



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

#56

# *Cat = Sales*

*Armchair Detective*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**ARMCHAIR DETECTIVE**



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## ARMCHAIR DETECTIVE

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*"On a catwalk? My haven't we changed."*

*"And you. From mere theft to terrorist blackmail..."*

If it wasn't the worst moment of my life, I'd be hard-pressed to say what was. That mechanized monstrosity of a costume, everyone assumed he was just overcompensating after the Bane injury. There was no reason to think it wasn't still Batman under the mask. Not until that moment. Not until he accused me of stealing nerve gas for terrorists.

At first, I only knew it was wrong, that he was wrong, but I couldn't grasp the totality of it, not in those first seconds. Then, a few words later, a few steps closer, and...

*"That's close enough."*

*"You're right. Close enough to realize you're not him."*

The real Batman would never fear my approach. But in retrospect, I guess Azrael was right to. Because as soon as I got close, I could feel it. Batman is warm and alive, raging with desire and purpose. This thing was sterile. The waves of intensity that pulse and pound off the real Batman were gone, and in their place, there was only a hollow, nervous dumb-show. If it wasn't the worst moment of my life... And now I was living it again, over and over, like some poetic Twilight Zone hell where you're trapped in the worst night of your life for all eternity.

Okay, technically, it was seventeen minutes, but it felt like an eternity and then some. The Batmobile can make it from midtown to Wayne Manor in fourteen minutes flat, but the Lamborghini isn't the Batmobile, and I was further downtown and six blocks from the car when the call came in...

I had resisted the OraCom for the longest time. It seemed so "Team Batman." But then, on my birthday, Dick and Barbara gave me this little, purple velvet box. They couldn't seem to control their smiling; it was like Joker had just passed through with a SmileX sampler platter. I opened the box, and these three silver cats looked up at me: earrings and a necklace. Dick was Mr. Technical, explaining that the earrings held the earpiece (no kidding) and the necklace had a powerful directional microphone (which could also be removed and clipped to the side of my mask, if I preferred). Barbara just said that "Girls need some style," and even if it wasn't dangerous for Catwoman to be running around with an obvious bat device, it would still be ludicrous to expect me to use a comlink shaped like a bat. I was too stunned to even speak, at first, which Barbara might have taken as disapproval, because she hastily added that my link was just like Batman's in one very important respect: she wouldn't be able to track it. And then Dick came over and kissed my cheek, said "welcome to the family" and, well, that's how Team Batman finally got a collar around my neck.

So now I have an OraCom, and that night I was satisfying a cat's professional curiosity about the security for a silk Tabriz rug the Saudi royal family is selling at Sotheby's, when the unit went off.

*...:Catwoman, you're going to want to proceed home, ASAP;... came this eerily detached voice that I wouldn't even have recognized as Barbara's if I didn't already know. ...:B is down. I'm sorry I don't have any details, other than he's in the Batmobile and it's operating on autopilot;...*

I'm sure I said something, but I have absolutely no memory of it. All I know is that the cool monotone of calm, super-human professionalism answered *...:ETA at the cave in 4.2 minutes. We'll know more then;...*

I had just made it back to the car when the line crackled to life again:

*...:Breathe, Selina. He's alive and he's going to stay that way. Alfred says it's his back;...*

It was meant as a comfort, and I suppose it was. "He's alive and he's going to stay that way." But I didn't feel relief. I couldn't seem to feel anything. Just those words "it's his back" hanging in the air like plague in some sweltering Karachi port of a hundred years ago.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't feel. I'm not completely sure how I managed to drive. All I know is that, somewhere in my head, the part of my brain that once struggled to process Batman being Bruce Wayne was only now making the acquaintance of another part of my psyche, the part of me that encountered "AzBat" that night.

*"From mere theft to terrorist blackmail..."*

The Batman I knew would never have thought such a thing. The Batman I knew was not in that costume. The Batman I knew must have been badly hurt by Bane. The Batman I knew... was Bruce.

It was incredible. After all this time, there was still one small piece of my past with Batman that hadn't made the adjustment now that "Batman" had a name and a face. But there it was: the man I thought I'd lost that night, the man who—let's get real—who I loved whether I'd admit it to myself or not, the man who Bane had hurt or even killed for all I knew at that moment, was Bruce.

Officially, the Lamborghini has a maximum speed of 350 kilometers or 217.5 miles per hour, just 4.5 short of the Batmobile. After the last turn off Country Club Drive onto the Wayne property, I discovered it can actually go 218.3.

I did something I've never done before. I bypassed the turn towards the garage and went straight into the Batcave. The bats in the hangar had a hissy fit, but they stayed out of my way as I ran to the med lab.

Alfred didn't. He intercepted me a few feet from the door, and frankly, I consider it a triumph of self-control that I didn't flatten him where he stood and keep right on going. I had to see Bruce, and I couldn't seem to make him understand that. He just kept going on and on about how unfortunate it was that Miss Oracle had contacted me when and how she did. He would have much preferred to inform me himself, and had intended to as soon as he had a free moment to do so. He was, naturally, occupied with his patient in those first minutes after the Batmobile arrived in the cave, and by the time he was at liberty to speak to me himself, it was, of course, too late. He apologized that Miss Oracle's incomplete information had so needlessly exacerbated my fears.

There's nothing like Alfred Pennyworth's scrupulous formality to make you feel like a hysterical drama queen making a crisis out of a cat's paw. I would have given just about anything to be able to toss my hair and answer flawless formality with careless felinity... but I couldn't. It was the Batcave, his Batcave. I didn't even know existed back then, and now I was standing in it. I couldn't manage carefree felinity. All I could do was ask if I could see him, and hope I didn't sound as meek and needy to Alfred's ear as I did in mine.

Oliver Lyon glanced over the dismal sales reports for Organic Life, Natural Living, and Herbal Monthly, and the equally dismal projections based on quarterly sales. Then he turned his attention to the sales figures for Supple, Fashionista, and Gotham Swank... always the stars. Thirty-five magazines made up his publishing empire, and every month it was the same three at the top and the same three on the bottom. The media kept talking about these new social trends: environmental awareness and economic downturns moving Americans away from the old bling towards a healthier, more modest, and eco-friendly lifestyle... If it was true, you certainly couldn't prove it by their reading habits. He could cancel Organic Life and those other losers and never see so much as a blip on the summary income statement.

But in Gotham there were considerations beyond the bottom line. Years ago he was advised that, given the amount of paper Lyon Publishing consumed, he would be wise to keep a few "green power" titles going, no matter what. It was the best insurance against Poison Ivy singling him out to be made an example.

Oliver gathered up his reports, but then paused before sliding them into his briefcase. Was there any point in his bringing work home? Tomorrow morning, they'd be packing up their things and driving out to the vacation house. He was used to it being a big three-day ordeal when they were moving out to Watermill Lodge for the summer. It was like packing up an army, especially when the kids were young. But this was a simple house party: a day or two to set up, a long weekend with their guests, and leave the staff to close the place up. It really shouldn't be a big deal. But it was going to be. With Noel, there was no such thing as a "simple" house party. He was sure she'd be packing enough clothes for a month. "Have to have options!" she'd say.

Well, what did he expect? She had been the fashion editor for Gotham Swank when he met her, and before that, she was a model. Three outfits per day (and three "options" for each) went with the territory.

He paused again, looking down at the papers. There was no way he'd have a chance to get any work done, not until the whole thing was over, but it might be worthwhile to bring the paperwork anyway, just to have it handy as a prop. With Noel, Fiona, and Gracie all under one roof, he might need an escape.

"Have to have options!" as Noel would say.

Alfred said that Bruce had regained consciousness shortly after the Batmobile returned to the cave, but that he'd administered a painkiller and he doubted Bruce

would still be awake. I didn't care. I still had visions of AzBat dancing in my head. I needed to see Bruce. I needed to touch his cheek and hold his hand and send Azrael the Imposter back to the shadows, a sickening memory of what never should have been.

I entered the med lab flanked by ghosts: the Catwoman of that other lifetime on my right, the Batman she once fought on my left, and the armored monster that took his place trailing a few steps behind.

"There you are," a groggy voice murmured—and just like that, the ghosts were gone. All he had to do was speak.

"I thought I heard voices out there," Bruce said weakly. "Then thought maybe imagined it. The shot... tend to imagine..."

I walked over to the bed and stroked his hair a few times.

"I like to think when your imagination conjures me, it can do better than this," I purred.

For just a second, one of the ghosts returned, but he wasn't standing beside me. The Ghost of Batman Past flickered ever so briefly in Bruce's eyes—crystal clear, dark and penetrating, sexy as hell—some sort of deep-seeded reaction to the suggestive taunt, I suppose. That hypnotic intensity blazed for a second, then glazed over again.

"Well, you are a bit overdressed," he murmured.

I bent over and kissed him. I whispered a few of the old promises in his ear as he drifted off, hoping to seed the right sort of dreams, and then I turned towards the door.

It's a kind of natural arch that separates the med lab from the main cavern, and I turned, knowing that as sure as the sun rises in the east and as sure as there will always be an England, there was going to be a pot of tea waiting for me on the other side.

I had turned knowing I was going to see Alfred coming at me with the inevitable tray, pot and cups, milk and sugar. And they were there all right, but in between, my eye caught something else. Something wrong. It took a second to register anything more, but then it came in a flash: color—green—green color!

The wastebasket just inside the med lab arch was heaped with little bits of vine and leaves.

"Oh no, my dear. No, no, no," Richard Flay cried.

He clicked his tongue and waved his fingertips in a seizure of disapproval as he walked out of the antique shop. Nicola Dulch smiled apologetically at the owner as she raced after him. She caught up with him at the corner, but only because he'd stopped at a newsstand to pick up the new *Art and Antiques*.

"Richard, that was terribly rude," she scolded. "How am I to show my face in there again, when they know I brought you expressly to—"

"You shouldn't go back. Ever. The painting's a fake, and not a very good one. Catherine de Medici died in 1589. Yet the buttons on her dress are cerulean blue, which has only been around since 1805. The beads in her hair are lemon yellow, 1809, and the dress itself is chrome yellow, 1818."

"Well, that is disappointing, but it's no reason to insult them. They didn't paint it."

"Nicola, my dear, you asked for my opinion, and I agreed to come down here and give it—in exchange for lunch at 21. If you want me to be polite as well (and to the

would-be peddlers of a mediocre forgery, no less), then the price would be dinner at Maison de Pierre with at least two bottles of my choosing from the premium wine list.”

“I’m not made of money, Richard. If I agreed to that, I’d have nothing left to buy the painting!”

“Then I’m afraid you shall have to take me as I am, or find another expert to save you from ruin.”

It took the entire walk to the 21 Club and a half bottle of ‘96 Latour to get Richard Flay past the affront of a poorly executed forgery and back to the charming lunch companion he usually was.

“So, my dear, sex and violence,” he said at last, eyes gleaming with the promise of gossip and scandal. “We meet this weekend at the Watermill Lodge, don’t we, for the big house party?”

“Oh yes,” Nicola said. “I think I was the first one outside the family to be invited.”

“You are family,” Richard insisted, consulting his infallible memory of who in Old Gotham society was related to whom, and beginning to arrange the facts as he often did after a few glasses of Chateau Latour. “You and Elizabeth were second cousins on your mother’s side, but you couldn’t be a bridesmaid when she married Oliver because you had, um... Was it chicken pox? Or was it the semester abroad, Paris or somewhere? Well anyway, you weren’t there. Then, when Fiona was born, you were her godmother, and when Elizabeth died, you were appointed co-trustee for Fiona’s trust fund, along with Oliver, of course. Let me see, what else? Oh yes, once he married Noel, you sponsored her for the Junior League and the Garden Club, which was generally accepted as the first family’s stamp of approval on the second wife. Did I leave anything out?”

Nicola picked up the wine bottle and checked the label.

“What’s in this stuff? You seem to know my life story better than I do. Quick, what’s my favorite color?”

“Turquoise,” Richard Flay said sagely. “I’ve been meaning to speak to you about those atrocious pillows you bought at the Snavelly auction. But seriously, I can’t take much credit. I was over at Oliver’s townhouse just last week and your name came up. What with Fiona’s birthday in a few months and turning over the trust.”

“Ah, that’s why my ears were burning. So what were you doing at Oliver’s talking about Fiona’s trust fund?”

“Oh, that had nothing to do with my visit. Oliver only wanted my opinion on those Miros they have on the stairs. He was wondering if they should be reappraised. It has been twenty years.”

“Reappraised?” Nicola asked sharply.

“Yes,” Richard said, surprised by the vehemence in her tone.

“Why would he want to do that? Why would someone reappraise artworks they’ve had for twenty years?”

“Oh... Well, there are many possible reasons,” Richard stalled. He was uncomfortable with the shift in the conversation. What had begun as light gossip about a mutual friend seemed to be drifting into pointed and indelicate probing.

Richard Flay hardly saw his position giving art advice to his friends as a sacred trust conferring priest/penitent confidentiality, but he was aware that a collection is an

extremely personal undertaking. He didn't like speculating what a purchase or sale might mean about a collector's private life. He only considered the artwork itself: its technical merits and provenance, whether it was representative of the artist or period, and its function in the greater context of a collection.

