they resist!"

The dangerous gaze of an irate tigress seared Harvey's eyebrows.

"You want to use my cat pins as... *bait?*" She spat the last word with incredulous contempt—the same way Bruce said *released* whenever Arkham discharged Joker.

"Yes, of course, we knew you would understand."

"Bait for a *theft*. My cat pins. You *want* a pair of, of... *trapeze artists* to try and *STEAL MY CAT PINS?!*"

The tone was calmer, but the intensity was eerily reminiscent of *REVENGE FOR IVAN*, *REVENGE FOR IVAN*, *DIE PLANT-KILLER DIE*, and Harvey thought it best to step away from a spray of zinnias in a cut crystal vase. Just in case.

Bruce massaged his forehead. A headache in Mad Hatter's presence must never be dismissed as just a headache. There were failsafe protocols to be initiated and now, not later.

It was obvious Jervis Tetch caused this headache. If it was equally obvious that he hadn't done it with neurotech gadgetry generating will-bending cognitive waves, that didn't alter the fact that the little weasel got what he wanted from his visit.

Bruce had agreed to compose a Dear John letter.

It was too ridiculous.

He had, it was true, for many years assumed the pose of a womanizing cad as useful misdirection about his true character and personality. He had deliberately cultivated a reputation as a man who would make use of whatever attractive woman was handy, simply because she was handy, amuse himself with her body for a few weeks, then discard her like last year's dinner jacket.

It was true Harvey Dent was his companion in bachelordom during those early years when he was most active establishing the Playboy Fop's image.

It was even true that, because of Dent's official position as District Attorney, Bruce gave Harvey a more exaggerated impression of his conquests. More, certainly, than he did friends with no first-hand contact with Batman and no basis to make comparisons.

But for Harvey to imply that Bruce Wayne had written "hundreds *if not thousands*" of Dear Jane letters, that he had developed dumping lovers into an art and a science, and that he could spin off a page or two of insincere "So long and thank you whoever" as mindlessly (and heartlessly) as Nigma spewed anagrams... it was insulting. It was nothing less than *insulting*.

Two-Face and Mad Hatter putting their depraved criminal intellects together to save Cobblepot from his own foolishness and then deciding HE, Bruce Wayne, had the means to cover their tracks!

"No judgments!" Jervis stressed.

THEY didn't judge *HIM*!?

They just knew he had—what?—the callous nature they lacked to go around lulling unsuspecting, vulnerable hearts into a false sense of security so he could step on them! No judgments indeed. They insulted him, the pair of them—Harvey behind his back, and then Jervis right to his face. And *still* he agreed to give them what they asked for.

Why?

Bruce glanced at the readouts from the Batcomputer that confirmed what he already knew: his brainwaves were free of any cognitive, emotive, or sensoceptive tampering. He grunted.

He agreed because he felt sorry for Oswald. There, it was admitted. Oswald Cobblepot was a joke figure and Penguin was a criminal—and Bruce felt sorry for him.

It's a damn rare thing to find that connection with someone. Damn rare. Even if you beat the odds and find her, there are a thousand ways to wreck it, from bad timing to... It's a damn rare thing. It takes guts to even try for it. And courage was not an attribute Oswald Cobblepot had in abundance. And yet the lonely bird took a shot at romance, and he landed himself a gold digger.

That passage Jervis had quoted about poison was incomplete. It began "*A red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long...*"

There were enough gold diggers out there, Bruce knew it better than anyone: Bimbos with absolutely no interest in what a man might have to offer beyond his checkbook.

"A red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and if you cut your finger very deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds."

Cobblepot was lonely. It wasn't like kryptonite or J'onn's vulnerability to fire.

It wasn't, ultimately, a crimefighting concern one way or the other.

The woman was gone from Gotham City, and now Oswald had to be told. His... associates... thought it was best for everyone if he was given some cock-and-bull story about... or some attractive lie that... if he was let down easy. His *friends* thought it would be best if he was let down easy. And Bruce agreed to go along with it because they were right.

Hell.

This was not acceptable. He felt sorry for Penguin—for PENGUIN! The cagey bird had his beak in a dozen illicit enterprises at any one time: black market, smuggling, gambling, you name it. And always with that club to hide behind, cleaning the money, both his and others. Not a thing even Batman could pin on him. How could he turn around and be such a sucker?

Bruce tore the readouts of his own brainwaves from the Batcomputer and pounded them into a tight ball.

