



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

#50

# Cat = Sales

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**WITNESS STATEMENT FORM**

Page 1 of    

DR No.                     

Location of Interview 38PCT Phone 212 555 0148

City Gotham City Zip Code 17012 Phone                     

City N/A Zip Code N/A State                     

Drivers Lic. No./Other ID                      Division 009 008

(Serial No.) 782387111 8792887888

Interviewing Officer(s) Captain Karnes

Other Person(s) Present Officer M.Cure

Statements: Use third person. Include who, what, where, when, why and how.

Written on behalf of juvenile witness - Wayne, Bruce by Officer M. Cure

On return from the Park Row Theatre at approx 22.00 hrs on Friday Jan 21st in company of parents - Thomas and Martha Wayne

Martha Wayne. Attack took place back alley

at gunpoint by a homeless man who N le

ced and shot and her to witness's mother

an she a kil on boulevard. was left

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**CAT-TALES**  
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By  
Chris Dee

Edited by  
David L.

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# 00000-001

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“Selina, wait!”

What just happened?

The words sprung out of my mouth— *Selina, wait!*—and I’d reached forward to stop her from going. It wasn’t a conscious act; it was instinct, like countering a gust of wind mid-swing on the Batline. For a second I even flashed on magic and mind control. It was the same kind of speech and movement independent of will.

Before that moment, it had been a typical Bat/Cat sparking off...

“It seems like everything leads back to *it* no matter what I say or don’t say, do or don’t do. It also seems like whatever *it* is, it’s getting worse. So yes, Bruce, I’m pushing and prodding and jabbing and refusing to ignore the fact that a pink elephant has come among us.”

The pink elephant again. A few years ago, Selina came down to the cave when I’d been fasting and sequestering myself before the anniversary. I was trying to meditate (albeit failing), a kind of ritual I’d fallen into for those last days leading up to the 21<sup>st</sup>. She wanted to know why. Starving and exhausting myself didn’t protect the city, save innocents or frighten criminals, so why was I doing it? When I didn’t provide a quick enough answer, she said we were back to pink elephants.

She’s right in that there’s a history of *the unspoken* between us. She was a thief. I’m a crimefighter. There were things I couldn’t say back then. We both knew what we felt, it was inescapable. But we couldn’t talk about it; I couldn’t, no matter how much she wanted me to.

“Just for the record, this isn’t ‘what I want,’” she went on, eerily in sync with my private thoughts—and there’s a history of that between us too. “I would love nothing better than to shove it all in the closet and forget it ever existed. But one of the things I want to shove in the closet and forget is a world where this kind of thing was shoved in a closet and forgotten. I don’t know everything that happened there, but I know it went on too long, a pink elephant was left to fester or something, until finally you told me to leave. I woke up in the back room of the fucking Iceberg and Ivy had my sapphire—”

“Sapphire?” I sputtered. “Selina, what are you talking about?”

What was she talking about? It was the safe, it was Walapang, it was... No. Wait.

“Wait, you think this is...” I trailed off, my mind reeling at the flash of understanding. Not pink elephants. Pink *sapphires*. Suddenly it all became clear. Kitten was projecting again. She’d been on me all day about what *I’m* not telling *her*, about Clark, about Nigma... Now it all made sense. The pink sapphire. It’s what *she* hasn’t told *me* that’s really on her mind. “This has nothing to do with dimension hopping,” I said honestly. “I know that you will tell me—or not tell me—about that whenever you feel you can. I’d just like the same consideration.”

"You're not listening—or not understanding. I *am* telling you. One of those worlds, you'd thrown me out. Something was left unsaid for too long. It scares me. Bruce, I don't want that to happen with us. If you need time, then take it... Just don't take too much."

"Selina, wait!"

*What... just... happened?*

"I'm waiting," she said, patient but curious, like she had no idea why I reacted the way I did—which was understandable, since I had no idea myself.

Before that moment, it had been a typical... Bat and Cat... It's always been this way. What's said is said, everything is thrown out there, then one of us walks away. We fume, gestate, introspect, and eventually we come back and find a resolution. Somehow that wasn't acceptable this time. Not today, not in the cave. I don't know how or why, but some deep instinct said no. Now, today, that simply *was not acceptable*.

"It's the safe," I said quietly.

I wasn't sure that was enough. This torrent in my brain was screaming that it was *Ivy and the gold bars and that damn bat and the kryptonite ring, my mother's pearls and my father's wallet, the police file reducing their murder to a few cold phrases "occurred in a back alley" "held at gunpoint" "powder burns on the victims' clothing."* It was more than I could ever explain in words. How do you explain that there is no one, no one else in the world, that knows that safe even exists? With everything else I have: with Batman, the Cave, the League, the manor, with my father's business and the Foundation... there have always been others that know about all of it. But that safe... not even Alfred knows. How could I possibly...

She was kissing my cheek. The kiss and the words that followed punched through the haze in my mind, like when I was recovering from Ivy's pheromones—which is, of course, where this mess started.

"I've been doing this a long time, Bruce. You think I don't know a personal safe from the other kind by now?"

Only Catwoman. Only Selina. How is it possible for her to reference her criminal past that way, intertwined, as it were, with the murder of my parents, and have that somehow make it *better* rather than *worse*? She said she recognized the personal nature of the safe immediately. She said she'd looked in the boxes because of the kryptonite clue, then she took the number she needed off the gold bar and that was it. She said she didn't go through the papers. She assured me that she'd never tell anyone about the safe's existence or about anything inside—which of course I knew, but the assurance still gave me a pang. We were so far beyond that, in terms of trust, it went without saying. She should know that. She was trying to reassure me, that's why she said it, but she didn't know how, because she didn't really understand why the safe was an issue. I realized I had to at least try to explain, even if it was futile.

"What bothered me the most is that you had to find it on your own," I began, realizing that part of the truth only as I heard the words coming from my lips. "Once again, I had no control over the situation. Somewhere, deep down, I knew that one day I would share that safe with you. But, Selina, I wasn't ready then and I'm not ready now. Every item in there is... intensely..."

“Just look at the kryptonite ring. Since you know about that, it’s the easiest way to explain. When Superman first entrusted me with that ring, I put it in the safe because it was the most secure location I had at my disposal. It didn’t *mean* anything. Like the gold bar, placing it there was a simple expedient. But as time went on, as the partnership evolved, it became something more. It’s an emblem of trust and mutual respect. It belongs there now because my relationship with Clark is a part of who I am.”

She nodded. I wasn’t sure she understood—she thought she did, but I don’t think anyone can really *understand* Superman handing you the means to destroy him. Luthor made that ring for one purpose: to make a kryptonite fist. To coil all his hate and anger into a blow his enemy would feel. He made it to take Superman’s life with his bare hands. And when he got his hands on it, rather than destroy the object made for the sole purpose of killing him, Clark gave it to me... “in case it was ever needed.” After he married Lois, we brought her to the cave, I revealed my identity, and Clark told her the whole story. After Luthor became President, possession of the ring became instrumental in his downfall.

I told Selina there was an untold story like that behind every item in the safe, an involved, deeply personal story I didn’t know if I could ever adequately explain. I knew I should sit down and go through it with her, piece by piece, but it was too much to take on. I simply wasn’t ready.

She gave a sad little smile, a sad little nod, and eyed my cheek like she wanted to kiss it again. I took the hint and kissed hers instead. It seemed to be enough. What I’d revealed would end the ‘festering’ she was afraid of. Now that she knew what was at the root of the recent tension, she looked... content. At least by the standard of the day.

It’s the safe.

I’ve been breathing so much easier since I heard those words, it’s like I’d forgotten what it was like to take a full relaxed breath. It was the safe.

God bless the cat-instinct that rides shotgun on every cat-crime, deciding what leaves a safe and comes home with me, and what stays right where it is. That box was bad enough, with the broken pearls and the wedding rings, the bloodstained wallet... I hate to think if I’d gone through those papers.

No wonder he doesn’t want to go through it all, sifting through the “untold stories.”

I went up to the bedroom, relief mixing with the exhaustion setting in after a perfectly hellacious day and a growing desire to hold Bruce all night long. That’s what we really needed, I thought. Give Batman the night off and make achingly sweet love until morning. He’d never go for it, of course. I had a bad day but Psychobat had a worse one, and that meant tonight’s selection of muggers, pimps and drug dealers were going to have a worse one still.

And, as if Destiny herself wanted to confirm that great Universal Truth, the bat was back.

The day we woke up knowing the very worst of the mindwipe aftermath was before us, this little bat appeared on the bedroom window. Bruce said it was called a

bumblebee bat, the smallest species there is. He was awfully cute, just a few inches wide, this tiny vote of confidence from the Universe. At some point he disappeared, I'm not sure when. But as I came up from that talk with Bruce in the cave, there he was again, hanging upside down near the top of the window just like he used to. I went up to take a closer look, wanting to see him as a good omen like before. But somehow I couldn't see him that way now.

He was just this little bat hanging there. If his return meant anything, it was an enigma.

He was there again the next day, when Barbara called. Oracle just picked up a memo on Arkham's mainframe: Killer Croc due to be released in two weeks. He was there the next day, when Bruce agreed to a sunset cruise on the Gatta "before things heat up again." He was there the next week, when the Falcones noticed most of the costumed types were up the river and started getting aggressive on the docks. He was there when Eddie got his swing back, left a clue on an 8-track tape and Bruce nearly tore the cave apart looking for a way to play it.

He was there when... when... ...oh hell.

## CHAPTER 1: THE PRICE OF FAME

I've been to too many funerals.

The priest's words jumble together in my ears as I stare down at the slowly lowering casket, his soft eulogy meaning little to me. I barely hear his voice, my ears locked on other sounds: the heart-wrenching squeak of a hand-cranked casket winch, the low groaning of the nylon straps that strain under the weight of their load...

Maintaining a secret identity requires acting. Acting requires an understanding of sense memory—a sight, sound, taste or smell that not only triggers a memory but the emotions (and sometimes even the physical responses) of an earlier time. Honestly, I never put much stock in the theory when I first learned of it... until one night when the smell of popcorn in a Princeton dorm room sent me stumbling into the hall, the associations with a movie theatre and the alley that followed rising like a flood in my brain.

Today I find myself unable to tear my mind from the memories that come with each turn of that winch's handle. I try to steady my breathing as the images slam into my subconscious—similar scenes, now all too familiar, play out behind my eyes. Clark. Oliver. Jason. Stephanie.

My parents.

I've been to too many funerals.

I blink the memories away, trying to shake the unease that's settled over me. In my peripheral vision, I catch sight of the only other person attending today's ceremony except for the priest and the cemetery caretakers. I wonder for the tenth time if he's feeling the same sense of unease, of incongruity with the day's events that I am. Something just doesn't seem to fit here; somehow, this time around, it all feels different. Maybe it's the weather: sunny, bright, unseasonably warm. There's not a cloud in the sky, and the sun hangs like a shining beacon of hope, mocking us, mocking this ceremony of sadness and loss...

I realize the priest has finished, as has the winch operator. The other attendee and I spend a moment in quiet contemplation as we both stare down at the polished mahogany box now sitting in its final resting place. I hear myself offering words of condolence, praying they don't sound quite as hollow as they feel. We shake hands, grim countenances offering each other little, and I realize at that moment that this is the last time we'll ever see each other. He offers a light, sorrowful smile as if he's just come to the same conclusion, then offers a quiet "Thank you" before walking away.

For some reason I stay there, watching as the caretakers toss shovelfuls of dirt onto the box below, and a wave of emotion crashes down on me: sorrow, frustration, anger, and perhaps a small measure of defeat. Over the years of doing what I do, I've come to believe that nothing is more frustrating or disappointing for a detective than knowing you may never find the answers.

The man we buried today may have been a man of little consequence, another essentially nameless victim in a city that has claimed many nameless victims.

Or he may have been the man that changed the world.

~TWO WEEKS AGO~

Alfred entered the master suite as he did every morning, with the silent grace of a seasoned butler and a shrewd plan to return his employer to the land of the living. He set a large tray on the low bureau in the corner, then moved to the window and flung the massive curtains open, revealing a tiny bat perched in the top corner. Sunlight poured into the room and across the oversized bed, eliciting a groan from the occupant nearest the window.

Tucked comfortably beneath the sheets, Bruce flinched and rolled onto his side, turning away from the invading light in irritated rebellion against all things daytime—but colliding with Selina as he did so. This produced a new protest, a sleepy feminine “hey” and a light push rocking him back onto his back. He winced and sucked in a great lungful of air through gritted teeth as pain shot down his arm, the splintered details of the night before finally penetrating the groggy haze as he felt the bandages wrapped tightly around his bicep—Killer Croc, razor sharp claws, stitches... stitches that Alfred himself had done.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Bruce grumbled under his breath, his eyes still clamped shut against the light.

It was unclear which he was addressing. Selina pulled a pillow down over her head and the covers up past her ear, trying to burrow away from all the sunlight, voices, and movement. Alfred approached the bed, tray in hand.

“Sir?”

“Nothing,” Bruce replied. Squinting against the sunlight, he peered at his approaching butler. “What time is it?”

“Eleven-thirty, sir.”

Bruce sighed, then slowly and carefully sat up. He would have preferred to sleep a bit longer; he imagined Selina did as well. She’d moaned from deep under her pillow at the announcement of the time, then thrashed around for her robe, got up, and disappeared into the bathroom without glancing at either of them or speaking a single word.

They’d all been up later than usual. His Croc injury wrecked Catwoman’s plan for a post-Patrol rendezvous. Instead of luring him to her lair, she’d arrived at the Batmobile just in time to see him staggering to the car with the kind of injuries that meant it would be the autopilot driving home. She didn’t fuss; Catwoman was a pro. She did insist on riding home with him—and he could find no valid reason to object. She also insisted on stopping the bleeding as best she could while car sped them home—again, he could find no reason to veto this eminently sensible idea. Then she stood there, just outside the medlab, while Alfred stitched him up. He told her to go up to bed. Alfred told her twice. But she wouldn’t. She just stood there, silent and stubborn, waiting for him.

It was dawn before any of them got to bed, and Bruce would have liked to sleep in for a few hours more. But he knew he had a two o’clock with Lucius that he couldn’t cancel (again). So he pushed himself back on the bed until his back was against the headboard, and Alfred gently laid the legged tray across his lap. Wiping away the last vestiges of sleep, Bruce yawned widely then smelled the warm food resting on the tray in front of him: an assortment of pastries, muffins and toast with various spreads, several strips of bacon, a selection of fruit, a poached egg on a small silver stand, a

silver pot and cups, and two glasses of orange juice. He picked up the first glass of juice and drank the entire thing as Alfred moved around the bed to inspect the bandages. Bruce pulled the Gotham Times out of the small bin on the side of the tray and glanced at the headline as he took a bite out of a strip of bacon.

"Anything interesting?" he asked Alfred, who had apparently decided that the bandages needed changing and was opening the curio to retrieve a small first-aid kit.

"There is an article in the D Section about technology stocks that you may find helpful for this afternoon's meeting," the butler replied as he cut away the wrinkled bandage from Bruce's arm. "And an absolutely dreadful editorial regarding the legacy of the former President that you may find amusing."

Smirking lightly, Bruce glanced sideways at Alfred as he applied a healthy dose of antiseptic gel to the stitched wounds. "And by 'dreadful' you mean...?"

"It utilizes a literary style and sentence structure that I found most confounding, sir."

"You sound just like Eddie," Selina laughed as she walked back into the room, running a brush through her hair and looking infinitely more lifelike. She went up to the window and waved at the tiny bumblebee bat. "Always the grammar snob."

"I do not believe those without a modest grasp of the language should be content to have their failings known by displaying their inadequacies in print," Alfred said dryly.

"Just like Eddie," Selina repeated with a laugh.

Bruce glowered at the comment. Alfred merely motioned towards the tray, indicating several envelopes sitting in the bin where the newspaper had been.

"There are also several pieces of correspondence that require your attention, sir," he said dryly.

Bruce glanced at the envelopes and papers, finished his bacon and set the newspaper down. He rifled through the letters as Alfred explained. "There are a few invitations requiring an RSVP, a fax from Mr. Fox about this afternoon's meeting and a personal letter."

Bruce glanced through the invitations. "Charity event for Leslie's clinic—definite Yes. Another 'We're rich, isn't it grand?' party at the Macavoy's. No on that one." He handed both invitations to Alfred, started in on a muffin and scanned the memo from Lucius.

"As you wish, sir."

Bruce set the memo aside and looked at the final letter. It was a business envelope from a midtown law firm addressed directly to him at the manor's street address. From the opened envelope, Bruce pulled out a two-page note written on the same law firm's letterhead. Perplexed, he read the first few lines.

*Dear Mr. Wayne,*

*You don't know me, but my name is David Vaniel, and I am a junior associate at Chatham, Latham and Gould. I am actually writing to you at the behest of my father, Edward. About 2 months ago, my father was diagnosed with end-stage pancreatic and lung cancer...*

Bruce looked up from the letter and glanced at Alfred. "It's an assistance request?"

Selina glanced at the page as she reached across to take a pastry from the tray.

"Don't you normally just send those on to Cynthia?" Bruce asked.

"Usually, but in some instances I feel it polite to offer you the chance of first refusal, sir."

“What is it and who’s Cynthia?” Selina asked, reaching again—this time to pour herself coffee.

“Kitten, either come back into the bed to do that or let me get out from under the tray,” Bruce said, awkwardly repositioning his injured arm. He glanced at the letter again, read a few more lines, and then folded it up and handed it to Alfred (since Selina had chosen the former suggestion and was crawling back into the bed beside him). “Send it to Cynthia,” Bruce said curtly.

Alfred paused momentarily—while Selina eyed the fresh bandage on Bruce’s arm and gingerly touched the shoulder above it. Alfred gently lifted the letter from Bruce’s grasp and stacked it with the others. “Very well, sir. Anything else?”

“No, that will be all, Alfred. Thank you.”

Having come home with Batman the night before, Selina had left her Jag in the city. Since Bruce had a meeting in town, she had dressed quickly so she could ride in with him and collect it. On the way, she asked again about the letter.

“Alfred wasn’t too pleased at the quick dismissal, that’s all,” she said casually. “Maybe you should’ve at least read it through.”

“As the one who normally opens those letters, Alfred knows better than anyone that Bruce Wayne gets at least one letter like that a month,” he replied.

“Letter like what? You never did tell me.”

“An assistance request. Most people in this city—in this *country*, really—know very little about Bruce Wayne and yes, before you say it, a lot of that is by design. Keeping the public image as vague as possible limits the risk of anyone making a connection with Batman. But the one thing everyone knows is that I have a lot of money.”

“Hard to deny the first part of that ‘Billionaire Playboy’ moniker,” Selina agreed. “Particularly when driving your *second*-favorite Porsche.”

He grunted.

“One of the side-effects of that image is that many people believe I have a great deal of disposable income, income that Bruce Wayne is all too eager to spend. While many believe that I spend the bulk of it on more... frivolous pursuits—”

“C.F. the aforementioned Porsche, planes, yacht, and a sorry string of bimbos before settling down with someone suitable,” Selina interrupted with a naughty grin.

“—there are a great many others who know the amount I spend on more charitable causes, both personally and through the Wayne Foundation,” Bruce concluded. “Unfortunately, there are people in the world that would take advantage of that generosity. Some requests are legitimate; some are grifters looking for a handout. Sometimes, the ‘grifters’ try blackmail if the Foundation rejects their requests.”

Selina burst out laughing.

“Oh *that* must go over well. Got a special setting on Zogger for those, do we?”

“I would love to,” Bruce declared in the deep bat-gravel. “But anything that inextricably tied to Bruce Wayne, Batman steers clear of. And that’s where Cynthia comes in. Cynthia Merrithew is the Chief Operations Officer for the Foundation. She has a crack staff that can do the kind of thorough investigation Bruce Wayne can’t, to verify the validity of requests and determine if the Foundation should get involved. In

a few rare cases, she'll contact me directly if a 'personal touch' is needed for a particular case."

"You're glowing," Selina observed.