As for personal matters, well... one could glean a great deal, he supposed, if one had a sordid mind. There were pieces a collector would never part with unless he was in dire financial need. There were pieces that had to be valued for a divorce settlement or liquidated to settle an estate. And of course, for some, there were shadow collections. He himself owned six pieces which were, technically, not the lawful property of those he bought them from. Those who owned stolen artworks enjoyed them privately. They didn't show them even to a fine art consigliere like Richard Flay. But owning stolen art had given him a kind of sixth sense about others who did. He could guess with a fair degree of certainty who had a hidden room in their manor with a guilty secret or three hanging on their walls.

"It was predictable."

That was Bruce's summary the next morning. I made Alfred wake me early so I could be the one to bring Bruce his breakfast. In between bites of a lemon poppyseed scone, he explained how he's used to working through events as he writes them up in his logs. Since he wasn't going to be able to do that any time soon, he'd accomplish the same thing by telling me.

Honest to God, that's how he put it. 20 mg of Oxycontin in his system, unable to walk fifteen feet to his workstation, but he'd worked out a way to get "all the psychoanalytical benefits of making a log entry, if not the archival ones."

Upside, I got to hear the whole story.

Downside, I got to hear the whole story:

"After all Ivy did to help get Harvey back, she felt entitled to have whatever happened next to go exactly the way she wanted. She expected to be made happy."

"Ivy is never happy," I pointed out, and Bruce grimaced.

"It's not a strong predilection in her nature, I agree. Nevertheless, she expected it. And evidently, sending Harvey away for treatment, far, far from Gotham..."

"And far, far from her..."

"Exactly. The goddess is displeased, and rather than simply adapt: get on a plane and go visit him, she has to assign blame and take it out on whoever she deems responsible."

"You."

"Me. When Rogues don't get what they want, it's usually me. Like I said, it was thoroughly predictable."

"If it was so predictable, why didn't you predict it?" I asked.

I have to admit, it was an effort. The teasing and sass usually come so naturally, but the scare of the night before was still too vivid. I would have been happy to give Catwoman the day off, to just crawl into the medi-bed beside him and spend the day purring in his ear. But he didn't need a purring kitten. He needed Catwoman pawing at the bat toy, just like always. So paw I did:

“So tell me, oh Great Detective who understands the minds of his enemies so completely, if this one was so easy to see coming, why didn’t you—”

“I did,” he grveled. “I was prepared for an attack. I’ve been dosing with anti-tox, I’ve kept the utility belt stocked with a variety of fast-acting herbicides, I went into the Wedgewood knowing it was almost certainly a trap and that Ivy was probably the one behind it.”

I felt this warm, wonderful tingle the moment he said “I did.” Just like all those years ago when he showed up on that rooftop to take down the imposter and reclaim his mantle. This was the first gravel I’d heard since he was hurt, and it meant the same thing as that wonderful old costume on that long ago rooftop: Batman was back.

“The only thing I couldn’t foresee was that damned flytrap getting around my belt the way it did, and those vines coiling around my leg in that exact way at that exact moment, so when the boiler blew...” He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Your body went one way while your legs went the other,” I said softly.

“Yes... Goddamn it, yes... After Bane, I modified the batsuit, added support and padding on the lower back. But no amount of reinforcement, no design, can anticipate every possible angle of every possible—DAMNIT!”

He slammed his fist down on the bed, and then winced at the effort. The move had jostled his plate and a little bite of scone had fallen to the ground. Now one of the bats—as heedless of his tempers as any cat would be—was venturing into the med lab to eat it.

A few hours later, the bat would be back for a ham sandwich. By then, Alfred had taken an x-ray and sent it to Dr. Thompkins. She confirmed his diagnosis: Bruce’s injury was “just a bad wrench,” but it was a bad wrench near the L4 vertebrae. That’s when the plate with the ham sandwich flew, when he heard the wrench was just below the disc that had swollen so badly after Bane’s “back breaker” maneuver.

No one outside the Bat-Family, including me, had ever heard what really happened back then. Alfred told me now that Bruce had suffered a minor fracture to his L3 vertebrae and a massive herniation to the L3-L4 disc, none of which is good but none of it is crippling. Except the latter released “inflammatory chemical mediators” that caused the disc to swell until it pressed into the spinal column, causing temporary paralysis from the waist down.

With a history like that, Bruce wasn’t going to take chances. It’s probably the one injury he won’t shrug off and work through. Alfred said he had to rest it completely for four to five weeks, Dr. Thompkins said he had to rest it completely for five to seven weeks, and (after the obligatory “DAMNIT” that sent the ham sandwich to the floor), he agreed to five weeks in the easy chair.

Fredrick Donohue, Jr. walked hurriedly through d’Annunzio’s dining room, embarrassment tinting his cheeks until he reached Fiona’s table.

“Well, I just made a total ass of myself. I thought the reservation would be in your name. I asked for Lyon, and Giovanni says ‘Like-a your sister? There must be a mistake again taking the reservation. Here I thought she was eating with you, and I

already sit her at your table.' He was going nuts rearranging his reservations before I could settle him down."

"Half-sister," Fiona said archly. "And I don't like using my name here because the last time I did, Giovanni thought I was Noel. 'Mrs. Lyon,' I could just vomit."

Rick sighed.

"You know, she is my mother, Fiona. I know you hate her, it isn't necessary to remind me every single time an opportunity presents itself."

"It was my dad's birthday, Rick. Our special lunch, just the two of us. I called ahead and made sure there was a cake. And what do I get? 'Mrs. Lyon.' I can't wait 'til I turn twenty-one. Get my trust fund and get away from all of you."

"I always thought we got along okay," Rick grinned.

"We did until you went and proposed to Gracie the gorgon. This weekend is going to be hell, Rick, and it's all your fault."

"I don't get it. 'Gracie the gorgon.' Why does everybody hate her, Fiona?"

"You know, in all the time I've been coming here, I never tried the shrimp *arrabbiata*."

"Only thing you and mom have ever agreed on."

"I'm pretty sure 'arrabbiata' means angry. Angry shrimp."

"You don't know how lucky you are, Fiona. The trust fund from your mother is untouchable. You can say anything you want, do anything you want, marry anyone you want. You turn twenty-one and it's yours, whether Oliver likes it or not. I'm completely at my mother's mercy. And she does not like Gracie. Neither do you, and I'd just like to know why."

"Must be from the chili peppers. Such a good bite, I'll bet it's great with shrimp."

"Fiona, come on! I just don't see why you're all so down on her. My whole family and half my friends, nobody likes her but me. Why is that?"

"I'm not going to answer that, Rick. Because despite what you might think, a couple million nailed down tight in a trust fund does not mean that I can say anything to anybody without consequences. But I'm sure if you think about it for a while, you'll figure it out all by yourself."

Will Foley was not the only six-foot white man to know his way around Chinatown. He wasn't the only blonde-haired, blue-eyed twenty-something to find his way past the tourist herb shops with romantic names like "Eastern Spring Elixirs" to the authentic ones like Ho Shou Wu.

He was only unique in what he bought there. He didn't want xiong huang cream like most of the athletic white men who somehow got the idea that the salve contained steroids that wouldn't be detected in drug tests. He didn't want yin yang huo, the horny goat weed, or dong chong xia cao. He didn't want any of the aphrodisiacs. Instead he bought red panaax araliaceae, ma huang, wu wei zi, an mian pian, and suan zao ren. Every week.

Today, he added chang bai ciwuja to the order.

"You sure?" Mr. Wo asked. "The extract is very strong. Give you quite a headache if you're not used to it."

"I'm sure," came the stoic reply.

"Yes, I know, you'd be so much happier chasing Ratcatcher through a stinking sewer, but instead you have to endure your favorite Schubert, fig and sandalwood incense, and a full body massage from a topless slave girl. I'm really not sure how you'll be able to bear it."

"I'll manage," he grveled. "But it will have to wait until you get back. In case you've forgotten, we're expected at Watermill Lodge this weekend."

"I assumed we'd be cancelling," I told him.

"I'm cancelling, I can't move. 'Freak accident on the racquetball court.' You're fine. You still need to go."

"I 'need' to go? C'mon, Bruce, 'fess up. This isn't social obligation talking; no amount of painkiller and anti-inflammatories is going to turn you into Mrs. Ashton-Larraby. What's really going on?"

There was the same flash in his eyes that I saw the night before: crystal clear, dark and penetrating, sexy as hell. It was Batman sitting there, Batman wearing a Bruce Wayne suit... Batman sitting there lying to me:

"It is a social obligation. I only know Oliver and Noel slightly, but this party is announcing and celebrating an engagement. It's a very special event. We said we'd be there, and one of us still can be."

I crossed my legs, licked my lips, and felt a warm, delicious tingle. He was lying all right, and maybe another woman would be offended by that. But I am not another woman.

Batman and I have played games before. He wanted me at that party, but instead of coming out and saying so, he was pretending it was Bruce Wayne who wanted me to go. Instead of just coming out and telling me why Batman needed me to be there, he was pretending it was some social duty I had to perform as the acting Mrs. Wayne.

I like playing games with Batman. Right now he was lying and I knew he was lying. But did he know that I knew he was lying?

I couldn't tell, so I meowed.

"Then I guess I better go upstairs and pack."



## CHAPTER 2: THE LOOK

The Wayne family had erected their manor on the choicest lot on the vast property. The house was perfectly situated to look out over the burgeoning city across the river. In those days, the city didn't glisten with artificial light as it did now, the Night-Gotham gradually coming into focus like a gleaming jewel as the sky around it darkened. It was a sight Batman seldom saw. He was usually in the cave by now, preparing for the night ahead, or sometimes he was in the city, arranging Bruce Wayne's alibi through some public appearance with a beautiful but shallow bimbo.

Back then, at least. There were no bimbos since Selina. It was being in his room at sunset that reminded him of that earlier time. Those first weeks after the Bane injury, that was the only time in his life that he saw this particular view of the city at this time of day. As if the memories were linked, the pain in his back grew worse, just as it always did back then. This time of day, the dawn of night, when he should be in the cave getting into costume... The pain had always grown worse then, and it grew worse now. In his mind's ear, Alfred suggested he take a pain pill and settle in for the night, and in his mind's ear, he heard his venomous, snarling refusal. How badly he had treated Alfred back then.

He should never have sent Selina away. It was a mistake. She was the biggest difference in his life since that earlier time, and her presence alone would have warded off this flood of unwelcome memories. Her sudden absence made them all the sharper.

Once again, his inner-Alfred suggested a pain pill and sleep, and this time, he acquiesced. He settled on the bed and shut his eyes, willing the old memories to stay in their cages, and taking refuge, as he had back then, with a conjured Cat on a long ago rooftop. Once again, he had hesitated when he shouldn't. She had *made him* hesitate, somehow, and he still couldn't nail down exactly how she did it. Over and over again, that one woman—that one criminal—somehow managed to break his focus. To break it, play with it for a while like it was her own personal ball of yarn, and then hand back the broken pieces with that damnable "Aren't I a naughty girl" grin. Once again, it led to his giving her an opening twice as long as a fighter of her skill needed, and once again, she had gotten away with her prize. Once again, he was left with that lingering scent in his nostrils: lavender and vanilla mingled with leather and musk, and a hint of tearose whenever her hair flitted past his face. Once again, he had to track that damnable cat thief back to her lair to try to recover stolen property rather than preventing the theft in the first place. Once again, typing those words into the logs: Catwoman. My enemy. My equal. Who brought a fire to my lips that Bruce Wayne's bimbos never came close to ringing... ringing...

Bruce started, his eyes snapping open, instantly alert. Ringing. Selina's ring.

He had to stretch to reach his phone, and pain shot like fire from his shoulder to his lower back, burning through the last wisps of sleep.

...: *Didn't wake you, did I? I wanted to say goodnight. ...*

"No, no" Bruce lied, double-checking that the line had been secured before adding, "Bats are nocturnal. How's the houseparty?"

...: *Woof. You've got me holed up with the cast of a Fellini film, Bruce. These people are seriously strange... :..*

Richard Flay was the only one of the houseguests I knew beyond "Hi, hello." It was to be a weekend of parties and amusements, with loads of extra people expected for a garden party on Saturday, clam bake Saturday night, and a barbecue on Sunday. But Friday night was a formal dinner just for those of us staying at the house.

Nobody had a chance to talk much during the afternoon arrivals. The son and daughter, Rick and Fiona, went off to play tennis, while his fiancée, Gracie, went for a swim. For the rest of us, the afternoon was all about seeing to the luggage and settling into rooms. I'd taken the Lamborghini, and this good-looking young man who carried my bags couldn't take his eyes off it. I think his hand actually trembled when he touched the door to get my suitcase. He lingered once he'd brought the bags to my room, and I knew he wanted to ask about it. I was patiently waiting for him to work up his courage, but he never got past his name (which was William) because Richard Flay kept popping in: he couldn't find his way back to his room, he needed more towels, he needed help reaching a high shelf, and so on.