Because he was human. Oswald Cobblepot was a criminal but he was also a human being, and humans yearn instinctively for that connection.

Batman smashed the tight wad of paper into the desk, pounding it flat. Thinking of the criminals as *people*. He was going soft. His peripheral vision saw the repaired gi folded neatly on the worktable. If he was quick writing the letter, he would have time for an hour's Zogger before patrol.

Okay, I was upset.

Maybe a little more upset than was quite reasonable under the circumstances.

Why is that?

Because Harvey/Two-Face, arguably the only creature in Gotham with a screwier sense of romance than Batman, wanted to borrow some jewelry? That didn't sound right.

'Course it wasn't just *any* jewelry he wanted. Those pins are very special. Catwoman has handled a fair number of jewels over the years, millions of dollars worth, the most spectacular pieces ever made. So I know what I'm talking about when I say those pins are special.

Not that Bruce would buy anything second rate, of course. But of all the first rate he could have bought, he bought those.

Cats.

Exquisitely, delicately, perfect cats.

Studded with diamonds.

Royal provenance.

Green eyes.

Two of them, one for Selina and one for Catwoman...

Oh hell.

At the time, I was almost hurt by it. That seems idiotic now, but my head was still spinning back then. It was all so new: He'd hid the first pin in his safe, with a card and a flower. A gift, clearly, for Catwoman. It made it seem like, I don't know, like after all the years of wanting, maybe I was just a cheap thrill for him, a conquest—nailing the forbidden bad girl.

I know. I can't believe I was so... foolish. After all the years thinking of him as *Batman*, I'd only recently learned the real man in there was Bruce. I wanted to believe he felt the same way, and somehow... I was an idiot, I admit that. Funny how love brings that out in a person. Luckily, Dick set me straight.

"From Bruce, of all people, this is a monumental gesture of affection and acceptance," he said.

I couldn't deny that. It was a gift for Catwoman—and he hid it for me to find in his safe. With a note. And a rose.

He has, I suppose, accepted more of me than I sometimes realize... in his way... his grunting, scowling, judgmental jackass way.

Still, if a little nothing cat in a curio is such a big deal!

Stolen property in his precious domain.

...

Harvey wanted my cat pins for bait.

They were stolen once. Taken from me. Hatter.

I felt... utterly... violated.

Those pins are very special. He did—does—accept me in his way.

I didn't like having those pins taken from me.

Dear Ozzy,

The time we've spent together

Bruce crumbled the paper and tossed it aside with a number of others. The bimbos always liked sickly-cutesy nicknames. But Penguin was such a snob, his dignity probably wouldn't stand for it. Much safer to stick with his proper name.

Dear Oswald,

The time we've spent together has been the happiest of my life. I never dreamed such a simple thing as companionship could bring me such joy

More crumbling of paper, and this draft joined the others in the small pyramid of wasted stationery.

It was certainly the right tone. That's how they operated, the gold diggers. Feed you a line that you're special, just you, the simple pleasures of just being with you. It has nothing to do with your Platinum Card, Ozzy, oh no, she just likes spending time with you. Why, she didn't even notice the Iceberg sits on a prime downtown lot with a market value of a million five.

Dear Oswald,

Crumble. Toss.

I know it's tempting to believe them, Oswald... Bruce's thoughts ran on, although the hand with the pen stayed frozen in place over the paper. ...You're no prize, although I doubt your ego would allow you to see that. Wouldn't matter if you did. The Fop is no prize, I know that. He's an arrogant, dimwitted, selfish, superficial snob. And still some of them pretended... I know it's tempting to believe, Oswald, you poor fool.

Except you're not poor, and that's half your trouble. You're not a fool either. That decoy on the Pelican heist and the false paper trail, that was first rate, you wily bird. How could you turn right around and be such an easy mark?

Dear

Chump.

Dupe.

Sap.

Oswald,

'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have...

Oh really? Bruce thought. Better to have loved and lost? It seemed like a doubtful hypothesis. Could he really go back to life without Selina? Of course he *could*, he'd lived that way before. But that was without ever having more. The Mission was certainly enough when that was all there was. The Mission and the Fop—and all those women with whom he couldn't be himself and that was fine because they didn't care about him or anything else except the money.

Without having known more was one thing, but to have tasted a full loving life and then have it all taken away...

Dear Oswald,

It isn't you, it's me.