"Cynthia and her staff are remarkably efficient at handling the Foundation's affairs," Bruce said proudly. "It's important work, improving people's lives, and they tackle it with a tenacity that... well, that reminds me of Dick and Tim and Clark."

"There's no reason to leave yourself off that list," Selina said with a smile.

Bruce grunted, and Selina pointed to the curb, indicating where she left her car.

Four days later, Alfred removed Bruce's stitches. Killer Croc was still free, but Batman felt two hours could be spared before patrol to meet Catwoman on the roof of the opera house and listen to the final performance of *The Queen of Spades*. Selina was spectacularly excited and Bruce suspected she was out getting her hair done. He'd stopped in the kitchen for a late lunch. As soon as Alfred set down the sandwich, he disappeared into his pantry and returned with an oversized Wayne Foundation envelope.

"For your personal attention, sir, from Ms. Merrithew. Perhaps it would be best if you read it through this time."

Bruce didn't react to the backhand; he was used to it. He tilted the envelope and the previous week's letter on that law firm stationery slid out, along with a note from Cynthia Merrithew saying it was not a charity request in the traditional sense and did require Bruce's personal attention.

Bruce unfolded the letter—ignored whatever Alfred was saying now in that dry acidic tone—and read:

*Dear Mr. Wayne,*

*You don't know me, but my name is David Vaniel, and I am a junior associate at Chatham, Latham and Gould. I am actually writing to you at the behest of my father, Edward. About 2 months ago, my father was diagnosed with end-stage pancreatic and lung cancer. His life has been turbulent, to put it mildly. My own relations with him have been also. I'm told lawyers have a larger non-technical vocabulary than any other profession, but when I look to words such as 'strained' or 'disjointed' to describe my relationship with my father, they fall woefully short. And yet, now that a less than angelic past and a lifetime of drinking and smoking have caught up with him, I feel a filial duty to do what I can. And this letter is what I can do.*

*I apologize in advance for the bizarre nature of this request, Mr. Wayne. My father is not asking for money or media attention, only a personal meeting with you. He asks five minutes of your time, in person. I understand completely if you refuse. I would ask only that you call me and tell me yourself, just so I can then tell my father that I spoke to you directly. He is so adamant about the need for this meeting. He's been pestering me for weeks, he says now that I'm "a big shot lawyer" he knows I can "make it happen," that kind of thing. But then, the last time I refused, the tone changed. He broke down. It was the first time I've ever seen my father in tears, Mr. Wayne. He's no saint, sir, but he's a dying man and this is obviously important to him.*

“He apologizes again for the peculiar nature of the request,” Bruce said, repeating the highlights to Alfred as he read. “And then he asks again that I call in person to refuse so he can tell his father he talked to me himself.”

“It is a moving document, in its way, sir. Might one hope it elicits something more in the way of a personal response than a ‘No?’”

“He’s a lawyer, Alfred; he should be able to write a persuasive letter. This one is ingeniously crafted to get past the buffers a man like me must have in place and to put the letter into my hands. He got that far with this little scam, you and Cynthia did exactly what he wanted, now we have this ‘call me personally.’ He’s not going to get that because I have no time—or patience—right now to play along just to find out what the con is.”

“Is it entirely wise, Master Bruce, to be so certain the letter is not what it seems?”

“It has all the earmarks, Alfred. Another day I’d take the time to confirm it, but the timing sucks. I’ve got the shareholders meeting coming up, Wayne Tech restructuring to absorb those old LexCorp subsidiaries. Plus, I still have to track down Killer Croc. Nigma’s still free and up to something; it’s a matter of time before he starts dropping clues all over the city again. The Falcones and Yakuza are getting bold with most of the costumed set still in Arkham, and they’re a hair’s breadth away from a full blown turf war on the south side.”

“An intriguing list of commitments, sir, giving both Bruce Wayne’s business interests and Batman’s crimefighting concerns their share of claims on your time. I rather wish you had included one additional claimant: Miss Selina. You are planning to attend the opera tonight, are you not, sir? A sentimental revisiting of your first ‘date?’ That is why Miss Selina asked me to prepare a picnic basket akin to the one Batman brought that night?”

Bruce scowled.

“That has nothing to do with this, Alfred.”

“I beg to differ, sir. That rooftop assignation with Catwoman has everything to do with it. Indeed, it has a great deal to do with everything that has happened since. Master Bruce, you asked Catwoman to meet you on that roof entirely because *you wanted to see her*. It had nothing to do with Batman’s activities, nor with Bruce Wayne’s business interests. It was an entirely human endeavor. An expression of your humanity. Just as responding appropriately to this letter would be an expression of your humanity. And responding inappropriately would, I fear, sir, be a distinct sign that you are losing touch with that humanity.”

“Alfred, really, don’t you think that’s a little melodramatic.”

“No sir, I do not. Master Bruce, what’s five minutes with a dying man? You have done far more for far less noble reasons. What could it hurt to talk to the man, or at very least, listen to what he wants so desperately to say to you.”

“Fine, I’ll think about it,” Bruce growled. “*After* I check him out.”

The bat Walapang had returned to his favorite perch over the workstations, and Bruce saw that the creature had two companions now instead of one. He powered up the monitor and resisted the urge to scowl. It was, ultimately, their cave, after all. He was just some guy who set up his computer underneath the good stalactite. He

thought no more about it—or anything other than the official paper trail of the life of Edward Vaniel—until a clip-clip of high heels on stone announced Selina’s return.

She said Alfred told her about the letter and that Bruce was downstairs researching the dying man, a development that Bruce found curious.

“Alfred’s got his teeth in this,” he said thoughtfully. “And I just don’t see why.”

He sighed angrily. He knew by now that he was going. He might go through the motions of ‘thinking about it’ a little longer, but the decision was made up in the kitchen. Something about the way Alfred urged him had struck a chord—there was something almost pleading in his butler’s eyes. That made the decision for him and it was pointless to pretend otherwise. Alfred had always been his anchor. More than an employee, more than a friend, he was a true confidant. While Bruce often ignored the protests and sarcasm that came in a quietly insistent stream since he first proposed the idea of Batman, he did know that Alfred had his best interests at heart. That’s why he couldn’t ignore this Vaniel matter. If it was that important to Alfred, he would go... But he hated that he was going to do it without understanding why.

Selina’s take was very simple. “It’s the least you can do.”

She didn’t mean for Vaniel. Selina wasn’t one to get worked up over strangers, dying or not. She meant it was the least he could do for Alfred. Unlike Bruce, she didn’t belabor the point. She said it simply, with a serene feline confidence, and then she looked past him at the large overhead viewscreen which mirrored the document he was reading on the small workstation monitor. She let out a low whistle.

“My God, is that a *rap sheet*?” she asked in wonder.

Bruce grunted, then spoke in the deep crime-loathing bat-gravel.

“‘Less-than-angelic’ the son said. He low-balled it.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Selina noted, amused.

Another way of putting it was that “Easy Eddie” Vaniel was a walking piece of shit. The rap sheet went on—and on—longer than the Wayne Manor driveway.

“Armed robbery,” she read, “grand theft, grand theft auto, carjacking. Well it’s a logical progression, I’ll give him that. Assault and battery, felonious assault, assault with a deadly weapon, continued next page... How many pages are there?” she asked curiously.

“Four. And that’s just the summary. Old police reports indicate potential but unconfirmed mob ties, which may explain why the early arrests never make it to indictments. He was never a ‘soldier,’ but at the very least he worked as an enforcer from time to time. He spent thirteen years in Blackgate for attempted murder, beat a known mob informant with a tire iron.”

“I just got to that,” Selina said, skimming page four. “One of yours, I see.”

Again Bruce grunted.

“After prison, he seemed to be trying to rehabilitate himself, with moderate success,” Bruce summarized. “There are a few small robbery charges and one domestic violence complaint from a short-term girlfriend—it seems David’s mother died while Vaniel was in prison. A check into patient records at Gotham Memorial reveals that he was diagnosed with both pancreatic and lung cancer, just as David’s letter stated. At this point, also as stated in the letter, he has no more than a month to live.”

Selina bit her lip.

“So why does he want to see you?”

Bruce glared hatefully at the viewscreen, having asked that same question every few minutes since he began researching Vaniel’s case. He could find no reason why this man wanted to speak with Bruce Wayne. There was an off chance, an extremely minute possibility, that he wanted to talk to *Batman*, who had been the one to catch him on a few occasions—including the attempted murder charge that put him away for thirteen years. But it made no sense—no sense at all—that he’d contacted Bruce Wayne, especially *through his son*.

No, this was something else—and whatever it was, Bruce had no clue.

Two days later, Bruce waited at the reception desk of the Oncology Wing, Gotham Memorial Hospital while a nurse’s aide went to find David Vaniel. When a well-dressed man emerged from one of the rooms, he seemed younger than Bruce expected. David Vaniel—for that is who it was offering his hand and introducing himself haltingly—must have been close to Bruce’s age, but he spoke and carried himself more like Dick. He was a polite young man, soft-spoken, seemed kind but a bit nervous—which Bruce attributed to surprise. Despite Alfred’s call to confirm the meeting, David never really expected Bruce Wayne to show.

Bruce politely sidestepped the tentative attempt at small talk and got down to business.

“Why am I here?” he asked bluntly.

“Honestly, Mr. Wayne, I know nothing more than I told you in the letter. All my father will say is that it’s private.”

Bruce never trusted non-answers, not from criminals, not from police, not from businessmen or bimbos, and especially not from lawyers. So he probed David Vaniel on other subjects, and found the man open and forthcoming.

“I’m here because he’s my father, Mr. Wayne. A son’s duty and that’s all. There’s no affection. None. The man was seldom around when I was growing up. And when he was, he was up to no good. Constantly getting arrested—or disappearing to avoid getting arrested, which was worse for me and Mom. People’d come to the house looking for him, police, even Batman one time.

“When he went off to jail, I went off to law school. Bit of rebellion, I guess. I wanted to become a prosecutor, put people like him in jail where they couldn’t start families they weren’t prepared to stick with. But anyway, when I got over the ‘angry young man’ phase, I just wanted to improve myself. I did wind up specializing in criminal law though, wound up in the D.A.’s office after all,” he laughed, “I hope with a better motive than I’d begun...”

He trailed off, blushing.

Bruce was listening politely, but also projecting a subtle air of dissatisfaction. It was a familiar performance: Bruce Wayne, the busy executive with a busy schedule, making time for something he views as beneath him. But underneath the Bat-subterfuge, Bruce knew he did it for another reason: he wanted to see if David Vaniel would pick up on it. A successful prosecutor needed people skills, instinct. Would he see through the polite pretense to the second performance underneath? Would he see “Bruce Wayne is

distracted” or would he take advantage of Bruce Wayne here and in person to pitch some...

“I’m awfully sorry, going on like this,” David apologized, hurriedly leading Bruce down the hall towards the room he’d come out of earlier. “You don’t even know me. It’s just that there aren’t a lot of people I’m comfortable talking to about my father... I should warn you before we go in. He can be a bit... harsh.”

He opened the door and the word hung suspended in Bruce’s mind as he peered into the room.

Harsh.

In every sense imaginable.

“Don’t you know I’m dying here? For the love of Christ, shithead. Give an old man some peace.”

That was the greeting when the opening door woke him. Edward Vaniel was the exact opposite of his son. Even considering the end-stage cancer, there was more to his deterioration than the disease that was killing him. His face was a weathered map of a hard life, a life spent in the dingiest, dirtiest, most violent places in the city.

Bruce heard his own name spoken in David’s low, polite tones, and repeated in Vaniel’s coarse ones, but the old man was calming down, slightly, as he realized the longed-for meeting was finally to occur. He looked up at the man standing at the foot of his bed, his brow creasing as he studied the aristocratic features.

“Bruce Wayne,” he croaked, a twinge of annoyance still in his voice. “You’re shorter than you look on TV.”

“Mr. Vaniel,” Bruce greeted in a low tone, “you’re thinner than you were in your last mug shot.”

David’s head whipped around, staring at Bruce in shock. The pleasant demeanor the billionaire had displayed in the hallway was gone, replaced by a strange determination in his face and body language. As someone who dealt with the worst of humanity on a nightly basis, Bruce knew how to handle a man such as this. There was only one thing they responded to: strength.

To his son’s continued surprise, Vaniel didn’t strike back in anger or spite. Instead, he did something his son had rarely seen: he laughed. He laughed long and hard; laughed until it turned into a ragged wet cough, forcing him to grab for the oxygen mask and take several large gasping breaths. After regaining his composure, he pulled the mask away from his mouth and spoke again.

“So you checked up on me?” he said, his voice a little hoarser after the coughing fit. “Good man. Smart man. I knew you were smarter than you let on.”

“What can I do for you, Mr. Vaniel?” Bruce asked flatly.

“And straight down to business, too. I like that. So let’s get right to it.” He rolled his head over in his son’s direction. “Davey, go wait outside. Mr. Wayne and I have a few private matters to discuss.”

David’s eyes went wide. “W-what?! But I thought...”

“You thought wrong, boy,” Vaniel growled in his son’s face. Hitching his thumb toward the door, he added, “Get going.”

David turned to Bruce, a bewildered look on his face. “Mr. Wayne?”

Bruce softened his expression as he kept his eyes trained on the senior member of the family. "Mr. Vaniel, if David wants to stay, I have no problem with..."

"Well I do!" Vaniel hurled his spite in Bruce's direction, which returned the stolid expression to Bruce's face. "What I got to be sayin', my boy don't need hearin', *capice?*"

The two men stared at each other in tense silence for a long moment. Bruce finally broke the silence, his eyes never leaving Edward Vaniel's. "It's okay, David. If your father wants to speak to me alone, then I'll be happy to oblige him."

David studied the sardonic look on Bruce's face for a few seconds, then finally got up and headed for the door. As he reached out for the door handle, he glanced back at the two of them, still locked eye to eye. "You're sure?"

"Yes," Bruce replied calmly at the exact same moment as Vaniel shouted "GET OUT!"

David slowly shook his head, shooting a last, scornful look at his father before opening the door and calmly walking out into the hall. He momentarily considered staying right outside the door in the hopes of overhearing something, but he knew he couldn't. His father would probably waste his last ounce of strength to get out of bed and kill him, but that wasn't what stopped him; it was Bruce Wayne. It would be flat out rude to betray the man who had put up with so much just because he'd asked. He hoped that whatever it was his father had to say was worth the time out of Wayne's busy schedule. So he walked over to the nurse's station, called his office once to check in, then waited patiently by the nurse's desk.

Ten minutes later, the door to Edward Vaniel's room flung open so hard that the door handle slammed against the inside wall of the room, causing more than a few nurses and patients to jump. Bruce Wayne came storming out into the hall, an angry expression etching his face.

No, it wasn't anger, David Vaniel realized as he hurried over to talk to him. It was rage. Pure, white-hot rage.

"M-Mr. Wayne?"

Wayne didn't answer, didn't even acknowledge David's existence. He stormed up the hall toward the elevators with long, determined strides. David raced up the hall after him, firing questions at his back. "Mr. Wayne? What happened?! What did he say?!? Mr. Wayne?!"

But the answers never came. David skidded to a halt just outside the elevators as the doors started to close. The last thing he saw before the polished metal doors thunked closed in front of his nose was the expression on Bruce Wayne's face—an expression of absolute hatred that would haunt his nightmares for years to come.

Later that night, the Batmobile roared into the cave, coming to an abrupt, screeching halt on the giant turntable where it normally rested. Before the engine had even wound down, Batman stepped out of the car and marched to the main workstation, his face still locked in the mask of frozen hatred that Bruce Wayne wore earlier that afternoon.

"What the hell was that about?!" Nightwing exclaimed, following swiftly (although he waited for the passenger hatch to open completely before climbing out of the car).

Batman ignored him as he reached the main console and slid into the massive chair in front of it. Nightwing stormed up behind him.

"Hey! I'm serious! What the hell has gotten into you?!"

Batman's eyes stared intently at the screen as his fingers started tapping on the console's keyboard. "What are you talking about?"

"*What am I talking about?!*" Nightwing repeated in disbelief. "The Riddler! What do you *think* I'm talking about?!"

"What about him?" Batman growled.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied sarcastically. "Don't you think you were a little... *harsh* on him?"

"No."

Nightwing's disbelief was quickly turning into exasperation. "Then do you mind telling me exactly what he did to deserve—"

"He tried to run," Batman responded nonchalantly, cutting him off.

"*Tried to run?!*" Of course, he tried to run! *He always* tries to run. They *ALL* try to run. Hell, half the innocent victims you save from certain death try to run, Bruce!"

Batman grunted at the sound of his name, then replied as he kept typing. "And next time, *The Riddler* will think twice before running."

Nightwing's jaw dropped open further, then snapped shut as he reached out and grabbed Batman's shoulder, spinning him and the chair around to face him. "Well, that next time is going to be a long way off, considering you *broke both of his legs!*"

For just an instant, there was a flicker in Batman's eyes, the briefest hint of... something deep within him. Nightwing saw it, but before he could figure out what it was, Batman swung his chair back around toward the monitor. "There were innocents in harm's way. I did what I had to do."

That should have been it. It was Batman's final declaration—the ultimate trump card whenever anyone questioned his tactics. Protection of the Innocents. And any means to that end were acceptable, short of murder.

That should have been it. And in years past, it would have been. Just a few short years ago, Nightwing—or rather, Dick Grayson—would have thrown his hands up and shouted "FINE!" or "Whatever!" before storming out of the cave, hopping into his mini-jet, and flying back to Titan's Tower to confer with Wally, Roy or Donna about what a flaming prick his *former* mentor had become. But that was years ago. He and Bruce had come so far since those days. They had finally gotten to that point of mutual acceptance, mutual understanding and, most importantly, mutual respect. They'd moved so far beyond the "I did what I had to do" crap.

That should have been it... except that Dick knew there was more to this whole argument than what was being said. There was something else going on in Bruce's head—something eating him up inside. He didn't know what it was but he knew the cause. And it finally registered what Dick had seen in that flicker in Bruce's eyes just moments before.

Pain.

Dick took a silent, deep breath, then reached up and removed the mask from his face. He stepped up behind Bruce slowly and spoke in a low, even tone.

"What happened at the meeting today?"

Batman's fingers froze for a half-second over the keys, then he started typing again. "Which meeting?"

He was being purposefully stubborn and Dick had to fight his impulse to get snide again. He knew it wouldn't help. "The meeting with the guy at the hospital," he said patiently.

This time, Batman's fingers stopped completely, frozen over the keys.

"Nothing."

"C'mon, Bruce," Dick replied softly. "It obviously wasn't 'nothing.' Alfred said everything started—"

"Alfred said?" Bruce snapped, and Dick knew he'd said the wrong thing. "Is that what this was?" Bruce asked harshly, turning his head slightly to glare back over his shoulder. "Is that why you just *happened* to show up tonight to go on patrol with me?"

"He was worried about you, Bruce."

"He worries too much." Batman turned back to the console.

"It seems to me he worries just the right amount, considering what happened tonight."

Batman simply grunted and started typing again.

"Seriously, Bruce, I've never seen you like that before. I've never seen you that vicious, even during Hell Mon—"

In one instantaneous motion, Batman spun the chair around and leapt to his feet, his face contorted in rage as he pointed into Nightwing's face and howled "*Don't you fucking DARE bring them into this!!!*"

Nightwing recoiled like he'd been shot. He stared in absolute shock. In all of their years together, in all of the time Dick was growing up in the manor, through his training as Robin, his rebellious teens and defiant twenties, through all of the fights they'd had over the years... Dick had never, *ever* heard Bruce curse like that.

It wasn't like he was offended by it—he'd lived with Wally and Roy for far too long for a word like "fuck" to *offend* him. He'd even worked it into his own daily vocabulary once he'd left the manor. But coming out of Batman's mouth... coming out of *Bruce's* mouth that way...

This was worse than he or Alfred had ever imagined. For the first time in a long, long time, Dick was scared. Not scared *of* Bruce. Scared *for* Bruce.