Alone at last, I figured I had time for a shower before I had to dress for dinner. Unfortunately, Watermill Lodge is no Wayne Manor, and it seems there's an odd little acoustic quirk with the plumbing. Standing in the shower, I could hear conversation in the next room. No actual words, but the pitch and tone came through loud and clear. It was a man and a woman having a pretty nasty-sounding fight. I was going to ignore it, but then the word "whore" jumped out quite distinctly from the otherwise unintelligible garbling.

Bruce smiled at the psychological point. Everyone has particular sights, sounds, and patterns that they key into. No matter how diverse or jumbled the sensory landscape, certain words, written or spoken, will be noted. Given Selina's miserable history with F. Miller and the Gotham Post, it wasn't surprising that her psyche would key into that word over others.

"The man's voice, or the woman's?" he asked mildly.

...: *Woman's, :..* she answered

Kitty's curiosity was piqued, and I decided that if I wasn't going to spend dinner playing Guess The Combatants, it would be best to skip the shower and hear no more. So I threw on the cocktail dress I'd brought for the occasion: a pale yellow silk, sleeveless but no cleavage, nothing too sexy for this crowd. I added some simple gold earrings, ran a brush through my hair, and went down to dinner early... And was immediately foiled by my own good intentions. Just I stepped into the hall, I saw the door to the next room over open and Rick come out. Male voice identified. Now feline curiosity really wanted to know who the woman was that he was fighting with, and whom she was calling a whore.

Luckily, I wasn't the only one who got downstairs early. Oliver was there, and he offered me a tour of the house. He asked about Bruce, of course, said what a pain those squash injuries can be, and mentioned running into him last month at his health club, that kind of thing. He also said how relieved he was that I hadn't worn some big piece of Wayne heirloom jewelry, because Noel was a little afraid about being outshone.

"I'm sure that sounds silly to you," he said apologetically, "but Noel was a model, after all, and in her day she was called the most beautiful woman in the world. Now, she has a son old enough to be getting married. I'm sure she can be forgiven a few harmless vanities."

I agreed, and when Noel came down to dinner, I made a point of complimenting her necklace.

"What was it?" Bruce interrupted.

...:What was what?::...

"Her necklace."

...:Oh, uh, white gold or platinum collar with a pinkish stone in the center, rose quartz or maybe pink tourmaline. ::...

Bruce grunted.

The rest of the cocktail hour chitchat was taken up with introductions. The only person I didn't know at all was Daniel Eagan: late 30s, bit of a southern accent, nice looking if a bit too "pretty" for my taste. He said he was a professional poker player, but he said it like it was a joke. He seemed to know everybody, but he didn't seem to know anyone well. Just what his connection was to the family, why he was there or what he actually does for a living, I have no clue.

Dinner was pretty odd. It seems that Richard Flay's friend, Nicola Dulch, had played a little visit to the seating chart. Nothing was said openly, but I heard a few whispers. Gracie was the guest of honor, no surprise there; it was her engagement to Rick that the whole weekend was celebrating. She was to be seated at Oliver's right, and I had the second highest position on our host's left—which was certainly no compliment to *my* social status, but to Bruce's. If he was there, Bruce would have been seated in the opposite position at the other end of the table on Noel's left, but seeing as he wasn't, Nicola was asking if I could be booted down the chain a few places to let her have the seat next to Oliver. Noel didn't care (and I certainly wouldn't have minded if anyone had asked me), but Oliver evidently vetoed the idea. It made for a very strange prelude to a very strange meal.

...: Cream of edamame soup, an artichoke, lobster themador, endive salad, and crème brulee, ::... Selina volunteered, simply to head of any more questions about irrelevancies like Noel's necklace.

Once again, Bruce grunted.

No butler, but there was a footman to do the serving. I heard Noel call him William and looked—sure enough, it was the same kid who bought up the luggage and couldn't take his eyes off the Lamborghini. Richard Flay couldn't take *his* eyes off William. Nicola kept *her* eyes on Oliver the way I used to track a pair of emeralds through a party. And all I can say about the crosscurrents between Rick, Fiona and Gracie is that I've sat in the drawing room between Eddie and Bruce trapped in their day-faces, politely chatting about opera when all they both wanted was to put on some masks, step outside, and beat the living hell out of each other.

After dinner, Richard Flay appropriated me for an in-depth discussion of the MoMA's new exhibit (yet again, made possible by a generous grant from the Wayne Foundation), and I lost track of most of the others' movements. But I'm fairly sure Nicola finally cornered Oliver. The pair of them seemed to drift off in the general direction of his study, and it seemed like they were both missing for about twenty minutes. I never did see when Oliver returned, but Richard noticed when Nicola got back, and that she was quite ashen. He speculated that either the lobster or something she just heard about long-term investments in Bear Sterns wasn't settling very well.

He went off to talk to her, but I was only on my own for a second before Daniel Eagan appeared from nowhere. He gave off that vibe...

"What do you mean, 'that vibe?'" Bruce hissed.

*...: Oh come on, Bruce. You know very well what I mean. I never had the pleasure of tangling with the Fop personally, but from what I've heard, 'the vibe' was your specialty. If I was interested, he was ready, willing, and eager. ...*

"And he knows you're with me?" the menacing Bat-voice graveled.

*...: Technically, but I'm here alone, and I might be the sort that plays around....*

"Anything else?" Bruce asked darkly.

*...: As a matter of fact, yes. Seeing as I'm a guest here and spending the next three days under the same roof with this guy, I opted for evasive maneuvers rather than clawing. Landed me in this little alcove behind a set of French doors, where I found this note. 'F I have it. Bring the money.' Boathouse 9. ...*

He grunted.

"Since there aren't nine boathouses on the property, that presumably means 9 o'clock. Was it after nine when you found the note?"

*...: Yeah, much. It was nearly eleven. I can still go out to the boathouse and poke around if you want. Not like I need my beauty rest. ...*

Bruce considered this, but decided against it.

"No, not worthwhile at this point. Is there anything else unusual about the note?"

*...: Unusual? Bruce, it's a note. It wasn't left at the Bat-Signal and it's not asking the air-speed velocity of an African swallow. What qualifies as unusual? ...*

"The F," Bruce sighed. "Does it have a period after it, like an initial?"

*...:No, but the F is in the top left over the other words, like it's being addressed to "F." I think we can assume the initial is implied. ...*

"F. I have it. Bring the money. Boathouse 9," he recited.

*...:Actually, it's 'Bring' and then a dollar sign. 'the money' was my interpret—...*

“Don’t,” Bruce barked. “Don’t interpret, don’t theorize, don’t think. Just give me the cold facts without any—”

*...: Bruce, are you ready to tell me what the hell I’m doing here? ...*

There was a long pause. Then, rather than answering, Bruce said:

“I miss you.”

There was a longer pause, and then...

*...: So, this is pretty important stuff, eh? You want me there with you, lying next to you right now, in our bed, running my fingertips over your chest, right over the emblem, right over the scar, purring you to sleep, but instead, you’ve got me here playing ‘lobster and lovenotes’ with the cast of a Fellini film. ...*

Bruce closed his eyes and expelled a long, shuddering breath.

Breaking his focus. Pawing it like her own, personal ball of yarn. Then handing it back in pieces and expecting him to pick up where he’d left off like nothing at all had happened... How very little had changed.

Wayne Manor would always be home to Dick Grayson. He didn’t call ahead and seldom bothered with the doorbell. But today, since his arms were full, he jostled boxes and pressed the button with his elbow—and then kicked himself for being so thoughtless. As soon as the door began to open, he started apologizing in a frenzied rush:

“Alfred, I am so sorry, I didn’t think. I just thought ‘hands full’ and it never even occurred to me... You must have so much extra work right now, what with Bruce being laid up and everything. And all I had to do was set down the boxes and get my key—”

“Master Dick,” Alfred beamed. “What a pleasure it is to welcome you home, young sir. Do come in. Here, let me help you with those parcels.”

Dick jostled his boxes again but felt obligated to repeat his apology when Alfred reached out to help.

“Oh no, please, I can manage. I already put you to enough trouble.”

“In ringing the doorbell, sir?”

Dick took a deep breath, and then explained:

“None of us did very well last time, Alfred—when Bruce got hurt, I mean. We let him push us away, and we never should have, no matter what he said. I know the weight of it all pretty much fell on you, and, well, Babs and I talked about it. If nothing else, this is a chance to make up for it a little. Babs went through all her favorite movies and picked out a bunch for Bruce to watch while he’s laid up. Otherwise, we figure he’ll probably just brood and read Dostoyevsky while Selina is gone. Or maybe back issues of the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin. But we’re worried about you, too. Must be a lot more work for you.”

Alfred could barely contain his emotion.

“Master Dick,” he said warmly, “there is no greater mark of character than to acknowledge the errors of one’s past, and then to go beyond simple acknowledgement or expressions of remorse, to actively making restitution. I am very proud of you, young sir.”

Dick swallowed and blushed profusely.

"Well, eh..." he floundered helplessly, and Alfred quickly returned to the original conversation:

"As you say, Master Dick, there is certainly some variance in the household routine, but the additional work upstairs is offset by the suspension of the master's downstairs activities."

"Ah. Well, I'm going to be down there each night myself. I figured it's better if I work off Batman's at-large list and use his routines to design a patrol route. Will that make any more work for you? Because I could always use the satellite cave under the Wayne Tower and—"

"Not at all, sir. Will you be changing into costume here?"

"Yeah, I guess. But don't feel you need to do laundry or anything. I can always pick up a few days worth of clothes during the week and run them back home."

Alfred's glare expressed disapproval as vehement as his earlier approval.

"It is best if you leave those considerations to me, Master Dick. Nightwing should simply make use of the cave's resources in whatever way you think best, and permit me to provide such support services as I deem necessary."

"Yessir," Dick said. He was seventeen again. Nightwing was years in the future, and he had just brought home a B-minus on his English test after Alfred spent so much time quizzing him on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Master Bruce is in his study," Alfred said mildly, picking up one of the boxes. "I am sure he will find this selection of films most diverting."

"Yes," Dick said, with renewed confidence. "Babs has good instincts for that kind of thing... Oh, and Alfred, I like to start patrol a little earlier than Bruce. Could you maybe have a little snack ready for me around 8 o'clock or so. Grilled cheese and maybe some fruit?"

"Very good, sir," Alfred said approvingly.

Bruce interlaced his fingers thoughtfully as Dick pulled DVD after DVD out of a cardboard box, consulted a slip from his pocket, and arranged them in little stacks on the desk.

"Looks like day three of your Babs-Flix marathon will be devoted to sizzling chemistry: *To Have and Have Not*, *The Big Sleep* and *Key Largo*. See what that 'Bogey and Bacall' thing was all about, I guess. The ways of the All-Seeing Oracle, they are mysterious."

"Not that mysterious," Bruce noted with a lip-twitch.

With Selina gone, he was alone as he had been after the Bane injury. "Sizzling chemistry" would remind him of the Cat and Bat as they had been, making him feel her absence more acutely. The next day she would return home, and he couldn't help but contrast his life then and now.

"Here's something interesting," Dick said, reading off his slip. "Wikipedia story Babs found on Lauren Bacall. They were doing her screen test, and she was nervous: only nineteen, big Hollywood studio, her first time before the cameras. So to minimize her quivering, she pressed her chin against her chest, and then she had to tilt her eyes upward to face the camera. Became known as 'The Look,' smouldering hot and her

special trademark. Just goes to show how what you *think* is happening can be so far off from what's *really* happening."

"What I think is happening," Bruce said ominously, "is Superman was off world to rescue his father and then traveled into the future to help the Legion. Flash, Aquaman, and Martian Manhunter took turns covering his monitor duty, and he's been paying them back for weeks taking over their shifts. He sits there, he's got time on his hands, he gets bored, and he opens the Watchtower interface to the OraCom and starts chatting with Barbara. Intentionally or not, he taps into the inner matchmaker, and here we are."

Dick started to object, when Alfred coughed from the doorway. He didn't want to call Bruce "crazy paranoid" in front of Alfred, so Dick shifted his attention to the DVD case for *Key Largo*. Alfred came in with a telephone on a silver tray, announced that Miss Selina was calling from Watermill Lodge and that he had already secured the line. Dick took the DVD to the window as if he needed more light to read.

His maneuver to give Bruce a little privacy was wasted, for Bruce waved him back almost immediately and, after double-checking with Alfred that the line had been encrypted, he switched the phone to open speaker mode.

"Selina, say that again," he ordered.

*...: Noel Lyon is dead,;... came the crisp reply. ...: She didn't come down to breakfast this morning. Oliver sent the maid up to check on her, and... well, the commotion is still in progress. But the hostess is dead, so I'd expect the party to be breaking up ASAP. Except for the immediate family, and maybe that cousin of hers if she's staying for the funeral. So I'll be ho—...*

"Stop. Back up. You're not going anywhere until we know more."

"How did she die?" Dick mouthed silently, but Bruce shook his head dismissively. He had other priorities:

"Selina, go to Noel's room. Stay inside the house if you possibly can, but do whatever you need to in order to get there without being seen."

There was a pause.

"Do it!" Bruce barked.

Another pause, and then...