What if this really tore them apart? He certainly didn't want stolen property in his bedroom, but he most definitely *did* want Selina in his life. What if... What if it really was either/or? Which was more important? Sometimes, you can't have everything you want...

...even if you're Batman.

I was getting changed to drive up to the Catitat. There are moods where a nice long prowl in the catsuit will work the angst out of my system, but this didn't feel like one of them. This angst required a big mass of warm fur that growled instead of purring and understood how things were.

I had just zipped up the boots when I felt the tingle. He was lurking somewhere, watching me, and he was in bat mode. Oh Joy.

I had decided to ignore it when I felt myself turned around, very tender fingers moving down my cheek and settling gently on the side of my neck. His lips brushed against mine, just barely making contact, while the free hand stroked my hair.

"I don't even know what we're fighting about any more," he whispered. "Why are we doing this? To ourselves, to each other... to us..."

I had no idea what to say. The kinds of strangely inappropriate thoughts that fly through your mind: he wasn't in bat mode after all; my radar had gone kafluey.

The next thought was scary: You can't get much inflection from a whisper, I wasn't really sure what his words meant, but it didn't sound good. Did he want out? Had we gone too fast? Or too far?

"Did we go too fast?" The thought leaked out my mouth, I heard it. I would have gladly scratched out my own vocal chords, but it was too late.

"What? No! Selina..." Whatever came next got lost as I processed the *What? No!*

I was relieved—way too relieved. That can't be good. I have too much invested in this, emotionally. It gives him too much power. This can't be good. Bruce was still talking...

“...Why do we fight like this? Why must it always be bite and claw?”

There was an uncomfortably long silence. I had no idea why we fight the way we do. Finally it occurred to me that admitting I don't know might make the question go away.

“I don't know,” I answered. Then, for some reason, I added a mumbled “You... setmeoffthatway.” As if the part of me that insisted that be spoken wanted to drive home the point, I started to froth a bit. “I mean—case in point—there are *two* stolen cats in that curio. And do you even notice the Egyptian one from the museum—*our* museum? No, you pick on some kitschy bit of schmaltz for Clarice or whatever it was—”

“Candice. And my main concern isn't over *which* piece of stolen property it is, but the fact that there is stolen property in my house! And that—”

“See, that's exactly why you should have gone with the Egyptian Sekhmet, because that cat *is* most definitely stolen. The last person to legitimately own it was buried with it 3000 years ago, and *everybody* who has handled it since has been trafficking in stolen goods. I'm just the only one to admit it.”

“That is so unbelievably not the point. The museum donors paid money for it, they had a certificate of ownership—” He stopped short. Took a deep breath, then began again, much calmer. “This is what I mean, Selina. Don't you see that we always do this? We *always* fight like this... exactly like this! No matter what it is we're fighting about, it always seems to come back to... All I'm asking is: why?”

I decided the only dignified response was to match calm for calm, so I put on the most composed, businesslike tone I could manage:

“That is a question that requires introspection to be answered,” I informed him. “I'm not good at introspection. Bad things happen when I try it.”

Maybe not the most prudent thing to have admitted, but it was true enough.

“I see. You'd rather just stuff everything away in a closet somewhere and ignore it?”

Inexplicably, I felt drops of icy sweat dripping up my back. I am aware that *icy* and *sweat* are contradictory by their very nature and should not be able to coexist in the same freakish bead of ICK WHAT IS THAT falling up my back.

I am also aware things are not supposed to fall *up*.

For that matter, criminals aren't supposed to get it on with crimefighters. Yet here we were: Catwoman, Batman, icy, sweat, dripping, up. Sometimes life is like that.

“What?” he said, “You started to say something just then. Let's not do this, Selina, where we leave it all at symbols and subtext and unspoken I don't know what. If you've got something to say, say it.”

“You might have a point.”

I was about to add “...*about the closet*” before he went all batty: Of-course-I-do, I-always-have-a-point. But the look he gave me didn't look like an impending victory dance, so I held my tongue.

“Yes,” he said, “introspection is hard, Selina. I'm no... I'm no better at it than.... I don't like to do it either. But if we don't at least try to work this out, it's only going to get worse. We'll either pretend to settle it so that it only comes up again in the future... or else it'll end up driving a wedge between us...” The pause was excruciating before he added, “And I can't have that.”

I couldn't squelch the smile. The control freak part of him does manage to assert itself in the damndest places.

"We can't have that," he amended.