Realizing that they'd both just been standing there staring at each other for several seconds, Dick finally spoke in a quiet, questioning voice. "Bruce?"

Batman suddenly deflated, the anger and rage washing away. He sat back down in his chair and spun back to the console like nothing had happened. Except, Dick noticed, this time he didn't start typing again. He just sat there in the chair, staring at the screen. Dick tried to control the heavy breaths he hadn't realized he'd been sucking in. He straightened himself up and slowly approached the back of Batman's chair. He reached out and gently placed a hand on Batman's shoulder. "Bruce?"

Under his hand, he felt the shoulders slump ever so slightly and Bruce's head bowed a fraction of an inch. Then, just as quickly, he stiffened again, sitting up straight.

"Edward Vaniel." Batman's voice was flat, almost mechanical.

"What?"

"The 'guy at the hospital.' His name is Edward Vaniel."

He tapped a few keys on the control panel and a large file popped up on the screen. He stood, glancing up at the file, and Dick stepped forward to stand next to him.

"Vaniel, Edward. a.k.a. 'Easy Eddie.' Career criminal with reputed mob ties..."

Dick listened intently as Batman droned on in a flat monotone. He knew Bruce well enough to see what was happening: whatever this was, it hurt immensely and Bruce was doing the one thing that came naturally in order to handle it—he switched into Detective mode. Viewing this like any other case was a way of sheltering himself. Dick wasn't sure where this was all leading, but he listened as Bruce rattled off the important details of the profile: life history, family history, criminal record—including the fact that Batman had been the one responsible for Vaniel's thirteen year incarceration... answers to all of the crucial questions, except one.

"So, why did he contact you?" Dick asked lightly.

"He's dying. Simultaneous lung and pancreatic cancer," Batman said dully. "His doctors say he's got less than a month." Then the tone changed. He glanced at Dick before continuing like a lecturing professor. "As you know, many terminally ill patients will spend some of their last days trying to either right the wrongs they feel were done to them in life, or trying to correct their mistakes."

"Revenge or Absolution," Dick confirmed. "Death's Double Whammy. So why would he... Wait. Don't tell me he knew who you were?! I mean, you said that Batman was the one who sent him up the river and—"

"No," Bruce interrupted with an eerie detachment. "Bruce Wayne is who he wanted. Not Batman."

"What did Bruce Wayne ever do to him?"

They stood in tense silence for a second before Batman finally responded.

"Eddie Vaniel wasn't looking for revenge on Bruce Wayne," he said simply.

"Absolution? For what?"

Bruce leaned forward and tapped a few keys on the console, bringing up a different file on the large screen.

"The one crime for which he was never caught."

Dick glanced up at the screen, his eyes widening in shock.

```
Casefile:      00000-001
Crime:        Double Homicide
Victims:      Wayne, Thomas
              Wayne, Martha
Assailant:    UNKNOWN
Case Status:  OPEN
```



## CHAPTER 2: THE NIGHT IN QUESTION

When I was ten, my parents were shot to death in a small time mugging; it happened right in front of me.

For years after that night, that thought defined me. It dominated my thoughts, my hopes, my ambitions, it permeated everything I did. My entire world became about their deaths—and my grief. I traveled the world to escape the pain. I trained my body to channel the anger. I trained my mind to try to answer the questions that couldn't be answered: How did this happen? Who was this man that took my parents from me? What drives a man to do something like that?

Why me?

The thought of that night drove me to a great many things. It did not, however, “create” Batman. I've come to understand that Batman was borne of something much deeper, much more intrinsic—my inherent sense of Justice. What happened to me, what happened to them, should not have happened. I wanted to do as much as a man can do to prevent it ever happening again. Would I have still become Batman had my parents never been killed? Who can say? But their deaths weren't the reason I became what I became. It was a catalyst that started me down the path.

Throughout all my years on this path, the one crime I've never been able to solve was the most personal for me: the death of my own parents. As good as I've become at what I do—as good as I could ever become—I've realized that I may never find the truth. It has nothing to do with a lack of ability. It is a simple function of time and place. Evidence collection in those days was nowhere near what it is today, and there's a decided lack of usable material.

Notes of the crime scene: one .45 caliber semi-auto handgun; powder burns on the vics' clothing indicate shot at close range; incomplete, broken string of pearls at scene indicate a handful of pearls were taken (see Witness Statement 7263876 written on behalf of juvenile witness—Wayne, Bruce by Officer M.Cure), other jewelry left on victims indicate haste of perpetrator's retreat; wallet, stained with blood, emptied, found several blocks away.

A decided lack of usable material.

Several years ago, I thought I'd come close—a career criminal who used to “work” that part of the city, a man named Joe Chill. I spent months scouring the facts, hitting the streets tracking and re-tracking the clues to find out for sure. Unfortunately, Chill was killed before I ever got a positive answer. If he was the one that did it, he took it to his grave. For years, I'd accepted that he was the true culprit, but a part of me would never accept it completely, not without absolute, confirmable proof.

When I was ten, my parents were shot to death in a small time mugging; it happened right in front of me.

That thought drove me to become a detective.

And the Detective would never accept an absolute answer without absolute, irrefutable proof.

"Dear God..." Dick uttered softly, his eyes still glued to the screen. After a few seconds of brutal silence, he glanced over at Bruce. "Is it...? I mean, could it really be...? Is it him?"

Bruce muttered something unintelligible, his eyes staring down at the keyboard as if he was unable to look at the screen.

"Bruce? Is it him?"

"I don't know," Bruce clarified, his body rigidly still.

"Is it possible? Was there any indication if he was telling the truth?"

"I don't know."

"Did he have any details, anything at all that would point to—"

Bruce's head suddenly jerked upward, his face twisted again with fury as he howled at Dick's face. "I DON'T..." Just as suddenly, the rage melted, a blank almost expressionless stare settling in as he finished flatly, "...know."

Dick studied that stare, a cold pit forming in his stomach. It was that empty, emotionless expression, a look he'd seen only once before. It wasn't during a Hell Month or an interrogation when the clock was ticking on a timebomb and precious lives hung in the balance, it wasn't confronting Joker, even after he'd killed Jason, it wasn't even when the specter of the Wayne murders was raised once before with that lowlife Chill... It was an hour ago, when Batman calmly and quietly snapped Riddler's femur.

Dick stepped toward him, placing a hand on his mentor's shoulder. "Bruce?"

"We didn't exactly get that far," he replied in a cold, mechanical tone. Then he turned and stalked off toward the costume vault.

"You didn't... Bruce? What do you mean 'get that far?'" Dick called after him.

"In the conversation," Bruce growled over his shoulder, a strange venom in his voice. "We never really got to the point of... details."

Dick stared. They never got to the details? How was that possible? This was Batman they were talking about. Batman always got the details, especially when it came to murder. Batman would hold onto anything for as long as it took to unearth every last possible detail...

In his mind's eye, he saw that face again, cold and emotionless, staring out from under Batman's cowl. There was something more to this, something deeper. Dick started to follow to the vault, but a soft voice stopped him.

"Don't."

He turned, and saw Selina coming from the shadows.

"Let me take this one," she said quietly.

She'd stepped from the shadows, but also from the direction of Alfred's elevator, making it unclear how long she'd been there and how much she might have heard.

"No. You don't understand," Dick started to object, but she shook her head and he found himself trailing off as his eyes followed the path to the costume vault where Bruce had disappeared. "You don't understand," he repeated in a whisper.

"I understand fine," she said definitely. "A guy with a rap sheet the length of a phonebook has to see Bruce Wayne—not Batman but Bruce Wayne—on his deathbed—and Bruce comes back breathing hellfire. You telling me the possibility didn't even occur to you?"

"No... Hell, I still can't believe it," he said dully. He was struggling with his own thoughts too much to really process what she'd said, and some inner core of his brain was answering mechanically, almost the way Bruce had done. "We had... There was a guy, years ago, a two-bit thug. His name was Chill. He claimed to know who Batman really was. Bragged to a bunch of his cronies that he'd 'created' Batman by killing someone close to him, and before he got any further, they thanked him with 9 slugs to the chest. I always thought that was it. Chill did it, Chill was dead; case closed."

Selina said nothing. It just wasn't important to her. What Dick knew, what he thought he knew, how that might have kept him from connecting the dots as she had, none of it really mattered. What mattered was that he was bungling it. Bruce was a raw nerve, and much as Dick wanted to help, he was slicing that exposed nerve with a razor then bashing it with his fist. So she said nothing. She didn't want to make it worse by becoming confrontational—as long as he stayed out of her way. But she wasn't about to let him start "managing" things—and especially her—however noble his motives, and it seemed like that's exactly what he was determined to do.

"Selina, this is worse than anything I've ever seen," he was saying. "Different than anything I've seen, even when Jason died. Now, I've made my way in, but anyone else tries to talk to him right now, I honestly think he may lose it—lose it to the point where we'll never get him back."

She shook her head.

"Richard, I'm very fond of you, I really am. I consider you and Tim, Barbara and Cassie to be family just as much as Bruce and Alfred. And I know you love him, and I know you've been through hell together, and I know you've known him longer than I have. But believe me when I tell you, he isn't going to 'lose it,' and if you 'honestly think' he could, you are frankly not worthy to be standing in this cave tonight calling him by his name. Now please, Richard, let me take this one."

"Selina, you have no idea what you're dealing with. He broke Riddler's legs."

"I know. Barbara called, that's how I knew you guys would be getting back about now."

"Yeah, well, she didn't see his face when—Wait, you know?! That doesn't scare the—I mean, you're not a little— This isn't—"

"Yes I know and no it doesn't, no I'm not and no it isn't. Look, Dick, it's not that I'm unfazed by this. It just doesn't shake my faith in a few fundamental truths of the universe. Bruce is a good man. When something hits, he might go off in such a way that even Superman gets edgy, but that is a part of who he is and I accept it. He won't go too far; that's part of who he is too."

"Selina! He broke the man's legs."

"There's no need to keep repeating that, Dick, I am perfectly capable of retaining information for more than fifteen seconds. Do you know Eddie has never once forgotten my birthday in all the time we've known each other? If he's in Arkham, if he's in hiding, if I'm in Zurich, no matter what, I get a phone call or a card or a gift. So don't think I'm not twice as upset about what happened tonight as you are. I am. Truth be told, two, maybe three percent of what happened out there might have been my fault."

"Because you call him 'Eddie?'" Dick remarked, as amused as he could be under the circumstances.

"No, not quite," Selina said sadly. "Because you were wrong earlier. We don't all run."

The front doors of Wayne Manor were constructed in 1866 out of the sturdiest Georgia pine. Returning Union soldiers needed jobs, and Bruce's ancestor, the architect B. Andrew Wayne stepped up, creating a myriad of building projects including a massive renovation of the manor. As a gesture to the recovering Southern economy, he bought Southern materials whenever he could. Hence the front doors, doorframe, and most of the foyer arch were all built from the hardest, strongest and heaviest woods he had at his disposal. This was lucky. For the force with which his decedent pulled the door open on returning from Gotham Memorial Hospital was not sufficient to yank it off its hinges, nor did the slam that followed penetrate to the surrounding walls, shaking paintings on their hangers or sprinkling plaster dust from the moldings.

It did make one hell of a noise, which Selina heard in the morning room and went to investigate. She saw Bruce in the hall, storming towards the study (and, she guessed, to the grandfather clock and the cave).

"Stay away from me," he snarled over his shoulder.

She recoiled, the ferocity in the voice freezing her legs mid-step and jolting her heartbeat into a thumping triple-time. The racing in her chest continued, but her movement resumed after only a second's hesitation and she reached the study just as Bruce reached the clock.

"Of course," he said under his breath, then turned fully, positioning his body as a barrier between her and the clock. "If I said 'follow,' would that get you to leave me alone?" he spat bitterly.

"Something has obviously happened," she said gently, doing her best to ignore the fiery hatred raging in his eyes.

Nothing was said for a long moment. Then, eerily, that blazing hatred vanished, snuffed out in a fraction of a second like a candle's flame pinched by wet fingers. The expression that replaced it was infinitely more unnerving... Void. Beyond coldness or control or detachment, there was only a lifeless, soulless void. What Shakespeare called dead coals.

"Yes, something obviously happened," he said dully. "I'm going to be... occupied for a while."

Then a totally unconvincing film of emotion appeared in his eyes, just covering the dead emptiness, and his voice took on an equally unconvincing veneer of tenderness as he added, "And you have to go."

"We tried that once, it didn't work," Selina said gently.

Bruce shook his head. She was alluding ever so delicately to their second Hell Month together, when he'd sent her to Paris because he didn't want Selina, the woman he loved, to see the part of him that emerged in those weeks leading up to the anniversary. This was something very different.

"There's no need to go that far," he murmured, thinking of Paris. "Just move into the penthouse for a while..."

This was very different indeed. Selina, the woman he loved, was also Catwoman, a thief and a criminal.

"It's not safe for you to be around me right now," he concluded grimly.

"Then you've seen it" Dick breathed. "That look, that 'void.' Selina, that's what's got me freaked, not the violence. I've seen Psychobat break a guy's legs before... And ribs, lot of broken ribs... And a jaw. I've... God, I've broken a good few myself. But that, that coldness, that dead, empty coldness... You weren't afraid at that point? Honestly, even a little?"

"No. I wasn't and I'm not. Startled for a moment, but... not afraid. Never afraid. And that's why I have to be the one to talk to him right now. Go upstairs, Dick, please. Have a drink. I imagine you need one. We'll be up in ten, fifteen minutes."

He sighed. A part of him wanted to argue, but something about her confidence held him back. The sheer tonnage of the night's shocks was catching up with him. It had started while Selina was talking, brick by brick dropping onto his back... Alfred's call. Riddler's beating. That look on Batman's face as he did it. The return to the cave. Batman's rage. Bruce's pain. Then the shock of that final revelation: Casefile 001... By the time Selina finished talking, Dick felt too weighed down to continue with her, let alone going another round with Bruce. Batman had taught him how to set aside personal frustrations, and that personal pain, for the sake of others—to put the safety of others above your own concerns, always. Dick had never been as successful as Bruce in that regard. Instead, he developed an instinct to funnel that energy into saving the ones in trouble. Now, Bruce was that person in trouble...

But Batman had also taught him to use the best tool, or more appropriately, the best person available for the task at hand. Maybe Selina really was the better choice to talk to Bruce right now—or maybe that was a convenient excuse his beleaguered psyche had come up with to get him out of the cave. He didn't know. And he was so weary, he didn't care. He nodded wearily and started for the stairs, muttering under his breath how he wasn't allowed upstairs in costume... He trailed off, not bothering with the barb about getting grounded if Alfred caught him. The attempt at humor was as pointless as it was unfunny. Maybe Selina had a point about that drink.

Selina watched him go, then she turned and headed to the costume vault. She entered just as Bruce was sliding the cowl over the false head that held it in place.

"I told you to go," he said without turning.

"And it's so rare that I won't do what I'm told," she smiled. "Bruce, what happened at the hospital?"

"I told you to go," he repeated. "Selina, please, I can't... I... I can't deal with this, with you right now. I said—"

"Yes, I know. You said it's not safe to be around you. And when that didn't work, Psychobat reiterated the point by breaking Eddie's legs—And **yes**, before you say it, I know that was ninety-nine percent everything else that's going on right now—but I also know that a tiny fraction of it, maybe just one tenth of a percent, was for me."

"I didn't target Nigma. He targeted the Midnight Special," Bruce said savagely.

"I'm not disputing that," she replied calmly. "I just think it would have been better for whoever Batman ran into tonight if they were someone who'd never sent me a birthday card... Bruce, what happened at the hospital?"

"This has NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU, YOU IMPOSSIBLE—" he shouted, then dropped his head and spoke in a flat monotone. "Just go."

"Bruce... anything that affects you like this does have quite a lot to do with me now. Please, don't expect me to stand by and watch this like it's nothing, because that's not going to happen."

He froze. The moment's respite talking about Nigma had actually been a relief. Now it all descended again.

"I can't... not now," he repeated through clenched teeth.

"I'm not something you have to 'deal with.' I can help. Now you told Dick that you never got to details with Vaniel. Tell me why. Tell me what happened."

Dick's question "Why didn't you get that far?" and now Selina's "Tell me what happened?" Bruce closed his eyes against it, the scene replaying in his head...

The door closed behind David Vaniel as he walked out into the hallway. Bruce turned back to the bed where Vaniel Senior was still staring spitefully at the door.

"Your son is a fine man," Bruce said cordially.

"My son... is a worthless piece of shit." Edward coughed raggedly a few times, then rasped "just like his whore of a mother."

Bruce raised an eyebrow but said nothing; Vaniel stared back, a light smirk crossing his face.

"I'm sorry, did I offend you or sumptin'? I ain't never been one to sugar-coat shit, Wayne. His mother was a worthless bitch who din't have better sense than ta get involved with a joe like me. She never did nothin' with her life and she passed her stupid, doughy-headed ideas onto that feeble son of ours."

"He put himself through law school."

"Well whoopy-fuckin'-doo!" Vaniel spat. "All the sense I tried to beat into that boy... tried to teach him to be his own man, to be sumptin' special... and he goes and becomes just another shyster in this gawd-awful city fulluv'em."

"Better that he become just another criminal?" Bruce asked pointedly.

Vaniel tried angrily to pull himself up in the bed, saliva spraying from his mouth. "Fuck you! Fuck you, you rich, pretty-boy faggot!" Finally succumbing to his own weakness, he collapsed back onto the pillows and stared at Bruce with venomous eyes. "Don't you dare fuckin' judge me! I did the best I could to put food on the table, to provide for my family. We weren't all born with silver spoons up our damn noses, you fuck. Some of us... \*gasp\* had to scrape by... \*gasp\* with what we could..." Vaniel scrambled around the bed for his breath mask, finally finding it and taking in a few lung-fulls of oxygen.

"I know a vast number of people in this world are in rough situations, Mister Vaniel. But not all of them turn to criminal enterprises in order to support their families. You need look no further than your own son for proof of that."

Vaniel glared at him over the edge of the mask, then slowly shook his head. "This ain't goin' quite the way I hoped it would go..." he rasped under the mask.

"Perhaps it would go better if you came to the point," Bruce said evenly.

"I'm getting there. I'm getting there," Vaniel managed between labored, sucking exchanges with the oxygen mask. "Will get there a whole lot quicker without any more judge-fuckin-mental interruptions from a ball-less, ivory-tower sack of shit that never worked a day at a man's job."

"Law-abiding and educated being antithetical to your idea of manhood," Bruce observed dryly.

"Fuck you," Vaniel weased, a casual aside as he considered the oxygen mask. He took a deep final inhale, coughed twice, then set it aside. "Real men gotta..." It didn't work, and he cursed without sound as he reached for the mask again. "Real men gotta make tough choices," he resumed. "Not Hahvard or Yale, while ya pass the fuckin' pheasant. We don't all get our lives laid out fer'us by some blueblood mommy and daddy."

Bruce leaned forward and gripped the bar at the end of Edward's hospital bed, staring at him. "Due respect, Mister Vaniel, but with all your talk about me not knowing anything about your family, you've forfeited your right to talk about mine," he seethed.

"I know more about your family than you think," Vaniel rasped.

The two men stared at each other for a tense moment. The bar at the end of the bed began to creak under Bruce's grip.

"What are you talking about?"

A saddened grin washed over Vaniel's gaunt features. "I'm talking about your parents, boy."

The bar creaked louder for a moment until Bruce released his grip. He straightened himself up and adjusted his tie. "This conversation is over," he announced and headed for the door. Edward watched Bruce walk away, knowing that his one chance was slipping away. He pulled the oxygen mask away from his face and rasped as loud as his crippled lungs would allow.

"I killed 'em."

Bruce froze. After a long moment, he slowly turned back to face the dying man.

"I did it," Vaniel repeated. "I shot your parents."

With startling speed, Bruce suddenly shot to the side of the bed, his large hand grabbing the front of Vaniel's hospital gown and yanking the frail man up off of the bed. The monitor beside the bed started beeping in a faster, erratic rhythm. Their faces mere inches apart, Edward saw an all-too-familiar burning behind Bruce's eyes.