*...: I'll call you back. ;...*

Tense minutes passed. Alfred's attention flickered around the study, the impulse to "tidy" providing an excuse to stay and hear more.

"I don't get it," Dick was saying. "Item one: ascertain the cause of death. 'Cause if it's nothing suspicious and this woman just keeled over from a heart attack or something, then sending Selina to snoop is—"

"The death *is* suspicious," Bruce said tersely. "Anything happening around Oliver Lyon right now is suspicious. And time is the enemy. We'll find out how Noel died soon enough, that isn't going to change. But anything in that bedroom can—and no doubt will—change within the hour, and I need Selina there before it does."

The three men stared at each other until the phone rang again.

"Selina?" Bruce barked.

...: *Uh, no. Not quite,...* Barbara's cool Oracle voice replied. ...: *I've got her on the OraCom. She said it's easier than juggling the cell phone right now, and you would understand why. So turn it on. I've got her on channel four....*

Bruce dropped his head into his hand and massaged his brow while Dick pulled his com unit from his breast pocket.

"Here we go," he breathed, plugging it into the phone speaker. "Selina on the OraCom. Who knew she'd actually use it, eh Bruce?" He smiled, and Bruce glared. "Eh, okay, channel four," he ended lamely.

...: *Hello?* ... Selina whispered.

"We read you," Bruce said formally. "Go on."

...: *Uh, well, she's laying here. ...*

"What's the bed situation look like?" Bruce asked. "Does it look like she shares the room with her husband? Or separate bedrooms?"

"You can't ask her that?" Dick hissed, smacking Bruce's shoulder lightly in a flurry of indignation, and Bruce quickly muted the speaker before replying.

"She's Catwoman, Dick. She's not squeamish about poking through other people's private things."

...: *Separate bedrooms, ...* the speaker announced in Selina's hushed whisper. ...: *Bed and nightstands told the tale, but I checked the bathroom to confirm it. Definitely separate bedrooms....*

"All right. Now check the safe," Bruce said, releasing the mute button.

...: ... ..

"There should be a fairly spectacular diamond in there."

...: ... ..

"A necklace, I believe."

...: ... ..

"Selina?"

...: *You do understand that there's a dead woman lying here at my feet, right? ...*

"You do understand it's Batman telling you to break into a safe and paw someone else's property?"

...: ... ..

Dick stared openmouthed as Bruce scowled at the telephone, counting down from three with his fingers. Then:

...: *I'll call you back. ...*

The safe was only a JSR mini with a digital lock, so it's not like it took all my concentration. I had plenty of free braincells to focus on the fact that I had let Bruce send me into this crazy house as an agent of the Bat. I had plenty of free braincells to point out that I was practically stepping over a dead woman to open a safe simply because he said so... and plenty of others to remind me that (grunt) he was Batman. Batman directly and unambiguously telling me to open up someone else's safe is quite a turn on and the one form of catnip this kitty can never pass by...

But I still hate following orders. He gets that tone that just assumes you're going to do whatever he wants, and... well, that's as far as I got when the pathetic little JRS digital gave up the fight and swung open to reveal its secrets.

...: *It's a fake:...*

"What do you mean it's a fake?"

...: *Does 'fake' have some other meaning I'm not familiar with? Bruce, it's a fake. She's only got one necklace in here. It's the one she wore to dinner last night:...*

"The one you said was a rose quartz?"

...: *Well, it's not like I put it under a jeweler's loop. I couldn't get that close then, and a stone this size you don't exactly assume 'diamond.' But I'm close now, and if it was real, yeah, totally with you: 'fairly spectacular' would be the mot juste. But it's not real. It's moi—shit, someone's coming... :...*

The men listening in the study waited in silence for a moment, then Dick asked:

"Moissshit?"

"Moissanite," Bruce grveled. "A diamond substitute like cubic zirconium, but it wears better, maintaining its clarity and color in a way that CZ cannot. If it's cut well, with a faceted girdle, its brilliance is indistinguishable from a real diamond."

"Yeah, but these people don't need to buy a fake, right? I mean, Lyon Publishing, they're in your league."

"That's not the pertinent question," Bruce said, his eyes locked on the com link. "Ask yourself what the true incongruity is with respect to that necklace?"

...: *Bruce? ... the speaker hissed. ...: That footman came into the room just now. Y'know, William, the kid who carried my bags. He just snuck in here and was rummaging around Noel's exercise machine. I think he took a bottle or something with him. :...*

"You THINK?"

...: *I'm on a ledge outside the window, Stud. I don't have the best line of sight on — :...*

"You're on a ledge?"

...: *Not a lot of options here. It's not like I can fit in the vents. It was this or the closet... oh shit, here comes another one. :...*

Once again, the line went quiet. Dick knit his brow, and then pointed to the com link.

"Selina. She's the incongruity. If someone named *Lyon*, as in 'sounds like LION,' had a 'fairly spectacular' diamond, then Catwoman should know about it. She certainly wouldn't be assuming a stone that size must be rose quartz."

"Correct," Bruce nodded curtly.

Dick studied his mentor: he seemed grimly satisfied with Dick's reasoning, and Dick couldn't help but wonder if Bruce was even aware of the new variable this line of thought introduced.

"Do you think it was a good idea to make her put her fingerprints on it?"

"What?" Bruce said, the word coming out as a softly expelled breath as he looked up sharply.

"Her fingerprints, Bruce. I doubt she's running around that house in costume. You make her go to a dead woman's bedroom while the body is still warm, crack her safe and feel up her 'fairly spectacular' diamond?"

There was a long pause, and then...

"Selina is a professional. I'm sure she's taken all necessary precautions."

"She's a pro at what she does, not at what we do. And she's acting as your eyes and ears right now. I wouldn't count on her viewing it as a Catwoman operation."

"..."

"Bruce?"

"I'm sure she's taken all necessary precautions," Bruce repeated.

...: *Christ, you've got me in the loony bin here, Bruce. You've landed me in fucking Arkham, you know that?...*

"What?" Bruce and Dick said in unison.

...: *Get this, first that William kid comes in, fishes around the exercise machine and takes away a bottle of something. Then Gracie comes in. Y'know, the fiancée? She just snuck in and went around the whole damn room, looking behind every painting. ...*

"She's looking for the safe," Dick noted.

...: *Well, duh. That's what people who just know wall safes from the movies think: gotta be hidden behind a big oil painting....*

"And Noel's is hidden where?" Bruce asked.

...: *Under the television. She's got one of those TV cabinets disguised as an armoire. TV on top, DVD and a speaker underneath. Speaker is the safe....*

"So this Gracie didn't find it?" Dick asked.

...: *Nope. She didn't get to finish looking. Oliver and Fiona came in with the undertaker. He took the body, and Oliver left with him. Fiona stayed behind. Take a wild flying guess what she did....*

"Checked behind an oil painting for the safe?" Dick said.

"No," Bruce shook his head. "She searched around the exercise machine, looking for something but not finding it. Because William the footman had already found it and taken it away."

...: *It is seriously creepy how you do that, ...* Selina noted.

"What she said," Dick agreed.

## CHAPTER 3: CELESTIAL NAVIGATION

"Cassie, cars do not have body language."

It sounded better in Dick's ears than "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," but it meant pretty much the same thing. Bruce needed experienced crimefighters in the vicinity of Watermill Lodge; he understood that. Cassie needed to learn how to drive; he understood that. He didn't think combining the two into his riding up to Watermill Lodge with Cassie while she drove the car was such a hot idea. And he especially didn't think "killing two birds with one stone" was the most tasteful way to phrase it, no matter how much pain Bruce was in or how frustrated he was stuck in that armchair.

Dick had faced enough life-threatening dangers as Robin, and far too often the villain of the hour had pulled that "killing two birds" quip. It wasn't funny the first time, but by the sixteenth, he had really had enough. Time had passed, sure, but he would always dislike the phrase. Killing birds was bad enough on its own...

"Cassie, that was our exit."

"Was not."

...but used in conjunction with the girl who could snap your neck without ever losing the 10-2 steering position...

...:Can I come home now?::... Selina asked plaintively.

Bruce heard Dick's words echo in his mind's ear: *She's the best at what she does, not at what we do.* Robin or Nightwing would be locked into the investigative mindset by now. They would know instinctively what lay ahead, that the investigation was only beginning, and how it needed to proceed. But Selina... Selina was still in girlfriend-houseguest mode. Catwoman had done what he'd asked of her, but as soon as the task was complete, she was Selina again, thinking about coming home to him. Thinking about extracting herself from an unpleasant situation rather than digging in until she'd found out what had happened.

*She's the best at what she does, not at what we do.*

She wouldn't have left fingerprints, would she? Girlfriend-houseguest mode or not, it was Catwoman who opened the safe, and Catwoman must take all necessary precautions in her realm just as he did in his. After a while, it became as natural as breathing...

...:Bruce?::...

"No, you can't come back yet," the final, unchallengeable voice of the Bat decreed. "There's too much we still need to find out, starting with that bottle that was taken. This is a murder, Catwoman, and since I can't be there to investigate, you have to be my eyes and ears."

**She is the best at what she does**, the same unassailable Bat-voice repeated in Bruce's thoughts. **Catwoman does not simply forget herself and leave fingerprints on someone's safe or jewelry.** If this had happened years ago, when Batman and

Catwoman were what we used to be, wouldn't I know that? If it was Batman investigating a suspicious death at Watermill Lodge and I found Catwoman's fingerprints inside the safe, wouldn't I know that it was a frame up? Wouldn't I be so certain that I would immediately eliminate that fingerprint as a Holmesian impossibility and draw the obvious conclusion that remained: since Catwoman does not go around leaving fingerprints, this one must have been planted in order to implicate her in the crime.

*...:Is this what you were expecting?:...*

"I'm sorry?" he murmured, still lost in thought.

*...:When you sent me here, is this what you thought was going to happen?:!...*

*...:I didn't think it would be this big, :: Bruce answered. ...:but something...::*

He was still holding out on me, and I couldn't fathom why. I asked again for some kind of explanation: why he'd sent me to Watermill in the first place, what he knew, what he was expecting, something.

Something more than "go to the bedroom and don't be seen."

What do I get in reply? "No, not yet."

Insufferable jackass.

"No, not yet. First go to..."

I was getting really fed up. He said reinforcements were on the way. Dick would be following the actual body, and Cassie was bringing me a "bat-pack" (growl) with a miniature camera and a few other gadgets, and then she would "be on hand" for whatever either Dick or I needed. But in the meantime, I had to 1) check the wastebaskets in Noel's bedroom and bathroom for some clue as to what that bottle was that I'd seen William take away, and 2) if and when that search came up empty, I was to proceed to William's and Fiona's rooms and conduct similar searches.

If all three searches were unproductive, "it will have to be the household garbage," he said. (Needless to say, it will also have to be forty new acres for the Catitat made possible by a generous grant from the Wayne Foundation.)

"Cassie, I swear to God, cars do not have body language."

"Do. Green Corolla behind us nervous because semi behind it. If edge up any further, would be in our back seat."

"Cassie... Cassie, I know I said give him some space but—Cassie, Cassie, speed limits are not suggestions, Cassie. You want to maybe—I think that was the toll plaza where we turned around last time. You... you can't just anticipate what they're going to do by watching for 'tells,' okay? You have to be prepared for anything the red Honda might do when it reaches the intersection..."

"Honda no have tells; driver do. Driver control Honda. Honda drift left when he look over shoulder to merge."

"Like we should have. We're going the wrong way."

"Not."

"We're supposed to be going east."

"Going east."

"No, we're not. We need to turn around."

"Sun rise in east."

"Cassie, it's *noon!* How does that even—MEN IN JUMPSUITS! Cass, you see those tall, orange 'traffic cones' with *arms and legs* whizzing past the windows? That would be a clean up crew picking up litter. And they may be convicts, but we don't want to kill them, so you think maybe... Bridgeport? That sign said Bridgeport. Cassie, we missed the turn again."

"See. Bridgeport. Bridgeport is east. Told you."

...: *Well, there was nothing in Noel's room to shed any light on that bottle,...* Selina reported.

Bruce interlaced his fingers thoughtfully, ignoring Alfred's approach and the tray being laid on the table beside him. He glanced instead at the mantle clock. She'd had ample time to check more than one room, possibly all three and the household garbage as well.

"But you did find something," he declared, stating his guess as a certainty.

...: *And how. First, there's William's room. He doesn't have one. He's not a live in. I just talked to the maid, and she says he's not even a permanent member of the staff. He's an actor/waiter from Gotham that they hire for things like the formal dinner:...*

"Rent-a-waiter work," Bruce said, sensing palpable waves of disapproval from Alfred at this horrific notion.

...: *Right, but they weren't going to need him for the garden party, the clam bake, or the barbecue; those are all pretty informal. So William was done. The staff all thought he'd gone back to Gotham last night. He was never meant to spend the night here. Don't think I need to be the world's greatest detective to know the big looming question there is "why did he?" Why was he still in the house first thing this morning when the body was found?...*

"And the answer?"