I knew from the lip twitch that he meant it as compromise, but it sounded so much like the royal 'We'—*We have decided, for the welfare of our subjects and the peace of our realm, that the matter of Clarice's cat in the curio shall be debated in the village square until a consensus has been reached.*

I laughed. And then—just to mess with me further—he chuckled.

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with Bruce?"

"Let's just say that recent events have... pushed me into that introspective territory a little."

"Me too," I admitted softly. Then I winced. The words had sounded so... vulnerable.

He took my hand in his.

"So... let's talk..."

...

...

Then he didn't say anything.

...

...

For quite some time, he didn't say anything.

...

...

I know, I know, I didn't say anything either. But he started it, right? He said "Let's talk" and then ... Nuthin'.

...

...

Well, one of us had to do it.

"Harvey wanted to borrow my cat pins as bait for Double Dare," I said, beating down the notion that being the first one to speak made me braver than him. "The very idea made my skin crawl."

"Oswald needs a Dear John letter because Jervis hatted his girlfriend and sent her away, and I can't seem to write it because all it makes me think about is us and... just saying that out loud gave me a headache."

I felt my lip twitch, and I snuck a peek at his. I suspected he found my quandary as funny as I found his. Our eyes met. We didn't actually laugh but the tension eased just the same.

"Look," he said calmly, "I guess I never really considered that you would be bringing stolen property here. I know I should have anticipated the possibility, but it still caught me off guard—"

"We keep having the same fight," I answered, "because we never resolved the big issue at the beginning. We just skipped right over it to get... to where we wanted to be. We cheated, Bruce."

"I do not— ...hmpf... I guess we did."

"I... never thought of the cats as 'stolen property.' I didn't think of them at all or I would never have... I mean, I know how you get." By this time, I knew he wouldn't take offense at the last bit, but I tossed out a naughty grin to soften it anyway.

Our eyes met again. I read the thought clearly: disbelief. Not distrust, though, more like: *Is that it? Did we actually resolve something? What now?*

"Would you consider something as staggeringly rational as a compromise?" I suggested.

"What kind of compromise?" Batman's voice. So much for compromise. But I was stuck with it now.

"There are *two* stolen cats," I began. The rest was obvious. Two cats that I have and he objects to: Keep one, return the other. Compromise. He cocked an eyebrow. Disapproving grunt. Here we go...

"Because having only one piece of stolen property is better than having two? Not a chan—"

He stopped suddenly, a strange, almost faraway look in his eyes. Then he blinked as if trying to free the thoughts from his head. The unmistakably Bat-like words still hung in the air, until...

"...Keep the museum piece... for old time's sake."

I don't think I smiled too broadly, but if I did, allowances have to be made. It's not every day a girl wins an actual compromise from Batman!

"Now, about Harvey," he cracked his knuckles. I started to see the humor of it all and laughed.

"He wanted to bait Double Dare *with my cat pins.*"

Bruce paused, looking into space, unclenched his fist, and lip-twitched.

"They hatted Lark and sent her *to Wisconsin.*"

EPILOGUE

Bruce took a slim, leather bound volume off the bookshelf and let it fall open automatically to an often-read page.

“To gain the friendship of a cat is a difficult thing. The cat is a philosophical, methodical, quiet animal, tenacious of its own habits, and it does not lightly confer its friendship. If you are worthy of its affection, a cat will be your friend, but never your slave. He keeps his free will, though he loves, and he will not do for you what he thinks is unreasonable. But if he once gives himself to you it is with absolute confidence and affection!” -Theophile Gautier, 1850.

He closed the book and returned it to the shelf.

Technically, the Egyptian Sekhmet was stolen property in that Catwoman had broken into the museum, disabled their security, and left with it in her possession although it didn't belong to her...

...although technically, it didn't belong to the museum either. It was on loan. It was on permanent loan from a private collector, facilitated by the Wayne Foundation. *He* owned it. And now it was back in his house.

So it was stolen, and yet, in a way, it wasn't. He couldn't say that was feline logic either, since Selina didn't know. If she hadn't noted the inscription on the sapphire cat, he reasoned, she certainly wouldn't pay attention to the “on loan from...” plaque. Even if she had, it was so long ago it's unlikely she'd remember.

So it wasn't feline logic. It was, like she said, a compromise.

Renee Montoya cursed her coffee maker. It had, yet again, overflowed the basket somehow, spilling more liquid onto the counter than it dripped into the pot. She picked up the impoverished coffeepot anyway and poured, salvaging almost three quarters of a mug.