"What did you say?" Bruce growled in purest hate.

"That night, in the alley. You and your... parents..." he started coughing raggedly, his whole body convulsing. Bruce held firm to the paper gown, holding him in place.

"Why...?" Bruce growled through gritted teeth.

Vaniel coughed a few more times, then finally managed to speak through strained breaths with as much defiance his broken body would allow. "You were all strolling through that alley like you owned the whole damn city. Dressed in your finest... \*hrk\*"

He was cut off as Bruce's hand instantly shifted from the gown to his throat. "NO! Why did you tell me that!"

"I... I... just... thought... you had a... a right... to know..."

Bruce's grip tightened. Edward struggled, gasping for breath, but the grip was like iron. A cough started low in his chest and tried to work its way up, but was caught at the hand on his throat. His whole body spasmed violently, his frail hands attempting to claw at Bruce's arm but failing. The monitor beeped more rapidly, more erratically, and somewhere deep inside, Bruce knew there was only a few seconds before Edward's heart rate reached the point where the monitor would alert the nursing staff. He tightened his grip even more for a few seconds, his face twisted with rage, then slammed the frail body down onto the mattress, finally releasing his grip. Edward's body continued to spasm as he coughed violently, dark red blood spilling out of his mouth. Bruce just stared at the pathetic form flailing on the bed, his jaw clenched so tightly that his teeth were groaning in protest. Without a word, Bruce spun back toward the door and stormed out, nearly yanking the door off of its hinges as he flung it open.

As he heard the distant sound of his son calling after Bruce Wayne, Edward finally got his breathing back under control. He wiped the blood from his chin with the back of his hand and held the oxygen mask over his face. Under the mask, he muttered quietly.

"Maybe he's got a pair after all..."

"Now do you understand?" Bruce murmured, an emotional wreck after the telling. "When I said 'not safe'... when I..."

"Shh, it's okay," Selina said gingerly. "Bruce, look at me. You're going to be okay. Take it slow."

He didn't turn to look. He didn't speak again. He just stood facing the wall and the false head with the Batman cowl resting on it. Selina could feel the waves of dark intensity radiating from him, but she said nothing. Like she told Dick, he had his own way of coping. He went inward, sometimes with an intensity that could bend light. The trick was to not get freaked out by it. The trick was remembering that the super-dense intensity at the heart of that black hole was still Bruce.

"Take it slow," she repeated softly.

Hell, it was the most concentrated essence of what made Bruce the man that he was—which was the man that she loved—which might be the reason she would never react to that dark, hellish intensity like anyone else.

He made a noise. It wasn't a grunt, a sob, or a sigh. It was a kind of raspy rumble as he inhaled, and she realized he'd been performing a breathing exercise since he finished the story.

Going inward. That was his way.

The trick was not to leave him in there. That's what the rest of them did, and that's why the Batcave had eaten two stars by the time she'd moved in.

The silent minute turned into two and then three. Then, without any transition and without turning from the Batman head, Bruce finally spoke.

"I just left," he said intently, a sudden wave of frustration blotting out the greater pain for a moment. "Maybe the only chance I'd ever have t— and I, I just left. I had to... I had— Selina, I swear to God, I had to leave that room or I'd have killed him right there."

"Bruce," she said quietly, "the last sound I want to make tonight is 'pfft,' but you've got to work with me here. What you're saying is... actually... quite absurd. You weren't going to kill him... because you don't kill."

"Batman doesn't kill," he said slowly. "But Bruce Wayne might."

She stared for a long moment. When she finally responded, her tone was solemn but the words were more light-hearted than either of them were expecting.

"You know, there are those out there who say that you're just as crazy as the ones you send to Arkham. They're fools who don't know anything about you beyond 'black cape' and 'big fist.' I've certainly never held to that theory. But it's comments like that that make some of the people who do know you wonder sometimes."

Bruce spun and glared, a mixture of rage and confusion on his face.

"'Pfft' doesn't begin to cover it, Bruce! It really doesn't. What you just said is absolute bullshit." She stopped and sighed. "And you know it is. Of course 'Bruce Wayne' wouldn't kill him, because it's not about 'Batman' or 'Bruce Wayne'—it's all YOU. YOU don't kill... and you never will, m'love."

Bruce's head dropped as he replied almost silently, "How can you be sure?"

"Well, Joker's in Arkham and not a coffin, that's the obvious one," she answered instantly. "But more to the point... Bruce, you didn't kill him, that's how I know. You stormed out of the room, scared Alfred, scared Dick and broke Eddie's legs. But you did leave that room."

He flinched at an unspoken memory, but slowly looked back up. Selina took a tentative step towards him.

"When you decided staying would have meant wringing his neck, you left. Bruce, how clear do you want it?"

"I'd never felt that before. Even with Joker," he said hoarsely. "I... I wanted to kill him. I honestly did."

"You wanted to. But you didn't need to. And that's how I know."

"Semantics," he said gruffly.

"No," Selina replied patiently. "Semantics is that bullshit from before, 'Batman won't kill but Bruce Wayne might.' This isn't semantics, this is 'different words have different meanings and those differences matter.' If you needed to, then I'd be worried. Wanting to means that you had a choice. And I know—Bruce, with every fiber of my being, I know—that when you have a choice, you come out on the right side. You're so consistent, it's frankly unattractive."

Bruce considered the words.

"Downright infuriating," she added, with a loving grin.

"Why did you send Dick to the showers?" he graveled, the abrupt change of subject and tone hinting, for the briefest moment, that whatever else was happening, Psychobat still wanted all questions answered, and all answers duly catalogued, annotated, and cross-referenced.

“Because Dick doesn’t consider your absolute, unqualified, relentless, inflexible, uncompromising, non-negotiable, pig-headed-stubborn commitment to doing the right thing to be infuriating and unattractive. And what you needed to hear had to come from someone who does.”

Feline logic, Bruce thought miserably. That’s what this evening needed.

“He’s upstairs now,” Selina said, reaching for his hand to lead him from the vault. “And he’ll want to talk, if you’re up to it.”

Bruce glanced absently down at her hand but strode past her and out into the cave proper. “I’m not. But I will,” he replied blankly. A few steps into the cave, he paused, looking towards the trophy room and the safe beyond hidden behind a hologram wall. “Go up and send him down here. There’s a lot of work to be done, and no time to waste.”

“Do you want me to help?” Selina asked quietly, following his eyes and guessing the investigation to come.

The only answer was another rasping rumble as Bruce exhaled and a cold emptiness in his eyes that Shakespeare called dead coals.

### **Witness Statement**

Written on behalf of juvenile witness—Wayne, Bruce by Officer M. Cure

On return from the Park Row Theatre at approx 22.00 hrs on Friday Jan 21st in company of parents Thomas and Martha Wayne. Wayne, Bruce witnessed the shooting of parents. Attack took place in back alley of Park Row N leading to main boulevard. Victims were held at gunpoint by unidentified man who demanded money and jewelry. Money was handed over but assailant panicked and shot and killed witness’s father, witness’s mother Martha Wayne screamed. Assailant then shot and killed her too and pulled pearl necklace from around her neck. Man then ran from scene towards the main boulevard. Witness was left unharmed.

“I don’t need to read it,” Bruce said flatly, sliding the photocopy of a photocopy into a folder and placing it precisely on the computer console between Dick and Selina. It was just after midnight. Bruce and Dick were still in costume, apart from masks and gloves. Workstation One, the ledge beside it and the inviolate space where Alfred would set the dinner tray were all strewn with crinkled police reports, sealed evidence bags with yellowing type-written tags, an old-fashioned cassette player and a stack of government wiretaps, and two items completely out of place among this produce of criminal investigation: a Cat-Tales mug and a Catitat mug, each placed a careful distance from the paperwork but conspicuously handy to Bruce and Dick’s respective workspace.

Neither man had wanted the cocoa and Selina didn’t especially want to make it, but it had become obvious that Bruce wanted to get something from the safe. He kept glancing towards the trophy room, and then, without actually looking at her, his jaw set in that old rooftop grimace, the one when he was really upset with her. She figured

Dick's presence wasn't a problem, since Dick didn't know the safe existed. Bruce getting up from the console and walking west would mean nothing to him. Bruce could be going to the med lab, the costume vault, the filing cabinets, even the gymnasium. He could just be stretching his legs; Dick wouldn't even notice. Nor would he notice (or care) if Bruce brought back another file from wherever he'd gone. It was only Selina who could attach any importance to the phenomenon, because only Selina knew he had a very secret safe with his most personal belongings...

So she went up to the kitchen and made cocoa. It was a silly excuse and she felt like an idiot doing it. It was such a stupid, girly thing to do, making cocoa. Catwoman: the Feline Fatale, Catwoman: the untamable, Catwoman: claws, whip, and attitude, was going up to the kitchen to make cocoa, for Bast's sake! But then, for just a split second when she set Bruce's mug down, she caught a flash of something other than void in his eyes. It wasn't gratitude or even acknowledgement. She didn't really know what it was, but it was alive.

Dick had picked up the folder the moment Bruce set it down. He removed the witness statement with reverent care and started to read while Selina walked the long way around the back of the workstation until she came face-to-face with Bruce.

"I don't need to read it," he repeated in the hurried whisper one uses in a library or a church. "Every word and detail is burned into my memory. Strange details. The word juvenile is misspelled. The curious repetition of my mother's name. 'Witness's mother Martha Wayne screamed.' I remember wondering about that when I was eleven. If there was some technical reason for it, for legal purposes. But then it should say 'shot and killed witness's father Thomas Wayne,' so that couldn't be it..."

He stopped and flushed.

"When you're eleven, you think there must be a reason," he concluded.

When you're eleven, you think there must be a reason. I looked at the back of the paper in Dick's hand, sucked into a vortex of memories... the day that envelope arrived. Alfred didn't want me to see it, so I snuck into his pantry when he was on the phone. I'd recognized the return address: Melquoire, Brandt, and Huffman, the family lawyer. A cover letter from Phillip Melquoire forwarding another letter from the District Attorney and several sheets of police paperwork. It had been over a year (actually it was 14 months and 11 days) and the case had been reclassified. It was still open, everyone stressed that. There was no statute of limitations on murder, everyone stressed that. But no polite formula of words could blunt the hard reality: the murder of my parents had been placed into a category where nobody expected it would ever be solved.

I looked at the papers, photocopies of photocopies, not the original casefile that Batman would obtain years later. It was that day in Alfred's pantry that I first saw that witness statement, what had actually been taken down that night from the sole witness to the crime in those crucial first hours after the event.

'Witness's mother Martha Wayne screamed.' I wondered why they wrote it that way. When you're eleven, you think there must be a reason. When you're eleven, you don't realize that Officer M. Cure (whose first name was Marshall and who retired to

Sarasota, Florida eight years ago) was halfway through the graveyard shift, typing on an antiquated Underwood at one o'clock in the morning in front of a malfunctioning radiator, trying to get through it so the butler that just showed up—and who has butlers in this day and age—could take the kid home where they could at least get them out of that shirt with the blood spatters on the sleeve that he keeps staring at...

The officers of the 38<sup>th</sup> Precinct did what they could that night, but from a detective's point of view, they didn't leave us much. Dick was trying and he meant well, but this wasn't going to be nearly as easy as he was expecting. He was letting emotion color what he knew as a crimefighter. What little evidence existed from Crime Alley, I had exhausted years ago. We had to focus on the new lead, on Edward Vaniel, and that was difficult for him to accept. For him, this was solving the murder of my parents. Returning the favor, because I had done it for him.

What it was for Selina, I still don't quite understand. All I know is I could not make her leave the costume vault. I couldn't get Dick out of the cave before that, but she did, for a few minutes anyway. It didn't give me much time alone, just a minute or two. A part of me might've been grateful if she hadn't come in herself as soon as she got rid of Dick.

I wanted them both gone. I wanted to conduct my investigation alone and without the incessant distraction and interference. I wanted to regain control of my mind, my body, my cave, my mission, and most of all, over the most important case Batman would ever have.

Dick was fairly easy; I knew what he wanted. He wanted to help me find my parents' killer the way I had done for him. I told him—truthfully—that the only way to learn the truth about what happened in that alley was to forget it, to put the police records aside and focus on the new variable. We would hit the streets, hunting down any of Edward Vaniel's associates from the old days, cutting a swath through the Gotham underworld. I'd take the West Side down to Soho, the Village, and Tribeca. Nightwing would take the East Side, NoLiTa, Chinatown and the docks. The chance was slim, but he might come up with something. At the very least, it would get rid of him for a few hours and let me work in peace.

Selina was more difficult, as always. I told her Dick would partner me on this, that he'd earned the right. I'd helped him track down his parents' killers, after all, and then kept him from taking it too far when we found them. At about that same time, I reminded her, she was helping herself to John Klondoff's jade collection, so...

It was a harsh way to put it, but it wasn't needlessly harsh. I did it for a reason. Selina doesn't apologize for her criminal past and she doesn't back away from it. At the same time, she wouldn't want to argue for being a thief, not then, not in relation to that case, so she did the only thing she could.

"Sure."

She said it lightly, as if neither the refusal nor the reasoning behind it held any importance for her... Of course it did, and of course there would be a price. I had no idea how high, or how soon it would have to be paid. All I knew was I had achieved my solitude at last, at least until I had to meet Nightwing on the Moxton Building to hear what he had found.

"Not much," Nightwing announced, disgusted.

"This surprises you?" Batman asked stoically.

"I guess not. Well yeah, it did, but I guess it shouldn't have. One of the pitfalls of that life, short life spans."

Batman grunted.

"Though strangely," Nightwing continued, "the ones who are still around that did know Vaniel were more... cooperative than I expected."

"I don't imagine he had too many friends, even in the criminal community," Batman stated flatly.

"That bad, huh?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Nightwing saw Batman bristle slightly, then the flat tone returned. "But despite what little you found...?"

"One name kept popping up," Nightwing confirmed. "From those 'reputed mob ties,' like it said on the quick sheet."

"I found the same," Batman graveled.

"One name, over and over," Nightwing nodded.

"Carminе Falcone," they said together.



## CHAPTER 3: CONNECTIONS

I began studying organized crime more than seven years before becoming Batman. One of the first observations I made then is still true today: the Italian Mafia in Gotham are the most famous gangsters in the world. There's a romanticized history in movies like the *Godfather* and *Goodfellas*. There's the real history of thuggery and blackmail called *mano nero* forming within the first waves of Sicilian immigrants; the Castellamarese War for domination, Luciano Lansky and Seigel, Murder Incorporated, and the rise of the Five Families... And there is a very murky present which often can't distinguish between the reality and fables of its own past.

Nowhere is that murky confusion more evident than in Carmine "The Roman" Falcone.

To hear Falcone tell it, he became *capo di tutti capi*, the 'boss of bosses,' by ending a bloody gang war: first helping his predecessor assassinate the previous don and then killing him before he could move into the vacated position. No one seems to notice that's pretty much the Lucky Luciano story, setting up Joe Masseria for Sal Maranzano, then killing Maranzano almost immediately afterwards. What makes the boast particularly suspect in Falcone's case is that 'Roman' in his name. He touts it now like a badge of honor, but back then it was anything but. He had no personal ties to Sicily, Calabria, or even Naples. He was a nobody. And at that time, an unconnected nobody couldn't hope to grab for power by killing a boss without support in Palermo.

So how did Falcone really come to power? Slowly. That's the best answer I or the FBI have ever been able to come up with. There was no single, startling act. Just years of work, decades of it, running the toughest crew on the South Side and leveraging a bloody reputation to consolidate power. As he took over the gambling, he let the money flow freely to his men, ensuring loyalty. When he moved into prostitution, he did the same. Drugs, he did the same. He chose which capos, soldiers, and associates were worth buying and he bought them, it was that simple.

Edward Vaniel was not worth buying. At best, he was dumb muscle, hired help Falcone used from time to time while he was building his empire. But what, if anything, determined when he'd use an outsider like Vaniel? That's what was unclear. There was a connection, certainly, but it was vague. Maddeningly vague.

There was nothing flashy in Carmine Falcone. Hollywood could never make anything of him and neither would Mafia legend, so at some point he started writing his own. That's when he became "The Roman," like he was a Caesar. Even he's begun to believe his fable, but before he was The Roman, he was an ambitious nobody scheming to become the strongest capo in Gotham. That's when this strange undefined connection formed with Edward Vaniel... and that's why it was worth looking into.

"Infrared disengage," Batman said sharply.

There was a click as the voice-responsive lenses snapped into the off-position within the cowl, and a sigh as Nightwing achieved the same effect by pulling his night vision binoculars away from his face.

“We are screwed,” he announced flatly.

The Falcone compound in Massapequa was a fortress. Blockbuster’s headquarters in Bludhaven, even Ra’s al Ghul’s castle in Istanbul had nothing on it—and that had a moat! This was a well-designed mixture of classic proactive defenses and high-tech gadgetry: patrolling guards and sophisticated cameras, massive stone walls concealing intricate sensors with unknown capabilities. The old world style of the mansion and wooded grounds belied the most advanced modern defenses, which Batman and Nightwing supposed was the point. The same dichotomy had appeared in The Roman’s Gotham City townhouse, but at least there they’d known what they were up against.

After they’d met on the Moxton Building and confirmed that “The Roman” was the one name that kept coming up in relation to Vaniel in both their investigations, they both knew talking to Falcone was the next step. So they’d proceeded to the townhouse.

One of the reasons The Roman had become so successful in building and maintaining his criminal empire was his tendency to do things differently than others in the business of organized crime. His outsider status for so many years had given him an outsider’s perspective. This allowed him to ignore the traditional ways of the old world dons—at least in certain areas where it didn’t damage his prestige (although he did have a tendency to overdo it in other areas to compensate). Most bosses in Gotham and elsewhere still operated out of small rooms in the backs of restaurants, “social clubs,” and other businesses. Carmine understood that these were glaring beacons for law enforcement, so he moved his operations into a remarkably ordinary townhouse in a small residential neighborhood in the heart of the city. Over the years, he’d muscled out several other residents and filled much of the block with his own people; not lieutenants or soldiers, no one directly involved in criminal enterprises, but workers from his warehouses, business owners and shop keepers under his protection, anyone who would blend in and make the neighborhood appear normal to the outside but still remain loyal to him.

Batman and Nightwing knew that in order to talk to Falcone, they’d have to infiltrate the townhouse, and do so without alerting any of the Falcone-friendly residents to their presence. Not an impossible job, but not exactly an easy one either. Once they’d made the decision to go after Falcone, they’d gone straight to his townhouse and given it a quick once-over with the infrareds, just like they were doing now at his out-of-town compound. It had been too close to dawn to do more, so they’d retired to the satellite cave under the Wayne Tower (since it was closer, Bruce said, although Dick suspected that he simply didn’t want to go back to the manor) and spent the day pulling blueprints, studying floor plans, investigating all that was known of the layout, design, and defensive capabilities of Falcone’s Gotham City townhouse and the surrounding neighborhood. When night fell, they waited one hour and then executed their plan with flawless precision—only to find the place empty, apart from a sixty-three year old housekeeper.

They quickly and silently searched the house, ultimately finding a datebook with the notation that Falcone had gone to his “country estate” (as the arrogant poser, still trying to come off as a Caesar, referred to the out-of-town compound).

So now, with a day lost, here they were back at square one. Worse than square one, actually. They were supposed to be talking to Falcone by now. Instead, they were in the middle of the woods, looking over a walled installation that made Fort Knox look like a convenience store. Ten minutes after they’d arrived on-scene they realized why Falcone wasn’t at the townhouse as expected: a phalanx of cars arrived at the compound, delivering many of the Roman’s lieutenants and their personal guards. A gathering of that size would attract too much attention in a residential midtown neighborhood.

“I don’t know how we’re gonna get in,” Nightwing murmured. “It’ll take all night, maybe even days, just figuring out what we’re up against.”

Batman’s eyes shifted within the mask to glare at him without turning.