...: *Don't know yet. But I did find Fiona's room, and in Fiona's room, I found this paper packet tucked underneath the lining of a drawer. It's like those envelopes they use for loose tea, and there's an indentation in the paper like it held a bottle. The size and shape look exactly right for the one I saw William take away from Noel's room:...*

"Describe it," Bruce ordered.

...: *I can do better, I took a picture with my phone. Sending it now. There's Chinese lettering on it. I think Mandarin, but I'm not really sure. I know it doesn't say "Beijing International Airport" "Grand Hyatt" "taxi" "museum" "imperial tombs" or "roasted duck" which is pretty much all my Chinese is good for:...*

Somewhere in the recesses of Batman's memory, he placed a checkmark next to his never (until now) confirmed theory of Catwoman's role in the theft of the Qing Lion. Then he fished out his cell phone and scrutinized the picture Selina sent.

"It's says 'root,'" he said, squinting at the first character. "A root of something I don't recognize," he added, giving up on the second symbol. "A root of something grown on Mt. Chang Bai... I think."

...: *I'll buy that. There's a faint herbal smell, like the back room of that crazy Miriam Nash's magic shop:...*

"The picture is a start," he said, mentally growling at Selina's failure to mention the smell initially, and at the unwanted intrusion of magical subjects, "but we'll need the original. If Cassie is going to go through Chinatown and ask questions without arousing suspicion, she'll need the actual paper, not a picture on a cell phone."

...:Cassie will? Thank God, does that mean I'm done? ...

"No, no it doesn't. Your next set of tasks is to 1) find out what Daniel Eagan does for a living. 2—"

...:Isn't that more of a job for Oracle? ...

"No. I don't care what he puts on his tax return. I want to hear what the others there have to say about him. 2) Find out why William was still in the house..."

He already had a theory about that, which he considered so obvious that he was astonished Selina hadn't already guessed it. But he wanted his hunch confirmed without tainting her objectivity, and more importantly, without doing anything to make her question her detective skills. She had put forth the mystery of William remaining in the house as if it was an important element of the investigation. Dismissing her reasoning would only discourage her while contributing nothing to the case.

...: 1) Find out what Daniel Eagan does for a living....

I'd been hearing a funny kind of static on the line as he was talking.

...: 2) Find out why William was still in the house....

My first thought was wiretaps or some kind of crazy cell signal interceptors, but then I remembered I was talking over the OraCom. Even Cyborg can't break through the encryptions Bruce and Barbara have built into this thing. Besides which, it didn't really sound like static. It sounded more like...

...: 3) Find out what Nicola wanted with Oliver last night....

...Munching.

"Bruce, are you eating something?"

There was this long silence that only those who have actually seen him in the mask can really pick up on. With anybody else, silence over the telephone (or in this case, the OraCom) all sounds alike. But with Bruce, there's the regular silence that is just him not saying anything, and there is the silence where the sheer concentration of malice, disapproval, and Battitude sucks in all sound, light, and thought in a six-foot radius, like a black hole of pure, mainline Batman.

This was one of those silences. I'm sure it was only a second, but it felt like a week. Then:

...:Alfred has me on a... kind of... regimented schedule. Meals and exercise....

Dick and Barbara's simple gesture in sending over a few movies had made a profound impression on Alfred. It wasn't the act itself, but the thought behind it that struck him. Fixing the mistakes of the past. Alfred too had made serious errors of judgment when Bruce was injured by Bane. His natural compassion compounded by Bruce's pain and despair, along with certain feelings of guilt over the qualms he had always expressed about Batman's activities, all led him to the great error. He allowed

the servant to overrule the medic. He had left too much up to Bruce and his brooding nincompoopery, and look where it got them.

This present injury was not nearly as severe, nor, thank God, was it permanent. But the short-term result so far as Alfred's day-to-day duties (and Bruce's day-to-day routine) was not that dissimilar. It was an opportunity to redeem himself for the mistakes of the past. A wise man knew not to let such opportunities pass, for a wise man knew The Universe might not be so generous next time.

So, as soon as Dick had left, Alfred had spoken to Master Bruce most firmly: given the extremely active nature of Bruce's daily life, a sudden drop-off into immobility, coupled with an improper diet and erratic eating schedule, was downright dangerous.

"If you are serious about healing this injury," he had declared, "then you need to follow a strict schedule. You will eat three meals a day, at set times, and perform one hour of physical therapy every day at 2PM. No deviations, no excuses."

...:Oh, good,... Selina replied.

Bruce couldn't believe it. He hadn't exactly expected pity, but some acknowledgement of his situation would have been welcome. He was *BATMAN*, and he was sitting there helpless while his butler managed him:

"Master Bruce. You have asked me to help you in your recovery, and I am taking that as seriously as anything you have done in your own... pursuits. If you want to *heal*, you will do this my way. You have deferred to my medical judgment before. Please understand that this is the only way to make you *better*."

"Oh, good," she says. Impossible woman.

...: Hey, I was just thinking, if "F" from the note is Fiona, maybe it was from William and the stuff in the packet is what the dollar sign is for....

Bruce's thoughts snapped immediately from dissatisfaction with his personal circumstances back to the case.

"If the 'F' is Fiona..." he mused, his head tilted upward and to the right as if the idea had a physical form and was floating there above him, rotating slowly so he could examine each of its many facets in turn. "Then someone like William would be a more likely sender than, say, Oliver or Noel. You don't often send notes for clandestine meetings with someone you live with and see every day..."

"On the other hand, whatever was being bought and sold probably had nothing to do with the contents of the paper packet. The note was simply left where anyone could find it, as if it was of no importance. But the packet was hidden in the lining of a drawer. A contradiction if the boathouse meeting was to sell the packet..."

"Then again, the note was sent the night before. Maybe it *was* unimportant then. The note's recipient doesn't care, he or she reads it, throws it away, goes to the boathouse and makes the buy. It's only in the morning when a body is discovered that they feel they have to hide it. In which case, either it's Fiona's and she hides it in her own room as best she can, or it was someone else hiding it in Fiona's room... either to frame her, if they expected it to be discovered, not altogether impossible with Catwoman staying in the house... or they hid it there simply because it's safer than stashing it among their own things..."

...:Bruce, uh, do I have to be here for this? Because I'm sort of hiding in a tree right now....

"Hm? Did you say something?"

...: Never mind. I'll call you back....

"Blue Ford has to pee."

"Okay, third time's a charm. Cassie. Cars: no body language. And speeding up—"

"There! Look now! Blue Ford has to pee. Right foot jittering on gas pedal and keep look at mile signs. Is look for next exit...'

"And *speeding up* because the passenger said something that pissed you off is BAD."

"Dick not know good music if bit him in ass. Is lucky has Babs to keep in line."

"Cass, I am not going to debate who should control the radio, the man with greater musical and life experience and therefore better taste, or the girl who thinks the oldest Jonas Brother is cute and wants to hear Mandy again. I am simply going to tell you, from that same font of greater life experience, that Bruce reserves the right to veto, suspend, or revoke any state-issued license given to his sidekicks until he is personally satisfied with your performance. And if he doesn't get the evidence he wants because we're still lost in Massapequa, you'll see menopause before you're allowed to drive again."

"See! Turn signal. Blue Ford go to pee."

"..."

"..."

"Get off at the next exit and turn the car around."

"I hope you're happy, Alfred. Munching in Selina's ear while she's investigating a possible murder. She sets aside her principles about crimefighting in order to help me confirm and punish the taking of a human life, and what happens? She hears me chewing."

"How very distressing that must have been for you, sir," Alfred said dryly. "I know how the very mechanisms of Justice depend on maintaining the illusion that Batman does not chew."

Bruce rolled his eyes, and Alfred collected the lunch tray.

"If one might indulge one's curiosity, sir. One has overheard Miss Selina inquire more than once why you sent her to the gathering at Watermill Lodge, and one has yet to hear you answer her query."

Bruce repositioned himself awkwardly in the chair, first holding his weight on his palms as he lifted himself up, and then stretching out his back. He winced in pain, but went on stretching, and then lowered himself again and stretched out his legs. Only then did he turn to Alfred directly and answer.

"A few weeks ago, Oliver Lyon tried to hire Batman," he said solemnly. "He contacted Commissioner Muskelli through the Mayor's office and requested a meeting. His theory was that all the great detectives were for hire: Sherlock Holmes, Nero Wolfe, Sam Spade, Hercule Poirot... Of course Batman didn't show, but Bruce Wayne ran into Oliver the next day at the Racquet Club and got the whole story. It

seems that, many years ago, Oliver gave Noel a diamond necklace for their tenth anniversary, and he didn't exactly go to Harry Winston...

"To tell you the truth, Bruce, I wasn't planning on giving her a diamond at all," Oliver said glibly. "You know the old chestnut: the more unfaithful the husband, the more spectacular the jewel collection. I certainly didn't want to hit that nerve. I didn't really know what I was going to do for our anniversary. I was thinking maybe a trip on the re-fashioned Orient Express. But then while I was traveling in San Francisco, I came across this necklace. The price was simply too good to be true for the size and quality of the stone."

"Too good to be legitimate, you mean," Bruce said as if he himself had faced that situation many times.

"Exactly. I made the obvious assumption, that the diamond was quite probably stolen. I believed that for years, but now I've come to suspect there is another, more sinister reason it was being sold so cheaply."

Bruce raised a skeptical eyebrow, but Oliver nodded grimly.

"We were at the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong, having dinner, and Noel got up to powder her nose. As soon as she'd left the table, this extraordinary woman came up to me and said to beware, the shadow of Tsin had fallen on us, and we were marked by its darkness.

"Well, it was Hong Kong. You know how prevalent kidnapping is. I assumed this was a new type of kidnapping threat, an attempt to extort money without the bother of actually grabbing Noel. I brushed it off like all the rest of that nonsense one encounters over there. I never saw the woman again, at the hotel or anywhere else. But then, it was the next morning, I had gone down to the hotel's business center to check my email, and just on a lark, I looked up this 'shadow of Tsin.' What did I see but a page full of Chinese writing I could make no sense out of, and a picture. It was a silk painting, seemed very old, and it was a portrait of a woman in some sort of courtly robes, wearing Noel's diamond. The caption said 'Star of Tsin' in English, they were only English words on the whole page. So I searched for that and found the whole history... the legend of it, anyway.

"It seems that, like so many of the great gems of the world, the Star of Tsin traces back to an ancient temple where it marked the chakra of a god on some golden idol. One night, two thieves—two brothers, to be exact—broke into the temple to steal it. The elder brother was an experienced thief, but not the younger. It was his first time, and in his nervousness, he stumbled and woke one of the cats who were the guardians of the temple. The cat yowled, sounding the alarm, and the priests came running. As the would-be thieves fled, they knocked over an oil lamp, setting fire to the temple and burning it to the ground. From that moment, both the thieves and the diamond bear the curse of that sacrilege. It's said that the brothers killed each other within a week, and all those who possess the stone will suffer likewise until it is returned to the gods."

"Piffle."

"Did you sneeze, Alfred?"

"No, sir. I pronounced that preposterous tale to be piffle."

"That's what I thought. And I agree. There are at least three other legends about cursed jewels that began as the eye of an idol, and are therefore cursed because they were removed from a sacred place/statue/temple. Don't think I didn't point that out to Oliver at the time. You may be surprised to learn that he *also* agreed. He says he dismissed the story immediately—even when he was unable to find that website ever again. He chalked it up to the peculiarities of the Chinese government's control over their Internet, but he was careful to mention to me how he had been looking for information on that 'Star of Tsin' and has never been able to find anything about it."

"I see, sir. So he 'dismissed it' as any sensible person should, but he continued to search."

"Correct. And, as you might expect, he started drawing associations that he never would have absent any talk of a curse. Several times when Noel has worn the necklace, she's had a brush with death. Their limousine was stuck in traffic for the opening night at the Met, and Noel didn't want to miss being photographed on the red carpet. So they got out and walked the last six blocks, and she nearly got clipped by a cab."

"There are those who would consider that a natural death in Gotham, sir," Alfred remarked dryly.

"Another time, she wore the necklace to the Wayne Foundation's Black and White Ball, and as they were driving home, lightning struck very near to the car. She wore it to the U.N. dinner honoring Superman, had a little too much to drink, and 'Noel being Noel, obsessive about her weight, she was on the treadmill first thing the next morning as usual, despite the hangover, burning off all that champagne. Still dehydrated from the alcohol, she collapsed on her treadmill. Only chipped a tooth but could've broken her neck.'"

"At the risk of repeating myself, sir—"

"Yes, I know, piffle. Or as Selina might put it: 'Pfft. Cursed diamonds went out with white gloves and pillbox hats.' I'm not saying I believe any of this, Alfred. But we do have a body."

"Indeed, sir. I would add too that there have been cases where what appeared to be a foolish superstition turned out to be a simple people's only means to explain some phenomenon which did have a natural, scientific explanation."

"You're thinking of the jade dragon statue, whose owners always seemed to die before their time. Not from a curse, as it turned out, but from long-term exposure to low levels of radiation, since the statue wasn't really made of jade at all, but a hybrid form of green kryptonite."