“Madre De la Cocina,” she asked aloud of the kitchen ceiling, “how is it that appliances know when to break?”

Cars knew. They invariably chose to break down when you had extra money. And appliances, it seemed, when you had an unexpected windfall of time.

This afternoon would have been her first real free time since her election to the council. No more backlog from Everwood's resignation, no late meetings, no date with Lawrence, no family visits for once (She loved her family dearly but there were times she would prefer a Sunday to herself) and no reading ahead for upcoming meetings. She'd planned to take off at 4, maybe even 3:30. Free time. Me time. Every girl's most precious indulgence!

She had planned a sauna after her workout at the gym, then a stop at the video store, those empanadas her mother sent over while she watched her movie, and then some Rocky Road with a book. The movie she had already decided: *SWAT* if it was out on tape by now (she'd missed it in the theatres, and she loved watching cop movies and noting all the mistakes) and *Seven* if it wasn't. The book would depend on her mood.

She'd started *Dark Symphony*, a cheesy but enjoyable romance novel, and *The Count of Monte Cristo* before her free time dried up.

But now all bets were off because she'd have to schlep across town to get a coffee machine after work, and then no doubt she'd hit rush hour coming home.

She poured extra milk and sugar into the mug, making a beverage closer to cocoa than coffee, and sipped. Then she laid out the morning papers. She knew she should begin with the real news in the Times, but since the scandal, she'd developed a morbid fascination with the Gotham Post. They'd torpedoed her life with their tawdry fictions:

They upset her parents—who found out about the scandal when they set the Post out in their store the morning the story broke...

They upset her brother—who had a Latin sense of machismo and no political savvy. Poor Benny was so hurt when Renee wouldn't let him go down to the Post offices to defend his sister's honor...

And they upset her relationship with Lawrence. It wasn't that he was unsupportive, quite the opposite. He'd stuck with her through a scandal. That suddenly made the relationship more serious than it should be. At this stage, after only a month... Renee had spent so much of her life pushing people away, afraid they would get hurt if they got too close; a cop in Gotham, it could happen all too easily. But simple dating, especially now that she'd left the force, what was the harm in that? She gave it a try, and then thanks to that cheap tabloid and their shameful stunt, "simple dating" exploded into this very personal issue...

And after they did all that, she was *still* reading the Post? Why? *Madre de toda la verdad*, why, when she knew they were slandering her week after week, did she keep reading this scandal rag? Renee opened the glossy pages and looked down... A gurgling chuckle rumbled in her mouth, threatening to rain cocoa-coffee all over the tabloid:

**High level sources inside Gotham City Hall hint that Jade
is the daughter of Gotham 'Rogues' Riddler and Poison Ivy...**

They... They did it? Her quote to the Times about the nonsense being printed... "Next week we'll hear that..." It was a JOKE!

Aquaman threatens Louisiana with Hurricane Isadora in feud over fishing boats.

It was over! They'd gone on to something else, as she predicted. Her scandal was *literally* "yesterday's news."

**Penguin's Brothel: The notorious Iceberg Lounge
is reported to house a number of call girls
who dress in the habit of Catwoman, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn...**

Cocoa-coffee rained over the pages of the Gotham Post.

Dios Mio, it was good to laugh at this stuff again! *God's blessing on you*, Renee thought, looking down at the byline, *Slott and Templeton, God's blessing on you and your noble efforts.*

The Flick Theatre, one time vaudeville showcase then movie palace then Two-Face hideout, appeared dark. Within its vacant lobby, no lights shown. In the house, the eerie stillness of an empty theatre was made eerier by a single pinlight shining from

above. The rows of unoccupied seats looked on the scene: that single ray of godlight shining down on a Lucite case. Within, two perfect ruby necklaces, matching bracelets, and two sets of earrings sparkled in the ghostly beam of light.

In the lobby, two swift forms slipped through the darkness. The one pointed a kind of crossbow at the ceiling; the other aimed a similar device at the far wall. They shot simultaneously, and arrows trailing a web of reinforced cable wrapped in easy-grip gauze shot past electric eyes to bite securely into their targets. The first figure turned to her sister:

"This is more fun than that twerpy little guy that just opened his front door to us."

Margot shrugged, and Akiki climbed the first cable as if it were the flimsy ladder to the circus trapeze. When she'd ascended to eight feet, well above the beams that activated Two-Face's defense system, she took a small but heavy disc, an inch and a half in diameter, and telescoped it out into a three-foot-long bar. This she fastened to twin ropes hanging from the ceiling...