“Six armed guards patrol the perimeter inside the wall,” he graveled. “Two outside. There are a number of cameras, either standard or heat-detecting, around the grounds. Presumably more cameras of either type within the house. Motion detectors aren’t likely as it’s an occupied residence. More guns inside are a certainty. Dogs are a possibility...”

“Will you listen to yourself? ‘A number of cameras,’ ‘either’ this kind or that, ‘presumably,’ ‘unlikely,’ ‘a possibility.’ Batman, we don’t know what we’re up against.”

Batman merely swallowed.

“It’s going to take time to get the intel we need to pull this off,” Nightwing continued. “We *could* wait until tomorrow night, wait for him to go back to the city and hit him at the townhouse like we originally planned—that’s assuming he’s going right back, of course.”

“No,” Batman growled with finality. “We’ve wasted enough time already. We go in tonight.”

Dick knew he was beyond frustrated. Spending the whole day plotting out their invasion of the townhouse had been torturous. Batman had identified the next link in the chain that led to the answers he needed, and anything that delayed him only made it more maddening.

If the plan had been to take down Falcone and his crew, Nightwing would have been right on board with going in immediately. But all they wanted was to talk to Falcone, which meant they needed to sneak in, catch him off-guard, and alone. That required finesse, and Dick was pretty certain that finesse wasn’t on Batman’s radar at the moment.

“Okay. If we don’t have the time to prepare,” Nightwing said slowly, thinking out loud, “if we have to go in tonight... then it’s gonna take time we don’t have to work out what we’re up against... then *more* time we don’t have to figure a way around it all... Unless—”

“No.”

“C’mon, Batman, it’s the obvious way.”

“No.”

"You know she can do it. You know she will; you only have to ask."

"I don't want her involved in this."

"Bruce, we need her."

"What did you say?"

"With her help, we can talk to Falcone before dawn. Without her..."

Dick's words faded into muffled cotton, sound without meaning. The only words that mattered were echoing in my brain: Want. Need.

"You wanted to but you didn't need to," Selina had said. "Wanting to means that you had a choice."

And *needing* meant that I didn't.

If I wanted to talk to Falcone any time soon, I needed Catwoman's expertise. I did not have a choice.

I knew if I called her, she would be with us outside the compound in minutes. She could get there faster than we had; she was at the manor. We'd come from the city...

But I hesitated, pointlessly thinking through the comparative drive times from Bristol and midtown, and all the while Dick droned on about... something. Loose connections. He said it was a lot to go through for some loose connections.

I still wasn't hearing him. All I could think of was how I didn't want either of them working on this. Wanting meant I was supposed to have a choice. And yet...

Catwoman arrived at the Falcone compound eleven minutes later than Batman predicted. As the minutes ticked by, he assumed he'd either misjudged the speed of her Jaguar or she was deliberately driving slower than she was capable of. Her engine was sufficiently quiet, there would be no tactical reason to do so. The only reason would be spite.

*...I thought Dick was going to partner you,;... she'd said when he called.*

"He is. But we need your expertise," he'd explained, feeling strangely detached from the conversation. It was the crimefighter answering automatically, while the greater part of his brain kept cycling through other thoughts: the hospital, the alley, the cave.

A long, uncomfortable pause answered whatever it was he'd just said... Yes, of course, he said he needed her expertise to break into the Falcone compound—after he'd shut her out of the case with studied cruelty and avoided her for a day. Thinking to deflect the coming attack by meeting the issue head on, he cleared his throat and said what he needed was "that same expertise that got you John Klondoff's jade collection. That same expertise. It will save us hours. Selina, please."

*...I'll be right there,;... she said.* Even in his detached condition, he noted the tone. There was something strange in her voice that he'd never heard before. And now, she was taking nine minutes more than he'd predicted...

Ten minutes...

While he waited, Batman studied the guards' movements, plotting out their routes and patterns. It was necessary, but it still felt like pointlessly wasting time. Again.

He kept hearing that strange inflection in Selina's voice on the phone, something hollow, distant.

Eleven...

When she finally did arrive, she had two backpacks full of specialized gear. She brought them to a different vantage point overlooking the compound—a strategically inferior one as far as Batman was concerned, but she insisted. She borrowed Nightwing's binoculars and muttered something he couldn't hear. Something about the trees being thinner, or maybe it was the woods, how something had changed or hadn't been changed. Then she bit her lip, thinking. She hadn't looked at him once.

She switched the binoculars to thermal view and commented on the number of people in Falcone's office. Batman confirmed it, and told her what they knew about the arrivals and what they surmised about a meeting taking place inside. Since they didn't know how many people could be coming in or out of the house (and, more importantly, *when*), they would have to cover their tracks both going in and coming out of the compound.

The high concrete wall was decorated at intervals with inset metal squares depicting scenes of ancient Rome: the profile of an emperor, a centurion, a frieze of the Roman senate... Catwoman pointed to one of these, the one with a portrait of Seneca, and said it hid the controls for the front gate and the outdoor cameras. She mapped out the best route to get to the second story window, pointing out camera angles, cover spots, and areas to avoid. Batman started to outline what he'd noted of the guards' patrol routes, but she waved him off as if she already knew and was trying to concentrate.

He hated the loss of control, but reminded himself it was the expertise that they needed—the time her expertise bought them that he needed—and needing meant there was no choice.

Catwoman was mapping out a plan where Nightwing would take out a specific guard when he entered the blind spot of that camera, opening a path for her to reach the control panel and disconnect *that* camera, so Batman could get *that* guard, redirect *this* camera so Nightwing could get that one, and then she would advance to *here* and get to work on the second floor window, while they picked off the remaining guards as they came around...

Batman couldn't see anything special about the metal frieze with the profile of Seneca that differentiated it from all the others, and a strange unease settled over him. Had he missed something, some little indicator that she could see and he couldn't? He asked how she knew that particular panel hid the controls.

For the first time since she arrived, Catwoman looked at him—and for the first time since leaving the hospital, Bruce saw something beyond his own rage and pain.

"I just know," she said simply.

The *words* were simple. The voice was professional, confident, and detached. But the eyes, there was no hint of the woman he knew in those eyes. No Selina, and no Catwoman either...

"Will take maybe twenty minutes to reach Falcone himself," she concluded.

...There was only heart-wrenching bewilderment and eloquent pain.

14½ minutes later, Carmine Falcone glanced at the clock on his desk while Fat Stefano's boy Anthony gave his report. Like all new lieutenants, he spoke last, and like all new lieutenants, he hogged the spotlight when his turn finally came. Like all new lieutenants, he was caught up in the glamour of being called out to the Don's country compound to give his report among all these senior *capo regimes*, just like in the movies. Like all new lieutenants, he didn't realize that his Don (and all the other capos) would have rather wrapped it up an hour ago, had a glass of sambuca, and said goodnight.

"So it looks like we're looking at about a ten percent bump in profits from the West Side this month." Antony Crispi concluded boldly.

"That's wonderful news." Falcone smirked at the young man, getting up from the desk and gently patting his shoulder. "But don't get too excited yet. There's an ebb and flow to these things. When the bump is continuous for six months, then we get excited. Okay?"

"Yes sir," Antony replied, glancing around the room timidly as the other capos chuckled lightly. The boy was new. He was bound to be a little eager to please. They'd all been there.

"Alright, boys. Good work. I'll see all of you at your regular times at the townhouse next week." Carmine shooed them away, each man making sure he said 'Good Night' to the boss.

Once the room was empty, Carmine strolled confidently over to the wet bar to pour himself a brandy, not really caring for the anise sting of sambuca when he wasn't playing The Godfather Don Falcone with his capos. He'd give those West Side profits six months to show what they were really doing, but this new kid he gave a month, tops. Either Antony learned to settle down, or Carmine was going to have to reconsider his promotion practices—and the boy's future... employment.

He picked a cube from the ice bucket and a shiver ran down his spine, followed by a low, rumbling voice behind him.

"Falcone."

Carmine froze for a split second, then casually dropped the cube into his glass.

"Ah. Batman. What a pleasant surprise," he intoned, over-cheerful as he picked up a crystal decanter and poured several fingers of brandy into his glass. "To what do I owe this honor?"

Carmine turned slowly, a broad smile on his face, to see Batman standing across the room with his arms crossed over his chest. Standing next to him was the younger hero called Nightwing who, it was rumored, was actually Batman's former sidekick, Robin, all grown up—but not *that* grown up, from the looks of him.

"And the Junior Bat!" Falcone added, tipping his glass at both of them. "Must be my lucky night. I win the lottery or something?"

"We need to talk about one of your associates," the Dark Knight growled.

"I've got a lot of 'associates,' Bats. What kind of associate?"

"Former."

"Ah! Well, I've got a lot *more* of that kind. Care to narrow it down a little? This 'former associate' got a name?"

"Edward Vaniel."

For only an instant, Carmine's sarcastic smile faltered, replaced with a flash of irritated anger. Almost as suddenly, the smile reappeared. "Vaniel? And just how is ol' *Easy Eddie* these days?"

Batman and Nightwing glanced at each other. They'd both expected the standard denials ("Never heard of the guy"), but not only did Falcone admit to hearing of Edward Vaniel, he used his old nickname with careless familiarity.

Batman returned his attention to Falcone and answered his question matter-of-factly. "Dying."

Carmine's smile widened. "Oh, now ain't that a shame." He glanced down into his glass, the smile never leaving his face. "Gunshot wound?"

"Cancer."

"I used to tell him all that living would catch up to him one day." Carmine shrugged, taking a sip of the drink. "Too bad for him. But I'm afraid I'm not going to be too much help in that arena. Haven't spoken to the guy in... well, a long, long time. Last I'd heard, he was up the river."

"Thirteen years. Attempted murder."

"Like I said, a long time," Carmine smirked, setting his glass on the edge of a small desk.

Nightwing, who had been standing quietly off to the side, finally chimed in.

"The way we hear it, he's done some work for you since then. Since he'd gotten out."

Falcone shot Nightwing the same look he'd give one of his junior lieutenants who spoke out of turn, then he turned a questioning eye toward Batman, it being his prerogative to reprimand a subordinate or not. When the Dark Knight's face remained as impassive as ever, Carmine glanced back at Nightwing.

"You know, Junior, I've got a lot of people working for me. Many of them indirectly, so I don't even know about them. Hell, half the time I only hear about it through the grapevine a year later. Even heard a rumor that *you* worked for me, indirectly, for a short while. That can't be true, can it?"

Nightwing said nothing, and Carmine smirked again.

"It's called 'delegating authority,' Son. Comes with being the boss. Maybe you'll learn about that one day."

Falcone could have gone round-and-round all night with the pompous upstart, but Batman stepped back in.

"Vaniel's recent activities are irrelevant. My questions involve a much older case. Around the time when you and he *were* working together, back when you were both two-bit thugs."

Carmine shot Batman a disgusted look at this reminder he wasn't always "The Roman Don Falcone," but then he replanted the broad smile across his face. "I'm still not sure how much help I can be, Bats Old Man. The old memory ain't what it used to be. What kind of case are we talking about here?"

"Double homicide."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't have been involved with anything like *that*."

"What about Vaniel?"

"Gee, Bats, I couldn't say. Easy Eddie was into a lot of different things."

"Did he ever talk about those 'different things?'"

Carmine chuckled. "When did he not? The guy liked to talk. A lot. If Easy Eddie did even half the things he bragged about back then, well, he'd probably be standing *here* now, having his home invaded by the likes of you, instead of rotting away in a hospital bed."

"I never said he was in a hospital bed."

"Quite right," Falcone agreed, smirking again as he picked up his glass and took another sip. "In any event, Vaniel has a bit of a history when it comes to... flapping his gums." His face darkened slightly. "Why, is he picking that habit up again? Talking about things he shouldn't be?"

"That's what I'm trying to determine."

There was a tense beat of silence as the two men stared at each other.

"Did he ever happen to mention the Wayne murders?"

Carmine stared for a moment, then rocked his head back and laughed heartily. After a few seconds, he wiped a non-existent tear from the corner of his eye and tried to suppress the chuckle still rumbling in his chest. "Th-the *Wayne* murders?!"

Batman stepped forward, narrowing the gap between himself and Falcone, and growled in a sinister tone, "Something funny?"

Carmine ignored the threat, still laughing to himself.

"I'd say so. Are you telling me that on his deathbed, Eddie Vaniel is confessing to the Wayne murders? He drop any other bombshells? Was he the one on the Grassy Knoll? He give you directions to Jimmy Hoffa's grave?"

Batman grunted his distain.

"Are you saying you *never* heard him mention it?"

"I'm not saying that at all, Bats. In fact, he didn't just *mention* it, he bragged about it—on several occasions!"

Batman and Nightwing exchanged glances, then both returned their attention to Falcone. The mob boss looked at both of them staring at him and chuckled even more. "*Of course* he admitted to it. Half the guys I hung around with back then admitted to it. Hell, I think *I* even confessed to it once or twice. It was a high-profile crime, little real evidence and no one was ever caught. Dream situation for anyone looking to make a name for himself. If you could convince people that you were the one who got away with one of the biggest crimes in this city's history, it was an instant credibility chip. Back then, half the players in Gotham said they'd killed Dr. Wayne and his wife. The truth is *no one* knows who did it and anyone saying different is flat-out lying."

In the vent above the study, Catwoman listened while Falcone went round and round with Batman and Nightwing. She couldn't quite believe she was inside that house, the mansion at the very center of the Falcone compound. The one she'd looked into when she snuck away from Miss Corinne's. That house that seemed to have everything she'd lost when her parents died. Of all the places she never wanted to come back to, let alone break into as Catwoman...

"So where is Easy Eddie holed up these days?" Carmine Falcone's voice drifted up from the room below. "I'd like to send him a get well card."

...but what could she do? Batman needed her. Bruce needed her. Bruce, who really had given her everything that she'd lost back then. It was the most important case of his... He'd given her a home ten times more luxurious than this one that she'd coveted. And he'd given her the love and the family it had come to represent in a lonely little girl's mind... It was his parents. The son of a bitch called him to the hospital and said that he'd... She was in *that home* that she shared with Bruce when he called and asked her to come out to Massapequa and break him into Carmine Falcone's compound. It was the most important case—the most important event—in his life that he was investigating. It was... He needed her criminal talents in conjunction with... He was Batman. Before he was ever Bruce to her, he was Batman. She really had, in a roundabout way, found love and a home and a family again, through crime. Just like this house she once coveted came from crime. The ironies were suffocating if you thought about them, and she kept telling herself not to. They didn't mean anything, they were just... crime in Gotham was a small world and it all interconnected.

"Hey, if you won't tell me, maybe Eddie's kid would know," Falcone's voice said smugly.

Catwoman started at a violent slamming below, punctuated by the piercing crinkle of broken glass.

"Vaniel's son is off-limits," Batman's voice growled hatefully, a softer glass-crunching hinting that he'd slammed Falcone against a wall where a mirror hung and was now pressing him against the broken shards. "If you want to punish the son for the sins of the father, that's a two-way street," Batman hissed. "Anything happens to Edward Vaniel's son, I will hold you *personally* responsible. Anything happens to Edward Vaniel's son, and I'm taking it out on *yours*. How *are* the twins nowadays, Carmine? I hear Metropolis is nice this time of year."

There were a few more jabs and threats that Catwoman didn't follow as she prepared to withdraw from the vent and the house. She was to reset the cameras and jam the front gate once Batman and Nightwing had gone, then rendezvous with them at the Batmobile.

Down below, Batman had let Falcone go. Carmine lunged to the desk, pulled a gun and turned to shoot—but found only an empty room and an open window to shoot at.

For all its proximity to Gotham, the sky above Massapequa is darker than most city-dwellers ever see. The roads are even darker. Batman had told Nightwing to drive the Jaguar back to the house. Catwoman would be riding with him in the Batmobile. They had something to discuss.

But then in the car, racing down that black road under that black sky, he didn't say anything. The same unease that had hit him outside the compound tickled up his spine. Selina waited... waited... and finally, giving up, she started to ask about Falcone. She'd only opened her mouth, when at last Batman spoke.

"Unless you have x-ray vision or some extra sensory ability I'm unaware of, it's not possible to 'just know' the controls were behind that particular panel."

"I salute you, World's Greatest Detective," she said softly. They drove in silence for a minute. Then:

"How did you know that Seneca panel opened up, and what the controls behind it were for?"

"Why does it matter so much?" she asked gently.

"It doesn't, in and of itself," he graveled.

It didn't... It shouldn't. But somehow it did matter.

It was instinct, initially. Catwoman knew something that he didn't; she could see something looking into the compound that he couldn't. It made him question if he was missing details he *should* be seeing, if his mind was misfiring somehow. If not, then it was an opportunity to learn. Batman wasn't so arrogant as to think he knew all things, and when he did bring in an expert for some specialized task, he always remained open to... *She saw something he didn't*, and the crimefighter core of his mind—the only part functioning on full capacity at the moment—had snatched instinctively for the new information. He asked the question, "How do you know?" but when she wouldn't answer... it awakened something. And now, it was strangely important to know why.

"You've never held back before," he said, more to himself than her. "You're usually more than eager to share any *burglary tips*."

"It's the safe," she said quietly. "Like the safe... Do you think you're the only one with a childhood, Bruce?"

The car screeched to a stop, slamming her into the seatbelt then back against the seat with equal force. Behind them, the Jaguar swerved and drove around to avoid crashing into them.

Batman turned to the passenger seat, staring blankly without seeing. The frank mention of the safe had torn into his gut like a knife.

"Do you? Do you think you're the only one that gets to put up a 'no trespassing' sign? It took a lot for me to come out here tonight. But I did it, and I did it for you. Let that be enough, okay?"

There was a distant rapping. Like a man waking from the deepest sleep, Batman vaguely realized it was Nightwing knocking on the window. He opened it, growled that there was no problem, and then drove off without saying more.

The farther they got from the compound, the more Selina felt like herself again—her real self, her present self, not the ghost of a lonely twelve-year-old lost in the psyche of a grown catburglar with a job to do. The more she settled the disquiet in her own head, the more she became aware of Bruce again. Of Bruce not talking, and that pulse of dark intensity streaming off him in waves.

It was only once they'd reached the cave, when she'd exited the Batmobile and headed for the stairs, that he spoke again.

"This mystery reason you won't tell me, is that why it took you an extra eleven minutes to meet us at the compound?"

She stopped and gave a sad smile.

"You really are the best. No joke."

"Is that why?"

"Yes," she said, turning to face him. "I knew enough about the grounds out there that I wanted to bring some special equipment that I haven't used in a long time, so I had to dig it out of the closet. I didn't time it, but if you say it was eleven minutes, there it is."

He grunted... and she looked at him shrewdly.

"You thought it was personal. You thought I was punishing you because you'd told me to stay, like a cocker spaniel, and then told me to come, like a cocker spaniel?"

He grunted noncommittally, then after a moment, he nodded slowly, once.

"Something like that."

She turned away and took a step towards the stairs, saying she thought Alfred was still up and she'd have him bring Bruce and Dick coffee.

"Selina, wait!"

The words had sprung out of his mouth again—*Selina, wait!*—an instinct, like countering a gust of wind mid-swing on the Batline.

But she was *going*—that's what he *wanted*, wasn't it?

She obviously didn't consider herself invited to join the investigation just because they'd needed her at Falcone's. So she was going. It would have been one less to get rid of if he'd let her go, but he stopped her.

"Yes?"

Bruce froze for a moment, unable to come up with a response or even wrap his head around *why* he'd asked her to stop in the first place. Before he could formulate an answer, Nightwing returned, extolling the virtues of the Jaguar as a truly superior driving machine. Then he kissed Selina on the cheek and thanked her for helping out. It was an obvious effort to lighten the mood at the end of a long, grueling episode, an effort that made Selina smile and Bruce's brow crease slightly. Dick seemed to take her continued involvement as a given.

Bruce glanced at him for a second, then looked back at Selina, the crimefighter core of his mind taking hold.

"As someone who's been there, professionally, did anything strike you about Falcone's behavior with Batman and Nightwing?"