"Yes, sir. It was of that episode I was thinking... Master Bruce, not to minimize the significance of Mrs. Lyon's passing, but another aspect of the tale intrigues me. As Master Dick noted earlier, the Lyon name itself is suggestive, as is the presence of a cat in the curse legend. Surely, if someone with that surname had a diamond grand enough to be the object of a curse legend, isn't it quite likely that Catwoman would be aware of it, and, well... How to put this delicately... Is it not quite likely, sir, that she would have made an attempt to acquire it back in her more felonious days?"

Bruce's lip twitched.

"Of course it is. It's an absolute certainty. The curse is a fable. Oliver made it up because he wanted Batman involved but he didn't want to say why. There are several possible reasons, ranging from mildly annoying to criminal.

"Option: it could be the social cache. 'We're so wealthy and important, we need Batman to protect us.'

"Option: it could be some kind of a commercial enterprise to exploit Batman's name recognition, make some money from 'the gimmick.' Oliver is a publisher. He could be fabricating material to produce a Batman 'locked room jewel theft' mystery.

"Option: it could be a diversion for something else entirely. Although he better be planning to disappear afterwards, in that case. Because if Batman is tied up playing bodyguard at Watermill Lodge while Mr. Freeze is relieving Tiffany's of all their ice, then I'd know whose door to knock on the next day to get some answers, now wouldn't I?"

"There is also the consideration, sir, that Mr. Lyon's fortune very nearly equals your own. He would hardly need to supplement his income with payoffs from Mr. Freeze."

"No, he wouldn't do it for money, but where that kind of wealth is involved, blackmail is always a possibility. And then there is the most likely possibility: Oliver could have been genuinely worried about something that poses a threat to himself or his family, something that he didn't want to reveal. If he's into something shady and thinks his life is in danger, 'Let's have Batman around but not tell him why.'"

"A dubious strategy, sir. Surely if he was involved in something illegal, a private bodyguard would be preferable to Batman."

"That depends on where he perceives the threat to be coming from, Alfred. He has the means to hire private security. If he's seeking out Batman, we can assume it's because he doesn't think they're up to the task."

"Implying he is menaced by a foe you already have experience dealing with... But none of those possibilities address the original question, sir. Why not tell all of this to Miss Selina?"

"For the reason you already noted: she's Catwoman. She'd know that Oliver Lyon never bought a famous diamond with a cat in its curse legend. She'd know immediately that he made up the story, and she might just think he made it up *to bait Catwoman*. It's not like it hasn't happened before: Eric Rothchild, Nathaniel Severs, Steven Phelps, Joseph Beebe... Buying their wives jewelry with a cat angle and then publicizing that they're going out of town, cancelling at the last minute but making sure the wife leaves anyway, and then sitting there by the bedroom safe waiting for her, like if they catch her in the act they'll be able to... I had to save every one of them, Alfred. You do not want to know what that woman is like with men who try to bait her. I need her there at Watermill Lodge, but I need her to be objective."

I was starting to feel Oliver Lyon was the only person in the house that wasn't a total shit. The man's wife had *died*. My instinct was to get the hell out of his way, let him make funeral arrangements, call friends and relatives, whatever... But no, I was sticking around like some kind of Lois Lane wannabe/professional snoop because Bruce needed "eyes and ears" on the premises. Fine. That's my excuse. But what

about the rest of them? Richard Flay, Daniel Eagan, and Nicola Dulch all seemed to regard the hostess's death as a minor household snafu that a polite guest would pretend not to notice. Rick, Gracie, and Fiona, on the other hand, seemed downright chipper. They didn't actually burst into song, they didn't say they were planning to plop Noel in the ground as quickly as possible so they could all go and dance on her grave, but every one of them gave off this vibe as if their weekend had just improved tremendously.

At the Iceberg, I expect that kind of indifference, but at a place like Watermill Lodge... You know what, I take it back. At the Iceberg, I expect that kind of indifference about the life or death of *strangers*, but even Jonathan, Jervis, Pammy, and Oswald are going to register a blip if somebody they ate dinner with last night shows up dead this morning.

I had just tracked down Nicola, and we were sitting down with a pitcher of iced tea by the famous boathouse so I could do my Lois Lane impersonation one-on-one. But before I could get past the how sad it was preliminaries and get into the delicate question of why she was stalking Oliver last night, my cell phone rang.

It was Dick. Again. The third call since noon:

*...: Cassie feels we're zeroing in on it. Was it a gas station or a post office where you turned onto Watermill Road?:::*

"It was a general store called Briermere Market. How can you still be lost?"

There was a long-suffering sigh, like he used to give after Batman sent him to find some evidence.

*...: Well, for starters, we're using celestial navigation in the middle of the day. You can't actually see Venus at one o'clock in the afternoon any more than you can read body language on a 2001 Toyota Camry, but it turns out that you can see the Delta shuttle out of La Guardia and think it's Venus. Frankly, Selina, it's a miracle we're not in Opal City at this point:::*

I've said it before. I'll say it again...

*...: I'll tell you this, if we'd just called Babs for the GPS instead of getting off the Ziegler Parkway and taking Exit 29 east to Aaronville, I don't think we would have wound up in Massapequa so many times:::*

I can't believe this is the crack team that kept me from the Katz collection.

## CHAPTER 4: DETECTIVE BY PROXY

Superman always made a few adjustments to the monitor womb when he began a long shift. He turned up the flicker rate from the eastern and central U.S. feeds to +4, or forty times normal human perception. He turned off the solar monitor alerts, since his own body provided that information and he preferred to minimize distractions. For the same reason, he set the notifications for ordinary Watchtower operations down to 0.01 decibels, so they wouldn't disturb him when he was concentrating on the data sweeps.

Except today he *wasn't* concentrating on the sweeps. He had been pulling so many of these extra shifts, his attention wandered as his eyes moved absently across the bank of monitors. Without realizing it, he had begun rewriting his piece on Darfur, and it was only the 0.01-decibel whisper of a system ping, like papers rustling in a room on the other side of the Watchtower, that snapped his attention back to what he was doing. It wouldn't be an important alert, probably just a scheduling update. But he decided to check it anyway, in repentance for letting his attention wander...

Talking with Nicola Dulch, I started to wonder why there aren't more socialites like Bruce. Not the crimefighting, we all know why he does that. The mask. The secret identity. I can't think why every prominent society figure doesn't invest in one. Because these people know *everything* about each other: suicide attempts, stints at Betty Ford, anorexic daughters, bankrupt in-laws, hushed up abortions, and plastic surgery in Thailand. There's nothing they don't know about each other, and there is nothing they won't discuss about each other. Without some small corner of your life that is entirely *yours*, you'd go insane.

Bruce and I have what goes on behind the masks. We'll always have that. No matter what they think they know about us, they can never touch the truth of how we met, how we fell in love... who we really are underneath it all. That knowledge makes it easier to shrug off the nonsense. I accepted a long time ago that everyone would think it was the money: *Bruce Wayne is the richest man in the country and, if that Cat-Tales show is to be believed, she was a jewel thief. Do the math...* It was that assumption about me and Bruce that brought me to the unseemly subtext with Noel and Oliver.

It began with Nicola dancing around my questions: there was just too much she wasn't saying. These people talk about everything, and the fact that Noel Lyon was dead wouldn't change that. It didn't temper their behavior in any other way, so there had to be another reason she was holding back.

"After Elizabeth passed, we didn't know if Oliver would ever remarry," she sighed sadly. "Long illness like that, it just seemed to drain the life out of him, almost as much as it did her. That's why Noel was such a shock. We had all grown used to Oliver being an extra man at the dinner parties. He never brought a date, and Fiona was always his guest for the polo field fundraisers—she was far too young, of course, but she did like horses so. I guess all young girls do... And then, all of a sudden at the

Spring Fling, there was Noel! The next month they were engaged and six weeks after that they were married. I was the one who helped her get situated: the country club, the garden club, the Junior League. Poor dear didn't know a soul. But you saw last night how splendidly she took to it all. Such a gracious hostess..."

I saw all right; I saw that she was holding back. But she wasn't doing it because of anything connected to Noel. She was holding back because she was talking to *me*, because I'm with Bruce, who's every bit as rich as Oliver Lyon. There are things rogues won't say in front of me: a bit of gossip about Arsenal and Cheshire, or Star Sapphire and the old Green Lantern... This felt the same. So, I reasoned, if there are things society gossips won't say in front of me about beautiful women hooking up with rich men, I can assume it's because they're avoiding the same kind of parallel innuendo as the rogues. That gave me the clue on how to proceed. It would be tricky, but I did have some experience prodding inveterate gossips:

"Nicola, tell me the truth," I purred in my best Mad Tea Party voice. "Oliver is one of the wealthiest men in the country. When he married a model from one of the magazines, there had to be... talk."

"Well," she hedged for exactly one syllable, just like Jervis does before launching into the good stuff. "There were a few, in the beginning, who said that Noel was on the make. A beauty like that hooks up with someone like Oliver, everyone *thought* it, but only a few actually said it out loud. It was just understood. But then, as the years passed, everyone but Fiona got past it."

"Fiona didn't?"

"Well, it's understandable. Noel replaced her mother, after all. As I recall, the famous outburst was at the Knickerbocker Cotillion. Penelope Vraag said something like 'at least Noel wasn't a twenty-something bimbo,' and Bunny Wigglesworth said how it could always be worse. So often the second wife is the daughter's own age. Fiona replied that 'Just because she's age appropriate doesn't mean she's not a gold-digging whore.' You can guess how quickly that quote made it around the room—oh, just like that amusing bit of 'Mrs. Wayne' confusion at young Grayson's wedding."

"Yes," I laughed through clenched teeth, "that was quite funny, wasn't it."

"Still, like I said, Fiona's attitude is certainly understandable. I mean, it's different for a daughter. Noel married her father, replaced her mother. I don't think it was ever really about the money, not for Fiona. 'Gold-digger' was a convenient barb because of what everyone else was saying, but the animosity ran much deeper. Noel had money of her own, anyway, from the first marriage. Fredrick Senior was, um... oh, I don't know what they call it, but it's when they put out fires in oil wells."

"Like Red Adair?"

"Yes, exactly. He traveled all over the world doing it, made heaps of money. But no social caché. And not the sort to think of a prenup, so Noel came away with a huge settlement."

"I see."

"Which Oliver's investment knowhow has quadrupled over the years."

"I see."

"Despite the fact," Nicola whispered, leaning in, "that Noel was cheating on the first husband with Oliver a good year and a half before the divorce."

"I see."

And I did see. I see why Bruce prefers to live half his life behind a mask.

As Superman pulled the alerts onto the main viewscreen, the muscles in his back of his neck tightened, one by one. It wasn't a scheduling *update*; it was a complete revision. The monitor assignments for the next six weeks were being revised on the fly—despite the fact that the next ten days had already finalized... Clark checked to see who initiated the process, and saw it was a Gotham keycode. Oracle's keycode. Oracle was... In Rao's name... Oracle was pulling all of Batman's duty assignments for the next six weeks, and... *and* she was posting a notice that Batman would be attending the next five meetings through the OraCom hologram. She was also removing him from the active duty roster for the immediate future.

Revisions to a finalized schedule were certainly not unheard of, especially in Bruce's case. Normally, though, there would be some explanation; not a full-fledged description, mind you, but a notification of some kind as to why he was going to be unavailable. Always cautious when it came to inter-League communications, Bruce had developed a sort of code over the years that most Leaguers—and especially Clark—had worked out through experience. Most often, it was a codeword for a particular villain: "Smiley" (Joker), "?" (Riddler), "Chapeau" (Mad Hatter), "DH" (Demon's Head, a.k.a. Ra's Al Ghul—although, strangely, that designation had changed a few years ago... to "Hairdo"). The villain notations generally meant he was on a case involving said criminal and would be occupied until they were brought to justice.

Occasionally, it was a Bruce Wayne obligation. Mysterious phrases like "chip" or "headache" would appear on the schedule, phrases that made no sense at the time and only become clear a month later when some item came over the business wire: WayneTech hosting a 3-day press event to roll out a new smart chip, or Wayne Enterprises completing the forensic accounting of Talia Head's stint at LexCorp prior to absorbing the bankrupted tech divisions.

Sometimes, it was a stranger notation that seemed relatively innocuous unless you knew the code: "Clothes shopping" (going undercover), "Vacationing" (going abroad on a case), "Baby-sitting" (stakeout). In a few rare instances, when Bruce didn't want the League at large to know what was going on, he'd make notations in typographic Kryptonian so at least *Clark* was made aware of the situation.

That's what had Clark so concerned this time: no notations, no names, no code words, no explanations of any kind or in any language. Just revisions to the schedule and a change in active status. Stranger still was that the previous changes always came with a notice that Batman would not be attending the regular League meetings for the duration. This time, he was removing himself from the active roster and eliminating his scheduled monitor duty, but still maintaining his attendance at meetings, albeit remotely.

Bruce was refusing to leave Gotham.

And he wasn't saying why.

“Enough is enough, Alfred. I’m going down to the cave. It’s bad enough trying to keep Selina’s notes organized on this tiny laptop. Once Dick gets the coroner’s report, I’ll need the holographic imaging system and—”

“Most inadvisable, sir. Going down to the cave might be feasible, but the stairs coming back up are far too onerous in this early stage of recovery. And you recall the challenges we faced maneuvering you to the elevator passage to get you up to the manor initially.”