...and swung... ..nimble... ..across the lobby.

Margot was already in position atop the first rope by the time the dangling trapeze swung back for her. Soon, she had joined her sister at the far side of the lobby before the entrance to the main theatre.

They peered inside... and looked at each other, confused by the spotlight and what it might mean. Then they looked back into the theatre.

"Only one way to find out," Akiki said philosophically.

"After you," Margot answered.

They walked, cautiously, down the right aisle of the orchestra towards the spotlight and the gleaming case it illuminated. As they got closer, they could see the stunning gems inside.

"Kiki, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Margot said, circling the case.

"It'll be a nice haul, though, once we get it open."

"Open! It's a trap, obviously. I say we split. Take this guy on later, on our terms and not—"

She got no further when Akiki touched a fingertip to the case and the room abruptly changed: the pinspot flicked out and, in its place, the art deco sconces glowed a warm pinkish glow. The curtains that hid the movie screen scrolled open and two men in tuxedos emerged, one played a violin while the other lit candles at a small table laid for three.

Akiki turned to her sister. "Nope, not in Kansas anymore."

"Good evening, ladies," a deep voice oozed from the shadows, "We are so glad you could join us." The figure stepped from the shadows into the light, revealing a well-built man in... one half James Bondish white dinner jacket with brass buttons, and one half Hugh Hefner smoking jacket with velvet collar.

"Hellllloooo!" drawled Akiki, appreciatively.

"Eww," said Margot, repulsed.

The sisters looked at each other in shock.

"Eww?" Akiki queried. "He's delish!"

"Hell-O!" Margot gaped. "He's a creepo."

Two-Face and Harvey, unable to actually “look” at each other as the sisters did, expressed *their* mutual shock in a series of sharp internal remarks.

YOU GET THE MOUTHY BITCH.

No, she's liable to kick and you like it rough. I'll take the sweet one.

NO!

Yes!

LAWYER!

Gangster!

WAIT, WHERE'D THEY GO?

Hoodlum—Hey, they're leaving!

“Oh, ladies,” Two-Face called, racing up the aisle, “We understand how these little differences of opinion can arise in the closest of relationships... LADIES! Come back! May we suggest a coin toss?”

Huntress squatted atop Jiffy Drive-thru Drycleaners, ostensibly keeping an eye out for Alvin Kenay, a fool who'd reached rock bottom and started to dig. But as the slimewad was nowhere to be seen, she passed the time wondering how a drycleaners could be drive-thru.

She was right and as usual NO ONE recognized that fact. She couldn't even convince a bunch of stupid criminals that something was wrong when one of them—stupid ass that doesn't know who his friends are—gets into bed with a black widow.

How would that work, anyway? You drive up and drop off your clothes and get a claim ticket? Okay, so far so good, but then how would you pick them up...?

Alvin Kenay was another one that didn't know who his friends were. Smart kid, but fell in with a bad crowd. Okay, that happens in those neighborhoods; it happened to students of hers who were a lot brighter than Alvin. But then he wises up and turns snitch. Good deal. Not smart enough to avoid getting mixed up with that scum in the first place, but smart enough to realize and get out. Right? Except he wasn't out! He was still inside and he didn't have the sense to let her protect him. No judgment, that kind. No clue who his friends were. Going to wind up as dead as Cobblepot—left by the wayside, Pal, and won't be missed. Nobody'll cry for you.

...The thing is, when the clothes were dirty, you could bunch them up any which way to pass them through a drive-thru window. But once they were clean, you wouldn't want to fold them up to fit through a car window, would you?

“A COIN TOSS!” a familiar voice boomed behind her and Huntress spun to peer into the street.

A woman in yellow was alternately running and somersaulting away from... Two-Face! That was the voice alright, waving his coin. And behind him... a third figure, in yellow like the first, also waving something...

“Beautiful jewels, Margot, at least take a look!”

“LET US EXPLAIN THE PRINCIPLE! FATE DECIDES! IT'S A FIFTY-FIFTY PROPOSITION!”

Huntress rolled her eyes, fired a line, and swung down into the street.

Lawrence Muskelli skimmed the overnight reports from the downtown precincts. Renee was right about the vigilantes, they certainly did their bit. Look at this: Huntress alone, in one night, single-handedly captured Two-Face, Double Dare, and recovered a half-million in jewelry taken from Tiffany's only hours before.