"Well," Selina bit her lip, thinking, "since you asked, and now that I think about it... Yeah. I thought he was uncharacteristically loose-lipped about the whole thing."

Dick nodded, adding "Just like the guys we talked to last night. Falcone seemed almost eager to give us information."

"I noticed the same thing," Batman graveled with a knowing glint. "He was fishing. He wants Vaniel and was hoping to use the situation to find him."

"So there is a real connection between them," Selina purred, a cat contemplating cream.

They had new information, and that propelled everyone back to Workstation One and the stacks of evidence they'd sifted through before.

Over the next half-hour, Bruce became increasingly frustrated as folders were stacked on top of floppy disks, boxes of cassettes blocked the primary CD tray, and finally, he knocked an evidence bag off the edge of the console as he reached for Dick's notes on the FBI surveillance photos.

He cursed, stood, and stalked off towards the chem lab.

"Dick, get in here," he called a moment later, and the two of them maneuvered a large round worktable into the main chamber of the Batcave. Chairs followed, commandeered from Alfred's pantry, and the evidence was shuttled over in armfuls.

Finally, the three reconvened around the ad hoc conference table just as Alfred arrived with coffee.

Dick kept circling back to Falcone's credibility. Bruce repeated what he'd said earlier: Falcone was fishing. What information he gave them was dangled in the hopes of learning more. He wanted Vaniel himself and was hoping to leverage the vigilantes' interest in order to find him. But why would he be looking?

"Waaaait-a-minute," Dick murmured, looking vacantly at a stack of federal wiretaps. Then he dove into a bundle of files and began sifting through papers. "Remember Detective Porpora," he said as he searched, "from that multi-jurisdictional task force on organized crime, the ones that helped clean Blockbuster's dirty cops out of Bludhaven a few years back? I thought I remembered—Yeah, here it is. Hey, nice picture—I thought I remembered him telling me the CIA was putting a case together about that time, to take down the Falcons.

"Now that rumor comes out every few years, but that time, it seemed like something else. Wasn't forgotten a week later, I remember that; it stayed around for quite some time. The talk was..." He paused and looked from Bruce to Selina and back to Bruce before continuing, "the Agency had an informant ready to name names. Eventually, nothing came of it but..."

"But if Vaniel was the informant," Bruce said ominously.

The Oracle avatar had now symbolically joined Bruce, Dick, and Selina at the conference table, even though she technically appeared only on a sidescreen adjacent to the table. It was forty minutes since the avatar had sprung from its flat, dormant gray to the lively, animated green that meant Barbara was online and actively working behind it; however she hadn't participated in the meeting for more than half an hour. There was only faint clicking coming over her channel, an occasional whispered curse, and the one time Dick asked how it was going, a furious "Not now, not now, don't break my rhythm-oh *DAMNIT*, Dickey!"

"Oops," Dick mouthed and returned his attention to the photographs he was viewing.

Bruce pored over the resumes and personal histories of CIA employees working at the Gotham Division Office at the time of the Falcone rumor—but he found himself glancing up every few sentences and looking around the table. Selina was clicking through a slideshow of old FBI surveillance photos, while Dick sifted through Porpora's notes on them... Bruce returned his attention to the resume of one Allan Dickinson from Grosse Pointe... but found it increasingly difficult to focus on anything. His mind kept wandering and he looked up again, seeing all of them working together this way. It's not what he'd ever envisioned when he began his mission as Batman, this collection of people around him, all working toward the same goals. He certainly never imagined that work on *this* case—this case that was so personal for him—would have included so many others...

"The whole family's here."

"What?" Bruce asked, the statement jarring him from his own mind.

"The whole family's there," Dick repeated, pointing to the screen. "Porpora's notes on the Falcones. There's some big meeting going on. The Feds thought it was a war council, but when Porpora saw these shots, he realized..."

"That it was a family thing," Selina finished, noting the undeniable resemblance among the people in the photos.

Bruce grunted, nodding. He tried to return his attention to the file in his hands: Allan Dickinson. Midwest, Norwegian-Irish ancestry, recruited out of the University of Michigan. Nothing in the personal history that would make him a candidate for undercover work with the urban mobs. Grew up in an idyllic lake town, not ethnically diverse... The psych profile was even less promising: broken home, bad relationship with the father...

"It's the son."

Selina's voice tore him away this time. He looked up directly at her, but her eyes were locked on a file in her hand.

"What?" Dick asked the question before Bruce could verbalize it.

"It's this one," Selina reiterated. "This FBI schmuck who based their entire case on getting Migliosi to turn state's evidence."

"Jesus," Dick stared aghast at the file as Selina offered it to him. "*One guy?* No wonder they could never make it stick."

"That may be why Porpora had a hard time convincing the Agency to open their own investigation," Bruce offered grimly. "With such flimsy evidence to start with, they'd basically be starting from scratch."

"Which it looks like they did," Dick confirmed, passing a stack of notes to Bruce.

Dick continued to explain what he'd read so far while Bruce glanced through the notes. He heard Dick talking but his mind focused in on the paperwork in his hands. All the CIA inherited from the bureau was hearsay and conjecture, an entire file of little more than street rumors, what the Falcone family *might* have been involved with... and nothing at all about a snitch. Bruce kept looking, his eyes poring through the file looking for anything. He found himself getting more and more frustrated, like it was right there, hiding in plain sight, if only he could see it...

"You're losing your mind."

Bruce's eyes jumped up at Selina, realizing it had been her voice again. For some reason, he expected to see her looking back at him, but she was looking at Dick instead.

"Oh please," Dick smirked. "I lost that years ago."

They both chuckled lightly, but Bruce just stared back and forth between them as Dick rifled through what looked like a stack of criminal records.

"But that doesn't mean I don't remember correctly. Aha! Bingo! The timing fits— Porpora told me about the CIA's investigation right around the same time that Vaniel would have gotten out of jail..."

Bruce shook his head and refocused on the notes in front of him, but wondered absently if he shouldn't return to the agency bios, work out who in the Gotham division office would be assigned to a Falcone task force if one had existed... That boy from the circus and the catburglar that meowed and grinned her way past all of Batman's defenses... sitting there, despite his best efforts, working together sifting through the minutia of federal mob surveillance, and all because he—

"Got it!" Oracle's hologram shouted suddenly, pulling all of their attention to the screen. "Bruce, I got it. Bits of a file hidden under three reformats on an agency hard drive. There was definitely someone named Vaniel who'd had two meetings with a SAC at the Gotham office at the time this memo was written, and was scheduled for a third. The fragment of the subject line I recovered has a code that means they're creating a social security number, and that means witness protection."

Dick let out a low whistle.

The Oracle head flickered out and Barbara's face appeared on the screen.

"Look, Boss, I'll keep looking. But given how deep this was buried, I don't know if there's anything more to be found electronically. Now that you know where to look, you'd probably have more luck checking the paper files."

"She's right, Bruce," Dick said definitely. "If there's anything about Vaniel in their records, it'll be there."

Selina turned to Bruce, and despite the cold void in his eyes, she offered a shy, affectionate smile.

"Breaking into a high-security CIA division office in the heart of downtown Gotham," Dick prompted. "Selina, I don't suppose we could impose on you *again* to..."

"I wouldn't mind another outing before sunrise," she said, still looking at Bruce. "If I'm wanted."

For a brief moment their eyes met, and somewhere beneath the vacant expression, she caught the faintest glimmer. His jaw suddenly set with a new resolve.

"Let's go."

Inside the CIA office, Batman was rifling through a filing cabinet, while Catwoman read through the folders he was stacking for her on the desk after he gave them a quick skim. Nightwing leaned against a bank of similar cabinets, watching. He'd already finished his share of the search and found nothing.

"Is it just me, or was Falcone's place a lot harder to get into than here?"

Batman grunted noncommittally around the flashlight in his teeth and kept searching through the files.

"Meow," Catwoman answered without looking up.

"I mean, seriously, it's the Central Intelligence Agency. You'd think these guys knew more about security than, well, anyone—eh, I mean, other than Catwoman, obviously. Maybe they should pick up Falcone just to get some tips on how to secure a base..."

Batman suddenly yanked a file out of the drawer and opened it, his eyes quickly scanning the pages.

"You find something?" Nightwing swung around so he was peering over Batman's shoulder at the file.

"Yes." Batman dropped the file folder on top of the open drawer and pulled the flashlight out of his mouth, holding it in his hand instead, while Catwoman got up from the desk and peered over his other shoulder.

"A dead end," Batman grunted disgustedly. "It says that Vaniel *was* the informant they were working with to take down Falcone several years ago. But they eventually had to drop it."

"Why?"

"*Lack of credibility in the witness,*" Batman read from the file.

Nobody spoke.

The words hung in the air, the implication clear: Edward Vaniel was too much of a liar for the CIA to use him.

Batman grunted, then suddenly turned away and harshly whispered a "Dammit!" under his breath. Catwoman had to step back to avoid his running into her, but she softly moved up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. Nightwing kept scanning the file, pulling out his own flashlight to continue reading. Not seeming to notice the hand on his shoulder, Batman stood in the center of the room, clenching and unclenching his fists. He felt like he was so close... so damn close... he just couldn't fit all the pieces together.

"Oh crap," Nightwing muttered, "it gets worse."

Batman and Catwoman both spun back around, eyeing him curiously.

"Easy Eddie wanted to make sure that he wasn't going to get double-crossed by the Agency, so he brought a *lawyer* with him to all of his conversations with the agents."

"Not unheard of," Batman remarked. "What's the prob—"

He froze, the wheels turning in his head.

"It's not that he had a lawyer with him," Nightwing continued. "It's who the lawyer was..."

Batman guessed the name just as Nightwing read it off the page:

"David Vaniel."

Batman moved over to join Nightwing back at the cabinet. There were mentions of David's assistance in bringing his father in, getting him to work with the Agency on the case against Falcone.

"He lied to me," Batman grunted harshly. "He told me he had nothing to do with his father until he showed up sick."

"In all fairness," Selina countered, "he probably didn't think it was relevant. If he didn't know why his dad was asking for you, why toss something like this out there unless he had to."

"It still begs the question: What else did he lie about?" Batman stared off into nothingness as his mind calculated the possibilities. Nightwing kept paging through the file. As she had earlier with Batman, Catwoman picked up the sheets Nightwing wasn't reading, scanning for details missed on a quick skim.

"Huh. It looks like the talks just stopped," Nightwing was saying. "They had a meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup>, everything was proceeding as planned, then the Vaniels suddenly stopped showing up... Wait, here it is... Something came up—threatened the immunity package they were putting toget—"

He froze mid-sentence, stopped by the gentle pressure of a clawed cat hand pressing lightly into his.

"Br—Batman," a shaken female voice said weakly.

Batman returned his attention to the file and felt a lump like a boulder drop into his stomach. Catwoman was holding a tabbed subfolder marked “Informant Bkgnd and Vetting.” In the file was a newspaper clipping—one he knew well. It was a Gotham Times cover story about a tragedy in an alley in downtown Gotham—the brutal slaying of Thomas and Martha Wayne. Next to the headline, handwritten in red ink, were the words:

“Possible Connection?”

## CHAPTER 4: CLOSING IN

Someone in the CIA thought Edward Vaniel was responsible for the Wayne murders.

I stood there staring at two words and a question mark scrawled in the margin of a newspaper clipping. I had seen that headline and that grainy photo so many times. Only one thing was different this time. That scrawl of red ink.

Possible connection?

I peered at the handwriting, sifting through all I knew and all I could deduce about the man who had written it. This was a CIA investigator, one with enough experience and standing in the agency to be assigned to the task force building a case against the most powerful crime boss in the city. And experienced law enforcement operatives are used to scum like Vaniel.

That was my *first* assumption. But as we began sorting through paper files copied at the agency, and as Oracle refined her search using the names, dates and places those hardcopies provided, a very different picture began to emerge.

There's a kind of rat-cunning that passes for smarts in the gutters. Every wiseguy-turned-snitch comes up with a variation on the same dumb idea, but for some reason he thinks it's a brainstorm and he imagines he's the only one to ever dream up such a brilliant plan. It's hard to imagine why they think they're clever. Their "strategy" is laughably transparent: they'll demand blanket immunity for anything they say in court, and once they're sworn in, they'll confess to everything they've ever done, making them untouchable for the rest of their lives. It doesn't work. Rat-cunning only impresses other rats. DAs, federal investigators and state attorney generals consider it a minor annoyance.

Vaniel was like all human refuse, he thought he had a brilliant plan. At some point in the earliest meetings, he began insisting the immunity package absolve him of *anything* in his past. He said there were things he'd done that weren't pretty that had nothing to do with Falcone and the mob, and he didn't want any of it coming out in any trial they had planned. The agents were floored. The sheer gall of it was almost *impressive*. Vaniel wasn't trying to trick them into immunity beyond the scope of his testimony, he was demanding it outright. He refused to give specifics, he volunteered no information about his past other than some of it "may have been high-profile" and that it happened in Gotham.

One of the agents looked into it while the others went through the motions, continuing to meet with Vaniel and his son about his eventual testimony against Falcone.

Oracle soon identified the agent delving into Vaniel's past. It turned out to be Nick McDonough. I remembered his bio and wasn't impressed. This was a man for whom Gotham was nothing more than a pit stop. He got himself assigned to the task force because nailing Carmine Falcone would help his career. A promotion and reassignment to Washington would make his eventual move into private security a far more lucrative endeavor.

McDonough apparently found the same kind of information we had from Carmine Falcone, witnesses who'd heard Vaniel bragging, etc. The ambitious moron thought he could guarantee Vaniel's cooperation against Falcone by blackmailing him about the Wayne murders.

If only Edward Vaniel wasn't such a hateful creep. I'd seen how he behaved with his son. I'd seen the disgusted contempt with which his former cronies spoke of him. I could easily guess how a man like that would behave with federal agents, especially if he thought he held all the cards. I could easily guess how McDonough and the others must have hated him. And so, even if they didn't have enough, shall we say, *evidence* to hold over him, McDonough tried putting the screws to him anyway. They would *make* the smug bastard tow the line.

They confronted Eddie without his son present, and he went silent. He alluded to the immunity package, "if it were true, it wouldn't matter because..."

They told him this was too big to be covered by any immunity deal.

He gave them nothing, walked out, and was never heard from again.

McDonough was transferred to Pittsburgh, not Washington; no promotion, and when he left the agency a year later, he could do no better than chief of security for an aluminum manufacturer—which subsequently went out of business.

"It sounds like it wasn't exactly his 'unreliability as a witness' that killed things," Selina observed when Bruce finished piecing it together.

He looked up sharply, a flash of venomous anger in his eyes and an acid retort on his lips. But it flickered out a moment later, and he returned his attention to a debriefing memo attached to Special Agent McDonough's resignation. They'd returned to the cave and were gathered around the conference table again, the new files appropriated from the CIA arranged in neat, orderly stacks.

"Yeah, it's not exactly accurate," Dick agreed with Selina. "But it's a concise and diplomatic phrase in a report your boss is going to read. Better than saying 'Nick bluffed with a pair of threes and we lost the family farm.'"

Feeling a disapproving bat-glare, Dick glanced up guiltily—and saw the glare was far more hostile than he expected. Bruce's frustration had increased exponentially since they'd returned to the cave... And it was easy to see why. First Falcone's bluster that *everybody* confessed to the Wayne shooting back when the case was news, then that "unreliability of the witness" notation in the CIA file. It was looking more and more like they could write Vaniel off as a pathetic, lying or delusional kook. But when they found that newspaper—"Possible connection" to the Wayne murders—it seemed to change everything. But now... now it turned out the "Possible connection" was nothing more than what Bruce and Dick had already learned... It was beyond "frustrating." Every answer was just a doorway to more questions.

"Of course, most cops are scrupulously honest about these things," Dick said quickly. "And I certainly learned early that no fibbing of any kind is ever acceptable in a log or report, and to do so undermines the very tenets of trust and teamwork."

Since Bruce's eyes had now returned to the file, Dick turned to Selina, pointed, and mouthed "it was *you, your fault*, museum, you know the time, worst Zogger-beating of my life after that. And I got grounded for a month."

She stuck out her tongue, and then picked up a different file.

"Okay, so CIA is into CYA," she murmured. "A little misdirection, a little creative reframing of the facts. 'We botched it with a witness who might have been useless anyway; we never really got to find out.' As intriguing as this whole minidrama has been and as deep as it goes, it really doesn't tell us a thing about the..." she glanced at Bruce. "The case we care about."

Bruce looked at her and tossed his file back onto the table with a violent snap of the wrist. David Vaniel's name appeared prominently at the top of the page. Not for the first time, Selina wondered about his focus on the son's involvement.

"Maybe we're looking at this backwards," Dick said suddenly. "We're trying to find evidence that he did it. Maybe we should go the other way. Reasonable doubt, just like in court. Assume it's *not* him. What reason would he have for lying about something like this? Why would someone want to claim responsibility for a crime on their deathbed if it wasn't true?"

"There are too many reasons to list," Selina said impatiently, her temper fraying almost as much as Bruce's. "Maybe he's a victim of his own Big Lie: he's bragged about it so much over the years that he's come to believe it himself. More likely? Bruce is a face and a name. This guy is less than nobody, he's got a couple hundred victims over a quarter of a century that are all nobodies too. He wants to confess on his deathbed, unburden his soul or whatever, who's he gonna call? The Nameless Victim Hotline?"

"A surrogate," Bruce growled.

It fit with the gross selfishness of the confession. There was no virtue in the act, no remorse and no concern for what he'd done, either in butchering my family or calling me to his bedside to confess. There was nothing but pride and willful concern for his soul. Did that make more sense, or less? If Bruce Wayne was nothing more than a proxy, a stand-in for all those Edward Vaniel had hurt?

Selina continued her laundry list of reasons Vaniel might have lied, but I started listing my own as I thought back to that hospital room, the particulars neither of them knew of that... *confession*.

Maybe it was one last jab at the world he'd envied and despised his whole life, to get back at those "Ivory Tower sacks of shit" once and for all. Or maybe he was looking for a way out; his own body was failing him, he was no longer that tough street soldier he'd always envisioned himself to be. A thug like "Easy Eddie" wasn't supposed to die rotting away in a hospital bed like thousands of other rubes in this city; he should go out in a blaze of glory. So he could have devised the ultimate con: he convinces Wayne that he's the killer, Wayne kills him in anger (ending his slow, painful descent into death), and the whole of Gotham City is turned on its ear when its prince, one of those hoity-toity bluebloods, is nothing more than a... a mindless, soulless killer.

And given my violent reaction...

It was pointless. All of it was pointless. There were countless reasons why Vaniel might lie. He was a sick, evil toadstool; since when does that sort need a reason? Dick

was wasting our time and so was Selina. I was wrong to get them involved, they didn't begin to understand...

I looked at the files on the table: the folder with the newspaper clipping was closed, but I knew it was in there and it was just the same as if I could see that wrinkled, yellowing headline.

Why Vaniel would lie on his deathbed was a pointless question.

The real question was: of all the things Vaniel could confess to, *why this?*

Alfred had come and gone with coffee. Dick was still reading the CIA transcripts, digging for more information on where the negotiations had broken down. Bruce picked up Vaniel's affidavit again and began searching through it intently. Selina was staring into space.

"Pearls," she said softly. "You said he had a real chip about wealth and status. I was just thinking... pearls have a definite 'old money' aura..."

Bruce's head popped up from the folder and he stared at her. "Could I speak to you in private," he said evenly.

"Sure."

He walked her back to the trophy room, the file still in his hand, and for a moment, Selina thought "speaking in private" might be an excuse for him to visit the safe again. Instead, he turned to her and spoke in a harsh whisper.

"More and more arrows are pointing to Vaniel being the one, but there is too much at stake not to be sure."

"Seems reasonable," Selina said carefully.

He grunted and walked away. Selina remained where she stood, shocked for a moment, and then followed him back to the table.