“Then I’ll stay down there,” Bruce said acidly. “You can bring my meals on a tray, you’ve certainly done that enough times. I can sleep in the med lab, use the gymnasium for the physical therapy, and—”

“And if someone calls to see Bruce Wayne, what will you do then, sir? In making your excuses to the Lyons, you did reveal that you are at home, laid up with a racquetball injury. It would be most peculiar if someone called and you were ‘not at home.’”

Bruce closed his eyes as a growl of pure frustration forced its way up from his diaphragm. It expelled as a guttural huff of utter disgust—not at Alfred, but at his circumstances. Alfred was right. Again. Bruce knew it, but if he didn’t, the proof came in a ring of the doorbell. DAMNIT! Anyone could—DAMNIT!—*anyone* could come to the door, expecting to see Bruce Wayne, and until he was sufficiently mobile, he had to remain in those places where Bruce Wayne would plausibly be. For now, he would have to manage the investigation from the study.

Alfred went to answer the door without so much as an “I told you so,” leaving Bruce to stew. He went through the motions of reorganizing his notes on the laptop, all the while cataloguing what pieces of cave equipment Tim could bring up to the manor without assistance (and which would not seem amiss in Bruce Wayne’s home if a nosy guest wandered into the wrong room) when Alfred returned and formally announced the visitor:

“Mr. Kent to see you, sir.”

Bruce looked up sharply, and saw that Clark had that awkward smile which Alfred’s formality usually managed to evoke. It disintegrated the moment he saw Bruce’s unnatural position in the armchair.

“My God, what happened,” he blurted.

“A bad wrench, L4,” Bruce said, mentally adding the bitter afterthought: *but you know that by now, since you just scanned my lower back*. Aloud, he added a few details the x-ray vision would not be able to provide: “Poison Ivy. Boiler blew, bad landing, one of those freak mishaps.”

“Tough break,” Clark said lightly. “Anything I can do?”

He knew Bruce was unlikely to accept help, but it seemed the best way to move the conversation along now that he knew what was behind Batman’s mysterious withdrawal from League affairs.

Bruce’s eyes flicked towards the door, just as Lois’s did before confiding something about Perry.

“You can sit,” Bruce said in that low sub-whisper only Clark could hear. “Alfred might tone down the Alpha Medic if there’s a guest in the house.”

"Noel was a slow glass of whiskey," Daniel Eagen said smoothly. "Lot of women are easy on the eyes, but not many can exude that *aura* of being beautiful. Maybe it was the modeling, or maybe she did it naturally and that's what made her such a great model. She didn't smolder like some of them. You look at her famous covers, she was never brazenly *sexual*. She was just brazenly *beautiful*."

"You liked her," I noted.

"Selina," he declared, "any man who says he doesn't like a stunningly beautiful woman is just trying to score points with a dog."

"I seriously doubt that's true," I laughed, and he held up his right hand.

"I swear on the bosoms of Miss Lonni Chinn, Miss January, 1983, and the very first woman I saw naked. Turn-ons: nature, animals, honest people, true friends, colognes, and pretty colors. Turn offs: dirty fingernails, jealous women, heavy smokers, and conceit. Any man, I swear to you, who says he does not like a beautiful woman—unless he is a faggot or she is a total shrew—that man is lying to score points with a bow-wow."

I have to admit, I lost the thread of my questioning at that point. I couldn't shake the idea that Daniel Eagen would make a decent Rogue. Because talking to him was starting to feel like the Iceberg, or even hanging with Eddie in the early days before there was an Iceberg. Even more so when the vibe started up again...

"But what can I possibly tell you about these things," he segued. "Some women were born to sip Cristal on the deck of a yacht moored off Caan or Monaco."

He had shifted his weight ever so slightly, so that his hand was in a position to move towards my leg.

"Bruce prefers Taittinger," I smiled, just as the hand started to move. I saw it hesitate, but he didn't shift his weight back until I added "And Portofino."

Clark knew Bruce would abhor any sort of "bedside manner," so he jettisoned the aura of sympathetic concern cultivated at so many visits to children's hospitals. He would look on this as an ordinary Saturday afternoon visit to a friend that was neither sick nor injured nor a member of the Justice League.

First, they talked about the weather systems he'd encountered flying in. This was no act of conversational desperation for two people straining for a subject to talk about. Bruce was a pilot, and he often took an interest in Clark's views on these things, the unique perspective of one who flew without a plane.

The conversation then drifted to sports, and the growing likelihood of another Metros-Knights grudge match if both teams made it to the playoffs.

It was only then, after a good twenty minutes of chitchat, that Clark dared ask about Selina. He knew she was out, there were only four heartbeats in the house: Bruce's, Alfred's, and the two cats. But since Bruce hadn't mentioned her absence, Clark didn't want to introduce the subject too quickly. (Bruce could be so touchy about anything he construed as matchmaking.) He also didn't want to say anything that would seem to characterize Bruce's injury as some sort of ordeal or crisis for the Bat-family. He finally settled on a formula that could not possibly be construed as intrusive matchmaking, fulsome concern, or overt sympathy:

"How's Selina doing?"

He was astonished to learn she was *away for the weekend*. He wasn't expecting tales of Florence Nightingale or anything, but it seemed... all the more astonishing as Bruce went on to "explain" (if you could call it that).

It sounded remarkably like Selina was out of town investigating a murder.

"Poor Rick, this is so devastating for him," Fiona said.

She wasn't serious. She was mimicking Gracie's performance in the kitchen a few minutes before. Apparently, no one thought to call the caterers and cancel the set-up for the garden party. When they showed up, Gracie took it upon herself to go out and tell them what had happened. According to Fiona, she was reveling in the chance to be spokesperson for the family, and was deftly positioning Rick as the tragic hero of the drama.

"Well, this weekend was supposed to be all about them," I offered. "And her as the bride-to-be. I guess she can be forgiven a few gaucheries."

Fiona snorted the way Pammy does if you say something nice about Clayface.

"Oh, it's not gauche. It's a lot more calculated than that," she said. "See, right now Rick is 'devastated,' but if he could have a peek at the will, that would be 'one less thing he had to think about.'"

I let out a low whistle.

"She's asking for a look at the will?" I asked, thinking yet again how these people blew Rogues out of the water for barefaced self-interest. "Do you think it's her idea, or did he put her up to it?"

"Oh hers, no doubt of it. Gracie the Gorgon has my brother wrapped around her finger and tied off in a square knot."

Clark was more confused than ever when the phone rang. He heard Selina's voice on the line before Bruce said it was her and put her on the speaker. He sat back, hoping this would clear up the confusion.

...: *So I talked to Nicola,...* the familiar voice announced.

Clark raised an eyebrow and looked as though he was going to ask a question, but thought better of it. Instead, he pulled his trusty reporter's notepad out of his jacket and began scribbling. Bruce glanced in his direction, but kept his focus on Selina.

...: *About her conversation with Oliver...*

Clark looked up from his notepad. Bruce mouthed the word "widower," and Clark nodded, jotting down another note.

...: *Seems Richard let something slip about Oliver reappraising some Miros...*

Clark's head popped up again, surprised. "Dick knows these people?"

"No. Richard Flay," Bruce said.

...: *Is that Spiccurl?...*

"Never mind," Bruce spat. "Miros?"

...: *Right. Miros. Four of them, going up the stairs at their townhouse. I thought about going after them once, but they're only lithographs. Limited editions, of course, from the late 60s, but only signed on the plate, so who cares. You were busy with the Grodd-Luthor axis or*

something. Really not giving Gotham the attention we deserved, so I just took a month off and went to St. Luca.

...: So anyway, Richard Flay tells Nicola that Oliver is having these Miros reappraised, and it seems like she came here this weekend to find out why. If he wants to nail down their value, it could be because he's contemplating a divorce. Now, that's a new idea: if there was trouble between Oliver and Noel. But I don't think it can be a motive for murder, because it sounds like there's a serious prenup.

...: Nicola says that when Oliver and Noel first got married, a lot of people thought she was on the make. She wasn't twenty years younger or anything, but, get this, apparently the enduring quote of the period was Fiona's: "Just because she's age appropriate, doesn't mean she's not a gold-digging whore." And there's that word again. So now I'm thinking maybe it was Fiona having the fight with Rick. ...

"Fredrick Donohue. Her half-brother," Bruce answered Clark's non-verbal question.

...: Yes, Fredrick Donohue, Junior. But nobody calls him F—wait, you weren't talking to me, were you. So that was Spitzcurl I heard earlier?...

Bruce grunted, but Clark couldn't suppress his smile. "Hello, Selina. Just came by for a visit. How are y..." he stopped instantly with Bruce's glare, midwestern hospitality giving way to Detective's necessity.

"Continue," Bruce graveled at the phone.

...: Okay, so maybe it was Fiona I heard in Rick's room. Of course, Nicola said it too. She was quoting Fiona, but then all I heard was a woman's voice saying "whore." I didn't really get the context:...

Clark's brow furrowed as this new barrage of names and keywords obliterated his tenuous grasp of the details... He was no longer sure what to jot down on his notepad, and he gently rubbed his forehead as an alternative to writing anything. Alfred recognized the gesture as one that usually precedes a request for aspirin. He was instantly beside the guest, offering his services with a silent nod so as not to interrupt the conversation. Clark glanced up at him and, not wanting to be rude, mouthed a drink request. Alfred nodded once and quietly left the room.

...: My money is on Fiona, though. Nicola confirmed that Fiona would say terrible things about Noel in front of Rick, even though she's his mother:...

"Do you know if Nicola had any reason besides the Miros for her suspicions?" Bruce cut in. "Divorce seems like a big conclusion to jump to in a vacuum."

...: Well, apparently Noel cheated on her first husband with Oliver before the marriage, so the probability isn't zero. She had an affair before, she could have one again. And whether she was or she wasn't, Oliver would have reason to suspect her.

...: At first, I thought if she did have a lover, it might be William. She hires him for all these catered events at their country house, and he is very pretty, in a decorative henchman way. ...

Alfred returned with a tray holding a glass of milk and a bottle of aspirin. Clark took the milk with a thankful nod, but politely waved away the aspirin. Wordlessly, Alfred set the bottle on the small side table in between him and Bruce.

...: But that idea just took a bodyblow. I found out what he was still doing here this morning. Are you ready for this? He spent the night with Richard Flay:...

Kryptonian reflexes were the only thing that prevented Clark's spraying milk all over the phone—he managed to get his hand in front of the glass just in time. Alfred

was instantly beside him offering a napkin, which Clark took with a thankful (and embarrassed) smile.

*...: So now I'm wondering if the regular employment could imply another connection, if Noel had some other reason for taking him with her whenever they went out of town—like maybe a chemical habit, if he was her supplier. That would certainly explain why he'd rush to her room to clean house the second he finds out she's dead:...*

Bruce grunted, and Alfred collected the empty glass (and soggy napkin) from Clark as Selina continued.

*...: I bounced the idea off Richard Flay. I'm sure you wouldn't have. I'm sure it violates fifteen bat-rules to confide in a suspect that way, but I'm here and you're not, so lump it. Anyway, he agrees that William might have some extracurricular sources of income, like buying fun and interesting substances for his employers. Says he would be 'just the type for that.' Go Kitty. So then, since I was on a roll, I asked if he thought William might have an extracurricular anything else, like could he have been banging Noel on the side?...*

*"And?" Bruce asked, reaching for the bottle of aspirin Alfred had brought for Clark, and swallowing two tablets without water.*

*"He doesn't think so. Says he has no doubt that William swings both ways, and that he'd consider all sorts of unsavory activities if the price was right, but a glorified waiter wouldn't have been Noel's cup of tea, no matter how young and pretty he—Someone's coming. I'll call you back:..."*

#### Oracle Log: Revised

Pulled details of the Lyon prenup from Coleman, Brocket, and Piques mainframe, Anderson Piques encrypted partition. Established Piques handled all Lyon family matters, including trust fund established for Fiona Lyon at death of her mother. Trust jointly administered by Oliver Lyon and Nicola Dulch. (Note: Dulch legal matters also at C/B/P through senior partner Roger Coleman.)

Forwarded above to B.

Established that C/B/P drew up Noel Lyon's will. Initial will was drawn up three months after the marriage and revised one year later. No activity since. Details of will's contents unknown. Set Epeius relays in all probate databanks to pull details as soon as will is filed.

#### Oracle Log: Personal

Thanks to B's excessive anti-monitoring measures inside the Batmobile, I had to run Robin's OraCom chatter through a 4-tier distillation matrix to isolate that sound I kept hearing in the background last night. Confirmed that while the Boy Wonder has been "maintaining the Bat presence" (read: cruising in the Batmobile), he's playing Phil Collins's *In the Air Tonight* on a loop. Tim's too young to remember *Miami Vice*, so pretty sure Dick put the idea in his head.

Clark Kent may not have been the world's greatest detective, but he knew any murder investigation should begin with the surviving spouse. As soon as the phone call with Selina had ended, Bruce filled Clark in on the salient details of the case so far.