"I keep coming back to the motive," Dick was saying, shaking his head. "The original confession. Why would Vaniel be making this up on his deathbed? He's not asking for money, he's got no reason for revenge or spite. What's the upside? What would he gain?"

Bruce said nothing, he just looked at Dick for a long moment then dropped the affidavit on the table and sat.

"Actually, there's a different motive to consider." He glanced at Selina returning to the table then back to Dick. "What did you think just now when I got up to speak to Selina in private?"

"Uh," Dick began hesitantly, "I... figured you wanted to tell her something you didn't want me to hear."

"Like a few minutes ago, when you told her how you got in trouble once for falsifying a log entry after Catwoman jumped you at the museum. You did it silently when you thought I wasn't looking, because you assumed I wouldn't appreciate the levity at a time like this."

"Bruce, I—"

"Can you think of another reason?"

Dick's mouth dropped open slightly, he glanced at Selina and then rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Maybe if you wanted to ask her something private? If it was a personal question that might embarrass her or you. Or if another person in the room might keep her from answering candidly."

Bruce nodded, thoughtfully, thinking back to the night before when he'd done just that, sending Nightwing to drive back from Falcone's alone so he could question Catwoman privately in the Batmobile.

"Can you think of *another* reason?" he asked again.

Dick shook his head but Bruce kept pressing. Dick suggested every possibility he could think of. Each time Bruce would consider it for a moment, grunt, then reclassify it as a variation on one of the original two: either Bruce didn't want Dick to hear what was said, or Bruce thought Selina wouldn't want him to hear.

"Can you think of *any other* reason?" Bruce asked again.

Dick slammed a file—he didn't know which—down on the table. Bruce's frustration was becoming contagious.

"I don't know," he spat, "You're the one that did it, why don't you tell me?"

Dick expected a retort as harsh as his outburst, or at least a disgusted glare, but Bruce simply turned his attention to Selina.

"Why did *you* think I did it?" he asked in Batman's sharpest interrogation tones.

Her eyes widened, and she took a low, startled breath at the implications of the question—and what he must know her answer might be.

"You *do* have an answer that Dick hasn't thought of," he demanded.

It was so wrong. It was like... if he'd pinched her ass instead of threatening to arrest her in the Sotheby's vault. Or made a needless allusion to secret identities in front of Randolph Larraby at the Country Club.

Selina said nothing at first, merely staring into that ferocious rooftop batglare. He couldn't *want* her to mention the safe in front of Dick... Then, slowly, she regained her feline composure, and she raised a knowing eyebrow.

"I have an answer," she said in Catwoman's cool, easy confidence. "Dick, would you give us a minute?"

"Never mind," Bruce said instantly before Dick could react. "You have an answer but you won't say it in front of Dick." He turned away from her and back to the table, motioning for her to take her seat. "Your reason is wrong, by the way, as were yours, Dick. I asked to talk to Selina in private to gauge the reaction and to see the dynamic from that perspective."

"What do you mean?" Dick asked, following Bruce's eyes back to the table and the Vaniel name on top of a witness deposition.

"Back at the hospital," Bruce reminded them ominously. "Vaniel sent his son out of the room. *Why?*"

"Wh- Why does it matter?" Dick sputtered.

"The whys are everything in this case," Bruce declared. "There's no physical evidence, no one has any credibility, everyone has an ulterior motive. '*Why*' is the only way to separate what makes sense from what doesn't. Edward Vaniel sent David out of the room before he would talk to me. *Why?*"

"Because it's *his son*," Dick pointed out, like it was obvious.

Bruce shook his head.

“Not enough. Vaniel wouldn’t give a damn what David thought of him, he made that abundantly clear. It wasn’t about sparing his son’s feelings.”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t about him sparing yours,” Selina countered.

Bruce nodded.

“So if it wasn’t for David’s sake and it wasn’t for mine, it was for his own. He wanted David out of that room...” he trailed off, his fingertips tapping the top of the deposition. Suddenly, his fingers stopped.

“It wasn’t because David is his son, but because his son is a *lawyer*,” he concluded, his eyes popping up from the file and jumping back and forth between Selina and Dick. “David Vaniel knows there’s no statute of limitations on murder. And all of his efforts, everything we’ve seen in these files about the agency negotiations, seem focused on *reducing* the penalties for his father’s crimes, not avoiding them altogether. This wasn’t just any lawyer, he was an ADA and he has strong personal convictions about right and wrong. That was enough for a rat like Vaniel to be cautious. If he confessed to two murders in front of his ‘feeble, doughy-headed son,’ then dying or not, he could be put on trial for murder. And he’d perceive his son as just enough of a ‘goody-goody’ to turn him in.”

“Oh, this is fucked,” Selina murmured, stunned. “These people are just... fucked.”

“Not the way I would have phrased it, but yeah,” Dick agreed. “So, what does this get us? I mean, what does it mean for the case?”

“That David doesn’t know anything about it,” Bruce growled, his fingers closing into a fist. As usual, the more they discovered, the less they knew.

“Which means that the only one who does... is Edward,” Dick concluded softly, glancing apprehensively at Bruce. “I think it may be time to pay him another visit.”

“No,” Bruce said instantly.

“There’s too much we don’t know,” Dick insisted. “And if all this running around has shown us anything it’s that the only person who does know is Edward Vaniel. C’mon Bruce, you know scum like that, he’s no match for Batman and Nightwing. We push him on a couple of these inconsistencies, we’ll make him crack.”

“No,” Bruce repeated.

“I don’t mean literally go in costume,” Dick pressed. “I mean—”

“I know what you meant and I said no.”

Batman had spoken. With the calm, quiet authority of the man who makes the final decision he said no. They would not return to the hospital, they would not question Edward Vaniel again.

There was a long, tense silence. Batman had spoken. And Batman was wrong.

“What other option do we have?” Dick asked.

No answer.

“Bruce...you know that I’m right.”

No answer.

“Bruce, you’re the one who *taught* me this. You’re the one who showed me a police report and said you have to start with the facts, start with what you know, start with the information. We do not have enough inform—”

“I don’t know what will happen if I go back in that room,” Bruce said evenly.

It was said with quiet resolve and calm acceptance—belied by a burning Hell Month ferocity in his eyes.

The Bentley turned onto the 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue Bridge and then slowed to the crawl of late-morning traffic inching towards the city. I tuned out the hum of the car, the warmth of Selina's leg pressed against mine, and a rhythmic metallic *thk*. Dick sitting beside her, fidgeting with the window controls.

"You won't be alone this time," she'd said in the cave. I'd almost forgotten she was there. But before I could turn to face her, let alone process her words, Dick was nodding along. "Damn right."

Somehow it was decided. Somehow the two of them—that kid from the circus and the catburglar with the naughty grin—had willed the decision it into being: We were going back to the hospital, all three of us. Dick would talk to David, see if the boy knew anything at all, and Selina... Selina would be with me. I knew Vaniel wouldn't want to talk with another person in the room, any other person, but Selina does know how to push a man's buttons. She'd honed in on Vaniel's class envy and dressed to provoke it: Chanel sweater, Hermes scarf, diamond earrings, pink sapphire. It was smart. His hate would override his caution. A man like that, driven by hate his whole life, it would take over. Blot out everything else until—

"Bruce? Bruce, we're almost there."

Selina. Whispering. And... sliding her finger into my palm? I realized I was making a fist and she was trying to ease it open. I pulled my hand away... At least she was discreet. Neither Dick nor Alfred had noticed.

None of them understood, this wasn't *just* about what happened in that alley all those years ago. It was about what happened in the hospital only forty hours before. It wasn't just my father's blood spattered on my shirtsleeve while Officer Cure typed up a witness statement, it was that bloody foam on Edward Vaniel's bedsheets after I'd pressed my thumb into his trachea with no conscious thought but to squeeze.

"You wanted to but you didn't need to," Selina had said. Like it was "I don't look at it as stealing as much as 'observing practical socialism.'"

"You wanted to but you didn't need to."

Like that subtle semantic distinction would matter to Edward Vaniel when compression of the carotid arteries on both sides of his neck cut off the blood flow to his brain, when the less efficient—but more satisfying because it required more force—method of compressing his windpipe stopped the flow of air into his already rotting lungs. When...

"You wanted to but you didn't need to."

I'd known rage before. But there was always something—an instinct, a voice, a... *something* that would *watch*, that would know... a something that would not permit it to go too far. But with Vaniel... Just keep choking.

"You wanted to but you didn't need to," Selina said. How would she know? How the hell would she know? "I don't look at it as stealing as much as observing practical socialism." Does she know how angry I was that night? Does she begin to *grasp* what real *rage* is? The passion that burns in true hatred, the control you need to keep it in check?

Just keep choking.

Was there any other thought at all in my mind at that moment?

... or did I just not hear?

The elevator doors opened onto the Oncology Wing at Gotham Memorial Hospital, and Bruce was assaulted by a barrage of sense memories from his earlier visit. The antiseptic odor that filled the hallway, the trio of signs at the reception desk forbidding smoking, cell phones, and detailing visiting hours. The same nurse sat at the desk—but this time it wasn't necessary to ask her to find David Vaniel. He was standing right there.

It seemed unlikely and, for a moment, Bruce questioned his perception. But sure enough, David Vaniel was walking up to them, looking utterly shocked.

"Mr. Wayne! I... didn't expect, I mean, after the way you left... I assumed, that is, I never imagined that you would be back..."

Bruce felt himself detach from the situation. He made the introductions on autopilot—Selina Kyle. My son Dick—while the Detective part of his mind latched onto details, not for any purpose, just as an unconscious instinct. David's eyes were bloodshot, the flesh beneath them dark and puffy, his voice a bit hoarse. Lack of sleep would account for the dark circles and the voice. The rest looked like crying.

To his surprise, the next thought that slammed into Bruce's mind was filled with acidic disgust: *What the hell did Edward do him now?* That wasn't the Detective, he realized; it was another corner of his brain entirely. An angry one.

Once the introductions were complete, Bruce looked at him evenly. "I had some more questions for your father," he began, then trailed off.

He'd concealed his feelings in a polite businesslike manner, so he couldn't quite understand what was happening. David's eyes had shifted to the expression felons have when Batman surprises them—a discreet ping at the nurse's station was the only sound for several tense seconds while the blood drained from David Vaniel's face—*What's happening here?* that angry corner of his mind asked furiously.

"Oh," David said after another uncomfortable beat. "Um, I'm sorry. He, uh... he's gone. He... he took a turn for the worst last night, fell into a coma. He died about uh... um, it was uh, about two hours ago."

He swallowed.

Bruce barely registered the light gasp that came from Dick and only subconsciously noted Dick and Selina's heads turning in his direction. His mind reeled.

"What?" he heard his voice asking.

Vaniel jolted slightly at the strange timbre of Bruce's voice and started to babble. After the way Bruce had left the last time he'd just assumed... he didn't even think to contact Bruce when Edward deteriorated...

That wild, red fury surged through Bruce's muscles again, into his hands, his fingers, his nerve endings, contorting into the tightest fist, ready to slam this—this—animalcriminalthing into the wall and squeeze the answers out of it.

He fought to keep himself from shaking, fought to keep the rage from boiling over as he looked into David's eyes—

Red—The boy's eyes were red. Bloodshot. The flesh beneath them dark and slightly puffy. His voice a bit hoarse.

Before they arrived, David Vaniel had been crying.

Because his father was dead.

Dick and Selina watched Bruce, not knowing what this new information would mean—for him or the situation, but sensing the shift in intensity that went beyond

Batman or Psychobat into a new dimension of *Bruce Unknown*. They traded a quick glance, both silently questioning if one of them might need to step in and deflect, diffuse, or... *something*.

But suddenly, the tension disintegrated—it didn't fade or evaporate, it simply didn't exist any more. A strange calm seemed to settle; both Selina and Dick returned their attention to Bruce and saw his face slowly soften.

David was still talking, babbling really. "...tors did everything they could, but it was too late. I mean, he had been declining for months—we all knew it was coming—but at the very end, it was so *fast*... it all happened so..."

Bruce reached out and touched David's shoulder, which abruptly ended his ramble mid-sentence.

"I'm sorry," Bruce said sincerely.

David stared at him questioningly for a moment. His eyes watered slightly and he stammered out a light but sincere "Th-thank you."

A quick sniffle and David blinked away the moisture in his eyes. He was suddenly hit with a rush of apologetic embarrassment. "Oh god, you came all the way down here and he's gone, so you didn't have the chance to—"

"That's not the most pressing issue at this moment," Bruce said, as he would defer a topic at a board meeting.

David wanted to apologize again, but something in the look of finality on Bruce's face stopped him. He took a deep breath and a wave of exhaustion crashed down on his shoulders.

For the first time since they arrived, Bruce glanced at Dick and Selina. He didn't seem to even register the confusion and shock on their faces, he merely nodded toward a small waiting area down the hall.

David looked meekly at Bruce, Dick and Selina as the three of them ushered him toward the water cooler in the corner. After shakily drinking a proffered cup of water, David finished his confused ramble, about Superman of all things.

"...I know it sounds weird, but it's four in the morning, and you're in this little room with nothing but the sound of the heart monitor, man's in a coma, TV is on without sound. One of those 24-hour news channels and I was just watching the crawl go by. And I notice it's a twenty minute loop. Every twenty minutes, they start this same footage with Superman. And every twenty minutes the night nurse looked in to see how I was doing. I started to think how funny that was, like maybe she had the same station on out at the desk and when Superman shows up, that's her cue to get up and walk the halls..."

Bruce could see they were the first "People" David had talked to, apart from hospital staff, since his father's death, and probably for hours or even days before. He was still finding his balance again. Finally, when David seemed himself again, Bruce asked the question.

"Your father never told you anything about our meeting, did he?"

"No, he refused to talk about it," David sighed. "I tried to get him to tell me, but... well, that's just how he is—was. I'm sorry. I might know something, if you wanted to tell me what it was about..."

"No," Bruce responded after a moment. "He obviously wanted it kept between us, and I think we should respect that. It doesn't matter now." His face darkened slightly before he added, "Some things are better left alone."

"I'm used to it," David said candidly with a light, breathy chuckle. "Probably better that way. My dad was always good at leaving a lot of unanswered questions in his wake. It's fitting that's all I have left to remember him by. Questions and bad memories and a healthy dose of debt. I guess this is the last time I have to worry about that... god, the bills. Funeral, hospital..."

"Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it," Bruce said, automatically, like shooing a fly.

He only realized the import when he perceived the triple waves of shock emanating from David, from Dick, and from Selina.

"Oh no, no please," David blanched. "That's not necessary, I— I wasn't looking for a handout. I was just complaining out loud. Mr. Wayne, you don't need to do that."

"No, I don't need to," Bruce said, quietly glancing at Selina. "But I want to."

A priest who had never met Edward Vaniel recited the same eulogy he gave at all such funerals, inserting the name of the bereaved ("his son David") in the appropriate passages, along with that of Edward's late wife Karen, his mother Joan, and similar details gleaned from a death certificate and a ten minute conversation with David the day before. The cemetery caretakers knew the speech well, and the winch operator began lowering the casket on cue, so it touched bottom just as the priest opened his bible to read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The bible was only a prop, the psalm recited from memory. The two mourners said their good-byes. The caretakers paused only a few seconds, sensing this was not one of those occasions where long, somber delays were expected. They began shoveling dirt onto the casket at once...

Bruce stayed for a moment and watched.

It felt different. It felt... Even after the Chill case, he never felt this. Bruce would never be *at peace* with his parent's murder. He would always *want* to know the truth. But for the first time in his life, he felt... he felt that he didn't *need* to know. If this fresh grave and all the unanswered questions that led here was all there would ever be, life still had meaning. The smell of grass in the air was still sweet and the sun still felt warm on his skin.

He left the caretakers to their work and walked to the Bentley where Dick and Alfred were waiting. Both, predictably, asked if he was okay.

Bruce glanced across the gravestones to a point further down the drive where David Vaniel was getting into his car.

"I'm fine," he said simply.

Alfred accepted the statement and opened the car door. Dick hesitated.

"I don't understand, Bruce. I don't understand why you're here today. I *really* don't understand why you paid for it. The hospital bills, the coffin, the tombstone. Why? What happened at the hospital, Bruce, why would you possibly—"

"Because I could." He pointed to the car. "Let's go home."

Bruce said little on the drive home, his mind replaying the whole twisted tale that had brought him here. The rage, the pain, even that vacant nothingness he'd felt that

night after the first meeting with Vaniel at the hospital—it all seemed so far away now. Distant. Foreign, even. All the things that seemed so important at the time appeared pointless, even trivial now. He found himself seeing different details, subtle flickers that he'd been too wrapped up in his own mind to really see as they were happening. To his surprise, his hindsight seemed to focus on the others. Alfred. Dick. Selina.

They'd refused to leave. They'd never left his side for a minute, working with him every step of the way instead of leaving him alone to do it himself. It had been so frustrating, so *maddening*. All he'd wanted was to handle this on his own, but they wouldn't let him.

Thank God.

The only time his memories let them fade into the background, the only time he locked again on his own pain was when he remembered that second trip to the hospital, the intensity of that moment still burned in his psyche. The pain and frustration he'd been holding inside had reached a fever pitch and when David told them his father was dead...

It was all gone—he'd come so close to finding the truth, to finally getting the answers and it all came crashing down with two little words: "He's gone."

How was it possible? He couldn't just *DIE*? He couldn't get off that easy! He couldn't just escape forever out of reach with all the answers. **HE COULDN'T!**

Rage, Pain, and Batman all screamed that Bruce could still get the answers: his whole life becoming Batman, all the training, all the sacrifice, all the grueling hours honing his mind and his body, deduction, hypothesis theory, karate, judo, jujitsu—it had to be good for something! He knew how to get the truth from someone and if that someone was gone, then he could always get it from the next best source—This pawn in front of him saying there were no answers, the answers died two hours ago. He would sear the truth out of the monster's soul with the sheer force of his hate—he would—

He would what?

He'd met David Vaniel's eyes, the eyes of an innocent caught in the crossfire between his father's past and a stranger's rage, and suddenly everything was very clear.

David wasn't an extension of Edward Vaniel, he was an innocent. And Bruce did not prey on innocents. It went against everything he believed, everything he was... He could not thrust his rage onto the son *any more than he could have taken the life of the father*. Those words of Selina's that night in the costume vault suddenly sounded very different to him. He wouldn't have killed Edward because he didn't kill. It sounded so ludicrously simple when she'd said it. Now it felt... exactly that simple.

As the car serpented through the cemetery, Bruce looked back at the caretakers methodically shoveling dirt into the grave and a strange calm settled on him again. It wasn't just Edward Vaniel's body being buried down there but Bruce's hatred of him was as well.

Then he turned to Dick. He'd accepted the brief, somewhat dismissive answer to his question, although he clearly didn't understand it. Bruce thought how often that must have happened over the years.

"To be honest, Dick, I'm not one hundred percent sure myself why I decided to pay for the medical bills and all the rest of it." He paused for a second, as if trying to think

of how to continue. "For a moment, I wanted to punish David, for everything. Not just because of his father, but for *being there*, in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong DNA. But you said it yourself back in the cave: He had no answers and... he wasn't to blame. He was an innocent man who had dealt with the worst of society all of his life. There was no way I could strike out against that."

They drove on, Dick wanting to accept the answer he'd been given but clearly not understanding.

"So he was innocent, he didn't know anything—which means he was just a guy who happened to be involved. So why did you... that still doesn't explain why you're here today or why you reacted the way you did at the hospital, offering to pay and everything."

Bruce smiled lightly. "At that moment, he wasn't 'just a guy,' Dick. He was a man who'd lost his father. He was a son. In pain." Bruce laid a hand on Dick's shoulder and looked him straight in the eye. "And that's something I know a little about."

Dick stared back for a long moment, Bruce's words causing a knot in his throat, but soon a return smile crossed his lips.

"Is that why you offered to pay for all of it: the hospital bills, the coffin, the gravesite?" Dick's grin threatened to turn mischievous. "Guilt?"

There was a faint grumble deep in Bruce's chest that sounded like the beginning of a disapproving grunt, but his smile stayed in place.

"Actually, that's too easy an answer. Why did I really pay for all of it? Because I could. David was in trouble, caught in dire straits due to circumstances he couldn't control. And that was something Bruce Wayne could easily fix."

Bruce expected a sarcastic remark about talking about himself in the third person, but instead, Dick's face grew serious.

"Bruce, I'm sorry," he said meaningfully. "I wanted so much for this to be it. I wanted to help you finally resolve this, once and for all. I feel like we failed."

Bruce shook his head.

"We didn't *fail*. We just didn't find all the answers."

"Semantics," Dick grumbled.

"No. No, it's not."

Dick thought for a moment as the car turned onto the Wayne property, then slowed to stop in front of the manor's main entrance. Bruce got out, knowing Alfred planned to drive Dick back to the city. But instead of closing the door right away, Dick waited, clearly wanting to say more.

"And you're okay with that? With not finding all of the answers?" he asked solemnly.

Bruce looked out in the direction of the cemetery, thinking of Edward Vaniel's grave.

"I will be."

At the funeral, standing over that pitiful grave that no one would ever visit again, I had come to an understanding. As I thought through all that happened in those two weeks since the letter arrived from David Vaniel, "*writing to you at the behest of my father...*" I realized that distinction between wanting and needing was very real

indeed: I had a choice. I could spend my life suffering over the family I lost or enjoying the one I have now.

And I would honor my parents better by doing the latter.

Edward Vaniel was a miserable piece of filth. That he was born human at all was probably some cosmic mistake. He was a horrible husband, a brutal father and an all around worthless human being. The world should have danced a jig on his grave, celebrating the death of a monstrosity. And yet here was this boy, whom Vaniel beat, abused, harassed and did unspeakable things to his entire life—the one person left in the world who should be celebrating the *most*—and instead he was upset that Edward was dead. Despite everything, Edward was still his *father*. And when your father dies, you lose a little piece of yourself...

I have a son. I would never want Dick to define his life by loss. I would never want Dick to spend his life suffering. I would never want Dick to choose hate and sorrow and emptiness.

Maybe someday I'll find new evidence. Maybe one day more information will surface that reveals what happened that night.

But if it doesn't, it doesn't matter as much anymore. Being Batman was never about solving my parents' murder, it was about preventing such a thing from ever happening again. I could spend the rest of my life, devote all my resources to finding out what happened in that alley and still maybe end up with nothing.

And if I did, whether I found the truth or not, what then? What satisfaction could I have knowing more innocents had died because I was obsessed with hunting down a single killer. That's no way to honor my parents.

The best thing I can do for them is what I have always done, to keep preventing these tragedies from befalling others.

The way to honor their memory is to keep defending innocents. The way to honor their memory is to keep being Batman.

The bat Walapang perched low over Workstation One, just as always. Bruce still wore the suit he'd worn to the funeral, although he'd removed his jacket and tie. He filled in the final notes on Edward Vaniel's confession and tested the link to his parents' casefile and the cross-reference to the Falcone/CIA connection. Finally, he attached electronic copies of Edward Vaniel's final medical records and death certificate. He scrolled back up to the file header and stared for a moment:

```
Casefile:      00000-001
Crime:         Double Homicide
Victims:       Wayne, Thomas
               Wayne, Martha
Assailant:     UNKNOWN
Case Status:   OPEN
```

He typed rapidly on the console keyboard, glanced back up at the file, and gave a light, satisfied smile.

```
Case Status:   CLOSED, PENDING FURTHER EVIDENCE.
```



## EPILOGUE

The first thing any crimefighter learns is patience. Physical training takes years of disciplined persistence. Collecting evidence with meticulous precision, analyzing it with care, surveillance of suspects, waiting for backup, and all too often, just waiting. Whether it's a madman like Joker, bound to go off at some point in reaction to God-knows-what and there is nothing to do in the meantime but sit and hope it won't be too terrible this time, or a cunning strategist like Ra's al Ghul operating off his own inscrutable timetable, there is always waiting. It was the hardest reality for each new Robin to accept. But Batman himself had a natural composure, a resolved unshakable calm that could out-last any criminal...

Batman had.

Bruce, on the other hand, was finding himself gripped by a strange, foreign sensation, an agitated tension connected to Selina's coming home. He kept checking the grounds cameras, looking for her Jaguar. He knew the route to the Catitit: when she returned, she would show up on the F4 grid first, coming off Country Club Drive, and then E3 and E2 to park in the garage. He knew her car would appear on F4 first, but he kept checking all the D, E, and F cameras. It was irrational. Absurd. Impatient. It was almost Feline log—there she was, F4, right where she should be.

He resisted the urge to follow her progress on the cameras. Instead, he gathered his jacket and tie and went upstairs, meeting her at the door. She was puzzled; she hadn't expected him to be there, waiting as she opened the door, and Bruce felt a strange throwback to an early museum encounter. Just like today, he'd known roughly where she would be coming from and when, which made it easy to spot her on approach and move in to intercept. Unlike today, the smile that greeted him was shy rather than naughty. Rather than hiss, she said it was a nice surprise. Rather than scratch his cheek, she kissed it.

"How did it go?" she asked, while he led her back towards the study.

"It was a funeral," Bruce answered simply.

"I would have come," she reminded him.

"There was no need. Dick came along, which was unnecessary, but kind of him. It was more important to me that you go to the Catitit today."

She bit her lip. She knew that much. He'd suggested it so pointedly. What she didn't know was—

"Go ahead, ask," Bruce said, noting the lip-bite.

"Why? Why did you want me to go up there?"

"Because the Catitit is something special and private that you made from a very fundamental part of you... and I thought you would need that before we go on with this."

Selina said nothing. She followed silently into the study, to the clock where Bruce stopped and turned. It was his exact position the day he'd returned from the hospital, that fiery hatred in his eyes that blinked out in a second to a dead, soulless void. Today there was no anger in there, and no void—she wasn't sure what it was.

"I know this hasn't been easy for any of you," Bruce said soberly. "I was impossible to be around and wrapped up in my own..." He trailed off and grunted.

Selina smiled and started to answer, but he'd already opened the clock and headed into the cave passage. He must've taken it for granted that she would follow because he'd started talking again.

"Anyway, as hard as I pushed you away, as hard as I tried to explain that I just needed to be left alone so I could handle this, you refused. You and Dick both. It was infuriating, it was frustrating, it chewed at me every step of the way and..."

Selina quickly followed down the stairs and across the cave.

"...it was exactly what I needed. So I just wanted to say thank you."

The round table was gone, and Bruce stopped and turned at Workstation One, a series of file folders and other items laid out on the console, arranged neatly in a row.

"I know I don't have to say that... but I want to. Thank you."

Bruce motioned for her to sit, Selina realized the chairs from Workstations One and Two had been turned to face each other, just as they were that day he had Martian Manhunter down here to tell him about the mindwipe. Selina looked curiously from the chairs to the objects on the console, the reality of the scene sinking in as she recognized two of those "other items." A small lead box that contained a kryptonite ring, and a larger one, a mahogany jewelry box with an ornate "W" in a delicate oval, inlaid in gold on the lid. She was looking at the contents of the hologram safe.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked, almost frightened as she stared at the box with the W. Bruce followed her gaze and focused on the box for a moment before answering.

"When my parents were taken from me, my whole world was destroyed. I had to find a way to go on in this new world where nothing would ever be the same again. Alfred was amazing. He did more than keep me going, he gave me whatever I needed without interfering or intruding on what I was going through. And he let me do what I felt I needed to, let me pursue the path I wanted to take.

"The only way I knew to cope with tragedy was that way that I discovered for myself. Until others came along. Dick, Barbara, Tim, even Jean Paul and Jason... anyway. If there's one thing that this whole... incident has brought home for me, it's that I've spent so much time focused on the tragedies, mine and others, on what I *lost*, that I've periodically lost sight of what I *have*. Yes, I'm certain I want to do this. Please sit down."

He sat himself and waited. Selina tentatively positioned in front of the second chair, then lowered slowly as if suspecting a boobytrap. Bruce smiled.

He began with the lead box. Since he'd told her about it already, it seemed the easiest way to begin. This time he opened it and actually took out the kryptonite ring as he talked. He found himself mentioning details he hadn't said out loud before.

"Lex Luthor had the ring made originally, and he'd done it for a single purpose: to make a kryptonite fist. To coil all his hate into a blow his enemy could feel. To be able to kill Superman with his bare hands."

It was something Bruce had always understood about the ring, but only now after those insane moments of rage with Edward Vaniel's throat clutched in his own hand did Bruce fully realize *why* he understood it the way he did.

“There were others Clark could have trusted to *keep* the ring,” he said, his mouth going dry from the realization. “Lois for one, obviously. But the one thing Clark said when he gave it to me, the thing that struck me at the time and that I’ve always remembered, was that Batman was the only person he could trust to *use* the ring if it came to that... At the time, I took it at face value, but now, after what happened with Vaniel... I wonder if he sensed something in me that I didn’t know myself—that no matter how bad the situation got, I’d know how to use it to take him *down* without taking him *out*.”

He took a deep breath. A half-hour had passed and they’d only been through one item—the *easy* one. The one Selina already knew about and that they’d talked about before.

Luckily, the next item went faster. A birth certificate and death certificate for Jason Todd. There wasn’t much to say about Jason, other than his life was too short. He was rash, impulsive and undisciplined—because he was still a boy. If he’d grown to manhood, there was no telling what potential he might have realized... The one feature he and Bruce had in common, more than any of these others Bruce had brought into his life, was an unquenchable desire to find the answers, a desire untempered by reason, as it happened, which ultimately led to his death. Bruce had tasted that *unreasoning* desire during the last few days but, unlike Jason, had been able to walk away, due in no small part to the people he loved who were there to help him through it. And he knew he would never take that for granted again.

The documents outlining the Ancient Order of St. Dumas didn’t take much time either—not as they pertained to Jean Paul Valley and the fleeting role he’d played in Bruce’s life. But they touched on a subject that Bruce and Selina had never discussed, his injuries in the fight with Bane and brief abdication of the Bat-mantle. It was the kind of... *discussion* Bruce wanted to avoid in going through the safe. It could take hours to talk through and would leave them both emotionally exhausted, with a half dozen more items still to come. Already the blood had drained from Selina’s face as she saw what the documents were. Already the memories were flooding back for her. Bruce looked at all the items they still had to go through, including the most important at the end, and wondered if he’d been unrealistic. They couldn’t possibly get through this in a single session, but spreading it out over days would be torture.

Then something amazing happened, something pure Selina. She handed the papers back without a word—and with a smile. Bruce set them back in their place in the row, and looked back at her astonished.

“I knew there was a reason I didn’t like him,” she said simply. “Blood will tell.”

Bruce’s lip twitched as he realized what just happened. Selina’s favorite coping mechanism was to take whatever she didn’t want to deal with and toss it in her Hellmouth of a closet, slam the door and forget about it. Jean Paul and the Order of Dumas were just metaphorically tossed into the closet behind an old cat-o-nine tails and Whiskers’ cat carrier, where she wouldn’t have to think about them for a very long time.

Barbara was next, and there Bruce didn’t mind spending as much time as it took to fully cover the subject: Barbara Gordon, who had no business becoming Batgirl in the first place. Perhaps the Rogues liked the idea of “groupies” emulating them, but it

wasn't a responsibility that Bruce ever wanted and he did everything he could to discourage her. In doing so, he discovered a quality in Barbara that he recognized in himself: she was stubborn. No Robin shared that quality with him, but Jim Gordon's little girl would dig in her heels in the face of all opposition. After the shooting, he saw that stubborn core evolve into a steely determination that was downright inspiring. She'd come dangerously close to dying, but unlike someone like Vaniel who so obviously faced death with fear and panic (no matter how much he tried to disguise that fact), Barbara never lost that inner fire. She had more strength and dignity lying helpless and immobile in a hospital bed than the most powerful heroines in the Justice League at the top of their game.

Then there was Tim. More than once, Selina had singled him out as the nicest, sanest, and most well adjusted of the Bat-Clan. Even before she'd known him as Tim, Catwoman had teamed up with his Robin on easier terms than any other hero—and, Bruce noted wryly, she wasn't the only female of dubious allegiances to be 'charmed' that way. There was just something about him, it seemed...

Selina had never heard the details of what happened to Tim's family and she took more time reading those reports than she had looking at any other papers so far: Shortly after Tim became Robin, his parents were kidnapped and poisoned by a villain called Obeah Man. His mother died as a result and his father lapsed into a coma for several months.

"I had no idea," Selina said quietly, handing back the file.

Bruce took the closed folder and stared at it for a moment. He remembered David Vaniel dissecting his initial choice to become a lawyer as a way of striking out at his father, but the way that changed over time and he found motivation within himself. Like the others in his life, Tim had dealt with those devastating tragedies—his parents, Stephanie—but unlike the others, all of Tim's tragedies had struck *after* he'd taken up the mantle of Robin. Yet despite that fact, Bruce had never once seen or heard Tim question his decision to become Batman's junior partner. Even at his young age, Tim had such strength, intelligence and resolve.

Dick's adoption papers were next, and Bruce opened up more than he had on any documents so far.

"This young boy who had been dealt the same blow I had. I thought that I could help him, try to ease the pain I knew he would have to deal with. I thought I knew what he was going through, but something strange happened—despite our similar tragedies, he was so... alive. He wound up helping me just as much as I helped him."

Selina handed back the papers outlining first Bruce's guardianship and later his adoption of Dick Grayson. The conversation drifted into Dick's tenure as Robin, the night Batman first showed up with that caped child in tow, his first sight of the bullwhip, a fudged log entry after a certain cat-encounter and subsequent Zogger punishment... years later, during *Cat-Tales*, when it was Nightwing who broke the ice and came to see her at the stage door.

After witnessing the way Edward Vaniel had treated his own son, even on his deathbed, Bruce knew that he would never fall into that trap. Dick had given him the greatest gift that a son could give his father: he'd become his own man, but more than that, he'd become a good man. And that was a gift that Bruce would cherish the rest of his life.

There was one set of folders left, along with the wooden jewelry box, but Bruce made no move to touch them. Instead he gestured to all the items they'd looked at so far.

"I honestly don't know if it was the detective in me or something else, but I know there is an instinct to *understand*—or at least to try to understand. I've thought a lot about these people who are so important to me, and tried to uncover what it is about each of them that makes them react so differently to such similar circumstances.

"Please try and understand that, Selina. It was never a desire do harm or hold on to information that would damage them. It's about learning the truth, a deep-seeded need to find the truths that shaped the lives of people I care about. Can you see that?"

"I suppose," she nodded. "It's uniquely you, the detective's instinct to probe, and the focus on tragedy as the crucial happenings that—"

She broke off. Bruce had reached back and slid out a folder that was tucked underneath the final one.

"I had to know the truth," he said, holding it out for her.

Now all I could do was wait. I knew that this had to be done, that she has to know the truth. I owe her that. So now I watched her eyes as she looked at the folder, trying to read her reaction.

I suspect that, ultimately, it will come down to the simplest question: Why? Why did I do it? Why did I delve into her past, into one of the most sacred and painful parts of her life and do it behind her back? And the truth is, I'm not sure I've got a valid enough explanation.

There was Jason, certainly. I knew from the beginning that Jason Todd was a troubled kid, that there were unanswered questions about his past that haunted his every move. When that past resurfaced, when the possibility arose for him to not only find answers but to actually find his real mother, he pursued the opportunity with such a dogged determination that he disregarded his own safety. It was those unanswered questions—and his ravenous need to find the answers so similar to my own—that ultimately lead to his death. I was ten years old when my parents died and there was nothing I could have done to prevent it. But when Jason came into my life, I was a grown man with considerable ability and resources. I could have found the answers to those questions that plagued him. I didn't. And because of that, I failed him. For years, I punished myself. There was nothing as formal as a vow over his little grave, nothing like I'd gone through with my parents. But a part of me did vow that I would never allow someone so crucial to me, someone in that family *I had chosen*, to be harmed because I didn't have all of the information. I would be prepared for any eventuality for the ones I loved.

Is that what drove me to find the truth about Selina's parents—to be prepared for any eventuality and to ensure that there was nothing about such a crucial incident in her life that would come back to hurt her or put her in danger?

I don't know. Looking back, there is something telling in the timing of it all: I started pursuing the details of her parents' death not long after that first... Hell Month (as we have all apparently taken to calling it), when she had done so much to bring me out of the personal turmoil I had been suffering. She had opened so many new doors for me,

had given me a level of comfort and understanding that I had never had before. So I believe that somewhere deep inside of me, something yearned to return the favor, to give back even a little piece of the comfort and stability that she had given me. And since my parents' deaths were still so fresh in my mind, I suppose I immediately identified her similar situation as a possibility to do that.

I don't know. I know all of the items in that safe are there not just because of the sensitivity of the information, but because of what (and who) they represent. I know that ultimately, it was done out of love, out of a desire to protect and honor her...

But it may have been an incredibly stupid mistake.

"Breathe," Bruce suggested, watching critically as Selina read over the file.

"You..." she began dully. Her hand started shaking as she held the paperwork. The original police report on the car accident that killed her parents, and a page of handwritten notes. Bruce's handwriting—Batman's handwriting, actually.

"You *researched* the accident that killed my..."

"Yes."

"These handwritten notes are—"

"Case notes," he started to explain, "made in the field. There was no reason to transfer them to digital format once I'd found the truth; there was no case... Wait. That's not entirely true... You've hacked the consoles before, found things I've hidden. I didn't want you to find them by accident before I could give you an explanation."

"So they're yours," Selina said slowly, trying to pull a simple answer from his far-too-complicated explanation.

"Mine. Yes," he said, beginning to realize her mental state.

"And... this file," Selina stopped and swallowed. "It seems..."

"It's the original. The copy now in the GCPD's records are the duplicates. It's the same with the police report and supporting files for my parents' shooting."

"Why?" she looked up. "Why would you do this?"

Bruce took a deep breath. There it was. Why? He thought through his prepared explanation: Jason, Hell Month... then he saw that dazed look on her face and realized it was all far too complicated.

"Because I love you," he said simply. "You're important to me in ways I never even knew I needed... And you deserve whatever I can give you. This, this is what I could give."

She nodded, once, and handed the file back slowly.

"Thank you," she managed, finding a trace of her usual voice and manner. She mentally breathed on that spark of cattitude until it produced an actual smile. "You're quite wonderfully strange, you do know that," she said lovingly.

The import of the gesture was beginning to sink in, a whole new level of shock replacing the previous one.

Bruce had returned the folder to its place in the row, but didn't bother to hide it this time. Selina realized it was his own parents' casefile it had been hidden under before, and another wave of realization hit at what he had done and how he apparently thought of her.

He held out his own parents' casefile only to confirm what he'd said earlier, they were original documents rather than photocopies.

"You may appreciate this," he graveled seriously. "Getting that was my first break in."

He didn't open the file or hand it to her as he had the others. They had been over that case enough in the previous days. Plus, as Bruce pointed out (with something approaching self-deprecating humor), there was nothing to learn from the police report that Selina didn't know long ago from hearing Bruce awake from his nightmare every morning at 5 a.m.

That left only the jewelry box. Mahogany, inlaid with a gold W on the lid, a W inside an oval just like his Bat-emblem. The way he opened that lid, the reverence, and the look on his face as he looked inside.

In the beginning, I told myself I would never be another acolyte at his temple of loss. I felt myself breaking that promise now. This is what he had left of them. These people he loved, this is what he had left. That broken, incomplete string of pearls, a well-worn leather wallet with the initials TW monogrammed in the corner and dark stain...

This is why the world had Batman. The world might be a better place for it. But that look on Bruce's face...

Then something strange happened. A shift away from the loss, to the joy that had gone before... a pair of wedding bands and a remarkably beautiful engagement ring... and a worn, rabbit-eared photograph of Thomas and Martha Wayne with an adorable 8-year-old Bruce at one of those rustic New England marinas.

The pearls and the wallet weren't all that was left of them. Bruce was.