Clark had scoured through his scribbled notes like a veteran reporter while Bruce spoke, and pounced on Nicola's suspicions the moment he saw the notation:

"If this Oliver suspected his wife was having affairs, isn't he the most likely suspect?"

"Not necessarily," Bruce said, his eyes glued to his laptop screen. "Selina was quite right about the prenup. Oracle just confirmed the details. If Noel was unfaithful, Oliver could divorce her without a cent. However, the truth about the affair is irrelevant, as is the prenup, if we're talking about *Nicola* instead of Oliver. If *she* thought Oliver might be planning to divorce Noel... well, divorce means financial warfare, lawyers on both sides poking around for hidden assets. Nicola and Oliver are joint trustees of his daughter's trust fund. If anything isn't as it should be, a divorce would bring it to light."

"You mean that Nicola might be afraid a divorce would expose *her* embezzling from the trust fund, because both Oliver and Noel's lawyers would be searching through the family finances?"

"Exactly," Bruce nodded. "Anything at all that's amiss would be found, and that train of thought doesn't stop at Dulch or the trust fund. If Noel knew something about Oliver's business, some guilty secret, somewhere, then she'd have a formidable weapon in a nasty divorce. Another party involved in that secret might think it was best to get rid of her and remove the possibility of a messy divorce."

"Begging your pardon, Master Bruce, Mr. Kent" Alfred interrupted from the doorway. "Is the working theory now absolutely and without question that Mrs. Lyon's death was a murder?"

"Dick is on that now," Bruce replied soberly. "Once he has the coroner's report and the official cause of death, we'll know more."

"Taking an interest in the investigation, eh, Alfred?" Clark said cheerily.

"It is an intriguing matter, to be sure, sir. But I regret to say my ulterior motive in interrupting the conversation was to remind Master Bruce that he has one hour of physical therapy to perform, beginning in six minutes."

"Oh, well if that's the case," Clark said, smiling brightly as he stood, "I will leave you two to it..."

Clark was stunned for a moment by the progression of emotions flickering across Bruce's face. In the span of a half-second, his expression went from "Don't you dare walk away from this now!" to "Please don't leave me with this vicious task-master" to "But we're in the middle of an investigation here" and finally landing on "No, Alfred's right. I've got therapy to do, but thanks for coming by."

Always a man of few words, Bruce voiced only the last and did so with a non-committal grunt.

Clark hid his reaction by turning to Alfred and extending his hand.

"Alfred, always a pleasure," he good-bied with a warm handshake. Rather than replacing the notepad in his jacket, he tapped it a few times absently on the back of his knuckles as he turned back to his injured friend.

Bruce shifted in his chair, preparing to stand, and winced in obvious pain. Concern washed over Clark's face, but he squelched the urge to zip to his friend's side and help him up—he knew that with Bruce, it was best to let him be. Bruce swallowed the pain,

grunted once, more in frustration than anything else, then looked back at Clark as if they were sitting across the League conference table from one another.

"If you need an extra set of eyes or ears on this..." Clark offered, waving the notebook in front of him.

Bruce grunted lightly. "No, I think I've got more than enough eyes involved ahead... Wait a minute. Actually, yes, there is something you can do, if you don't mind acting as a taxi service. Cassie is up there now with Dick. If you could give her a lift back to Chinatown, she wouldn't have to wait for—"

"Say no more," Clark interrupted, and in a whoosh, he was gone.

Dick munched the soda cracker that had come with his chili, and looked thoughtfully out the window. His eye scanned the non-descript building across from the diner, the rusty side door, and the car parked closest to it. Then, he glanced up and down the street, making sure there were no other cars that might belong to the medical examiner.

He turned from the window then, and took a sip of coffee. It was weak, bitter, and had a revolting oily film floating on the surface, but it gave him a reason to look away from the window.

He knew he was a bit paranoid. The diner was empty, and with the choice of any table, he had gone to the one at the window. In Bludhaven, an alert waitress might guess that he was keeping an eye on the building across the street—or someone inside it—and begin looking for an angle to profit from that information. But in this quiet little town, it really didn't seem likely...

Still, he was being cautious. It's how he was trained. Podunk little town or not, looking out the window too often would be suspicious. He was about to call for the waitress and kill more time with a slice of pie when, at last, the rusty side door opened. A balding little man who waddled like Oswald Cobblepot came out. He locked the door, got into the car, and drove away.

Finally, the coroner was gone for the day. Finally, he could get inside and get some answers. Finally, they were going to find out how Noel Lyon had died.

## CHAPTER 5: CAUSE OF DEATH

“RRRRGLURRUNGH yngh yngh yngh.”

Nutmeg twitched her nose.

“RRRRGLURRUNGH yngh yngh yngh.”

Whiskers kinked his tail.

“RRRRGLURRUNGH yngh yngh yngh.”

And with a final exchange of ear flicks, it was decided that Whiskers would investigate the new noise while Nutmeg guarded the catnip mouse, fuzzy ball, and furry cushion in Selina-cat’s suite.

“RGLURRUUnnnnnntoo.”

Whiskers found the new noise easily enough, in one of the downstairs rooms he seldom visited.

“NRRRRNGH... too young for a hernia,” Tim groaned.

It was a new two-foot. His scent was known around the manor, but Whiskers had never seen him face to foot. Now, here he was...

“RRRRGLURRUNGH yngh yngh yngh.”

...playing with big squares that smelled like the cave place.

“*Aeiou*,” Whiskers said, both to introduce himself and to inquire how the two-foot got the big squares away from the flying mice.

“Hey there, which one are you?” Tim replied.

*Aeiou*.

“Dick and Barbara said we’re all making amends for whatever we messed up the last time Bruce got hurt... RGLURRU... Now me, I don’t have anything to make up for. All I did was get shut out after B appoints an untried whacko nutjob as his successor... URRngh... who promptly fires me as the sidekick ‘cause whacko nutjobs have to work alone, otherwise someone might, y’know, introduce some element of sanity into the senseless carnage... RGLURRURRR... and then he tries to strangle me when I dare go back to the Batcave... RGLUngh, damn, that was a heavy one...”

*Aeiou*.

“You said it. So I really don’t think I have anything to make up for, but I’m still okay with helping out... NRRRRNGH... Way I see it, the family’s pulling together this time. Makes ya proud to be on the team... RRNGH... Bruce needs this stuff brought up from the cave, Dick’s unavailable, so fine... MPHRRR-AH, got it! So okay, that leaves me doing the heavy lifting on my own. Not such a big... AARUNNGH... deal, really, I mean, it was a labor of Hercules trying to contact Bruce when Az went all homicidal psycho on us last time, so this... RRRRGLURRUNGH... by comparison... yngh yngh yngh... isn’t all that bad. Except...”

*Aeiou*.

“Exactly. Help somebody move their stuff, it’s kinda customary they give you a cold drink.”

*Aeiou*.

“Even in Wayne Manor, even a ‘do it now because I say so’ hardass like BRRRRUGLRR...”

“Begging your pardon, Master Tim,” a formal voice interrupted. “Master Bruce would like you to join him in the study for some refreshment when you are finished.”

“...”

*Aeiou.*

“You could have told me he was standing there.”

There’s a lot about crimefighting I don’t get simply because it’s not my mindset—but there is a lot I do get, simply because it’s not my mindset. I come from the other side, where you avoid any solid links between your hand and the empty space on the wall that used to have a Monet hanging in it. You sidestep enough of those potential links, you get a sense for when someone else is doing the same thing.

The problem of the moment wasn’t “crimefighting,” per se, but it was another one of those areas where the hero/crimefighters’ mindset was getting us nowhere, and that left it up to the criminal cat’s.

Dick and Cassie had finally conquered the Watermill roadways and found their way to the lodge. I met them in a secluded spot behind the boathouse, and gave Cassie the paper wrapper I’d found in Fiona’s room. By then, Bruce had called with the game plan: Clark was on the way, and Cassie was to stay with me until he arrived. He would fly her back to Gotham to save time while Dick went ahead with the medical side of the investigation.

I probably should have noticed it then, but Cass is always so quiet, *quieter* doesn’t really register. Dick went on his way, and I asked about their drive up. When she didn’t volunteer anything, I told her about the case so far. It’s true she didn’t say much, but she never says much. I didn’t know there was a problem until Clark arrived. Knowing where to look, I saw the momentary red-blue streak come down over the water, so I wasn’t surprised when Clark Kent came plodding through the woods a minute later (in a suit and tie that was really too formal for Watermill Lodge).

“Excuse me, do you have a minute?” he called as soon as we were in earshot. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet. Are you guests at that houseparty where the supermodel was found...” He trailed off, and at first I figured it was because with those super-senses of his, he knew we were alone. But then I saw he was staring at Cassie, and his eyes looked like saucers.

“Good Lord, are you okay?”

“Okay,” she said, just above a whisper.

He half-squatted so he was more at eye-level, and said “Are you sure?”

From someone else, the gesture might have been a bit patronizing, but Clark is never patronizing in the cape or out. And the question was simple enough, it was genuine concern. I know. Cats have a highly developed pride mechanism, and if anyone gets all fussy-protective, it raises hackles. This wasn’t fussy over-protective anything, it was genuine concern. But Cassie stopped breathing, squeaked, went white as a sheet, and ran away.

Clark looked at me, bewildered.

"You better go after her. Her heartbeat is... a dozen hummingbirds, and I seem to be making it worse."

Bruce was stretching at an unnatural angle when Tim reached the study door, and Tim knocked softly rather than risk startling him.

"Bad time?" he asked hesitantly.

"No, quite the reverse," Bruce said, waving at papers that were just out of reach. "Move those financial statements four inches closer, where I can get at them."

Tim picked up the papers and handed them to Bruce, who glowered as he took them and set them back on the table.

"I just did something wrong," Tim said, glancing at the papers.

There was something about that glower. It wasn't ill temper, although it was the sort of thing oversensitive out-of-town heroes often called ill temper: "Batman being a grouchy bat-prick again." But Tim knew better. It was a Batmobile glower. His first weeks in the field with Batman, riding home after a Scarecrow encounter or a Mr. Freeze escape, a glower that said "What did you do wrong back there?"

"Oh, I get it," Tim announced, with a note of triumph that he'd figured it out. "You said to put it where you could reach it, not to hand it to you."

Bruce grunted.

"And that kind of hair-splitting on the instructions means there's a Batman reason for wanting those papers on the table, right?"

Bruce's lip twitched. Tim really was a very promising young detective. Better, perhaps, than Dick had been at his age.

"Correct," he graveled, which confirmed it was *Batman* who had asked Tim into the study and that this was not to be a friendly social visit but a training exercise. "The north drawing room where you brought the imaging consoles hasn't been used in ten years. There's no reason a visitor would see go in there, but if they did—"

"If they did, you only had me bring up pieces made by WayneTech. I noticed. So, head of the company has a couple prototypes in his house for some reason, there's nothing suspicious in that."

"Very good," Bruce nodded. "Whereas this room...?"

Tim looked around thoughtfully.

"OraCom plugged into the speaker phone and three laptops going," he said, pointing. "Nobody is going to know that's an OraCom, but you're obviously doing something big over the phone right now. So... financial statements, spreadsheet and pie charts, a power point presentation with graphs over on that one... It looks like the head of Wayne Enterprises is working from home and there's a big conference call going on. Substitute Perrier for that pitcher of lemonade, and it looks just like my Dad's study at tax time, in fact."

"Good," Bruce grunted. "I've already had one unexpected visitor shown in to see me in here. Alfred would be more discreet with a visitor who wasn't Clark Kent, but even so, they would pass by the door if he took them to the morning room, the east parlor, or the sun room."

"So you came up with a visual excuse for the 'conference call,'" Tim grinned. "I like it."

"Glad you approve," Bruce grveled. "Now, pour yourself a glass of lemonade, and, since I haven't seen your log, you can tell me how it went last night while we wait for Dick to call with the autopsy findings."

Dick Grayson. Jason Todd. Tim Drake. All boys.

Bruce and Clark, that Conner kid... even Alfred, for that matter.

There's a common denominator there, and it's not which side of the law they get up on in the morning.

Maybe it was the murder investigation, the way I felt the Rogues were giving me a better insight into the suspects than I would have looking only at Bruce's side of the equation. Something just told me that whatever upset Cassie required a different perspective—in this case, a non-male perspective—to get to the bottom of it. So, I followed her into the boathouse. I went in like I approach Shimbala's pen at the Catitat.

Bruce has warned me repeatedly about Cassie's fighting abilities. He said not to ever forget, in all her sweet, adolescent fumbling, that she's a potentially lethal killing machine. Each time he did, I reminded him that I own the largest Bengal tiger in captivity, a number of leopards, cheetahs, and ocelots, and, as if that wasn't enough, I share a bed with Batman. I know all the rules about remembering sweet-adorable-affectionate is also *dangerous-as-sin*.

It's a good thing I did, because that awareness let me see the condition she was in when the light from the door hit her. The poor little thing was petrified.

"Cassie?" I said in the same tone I'd use with a frightened leopard.

"Alone?"

"Yes. I'm alone. You don't want to see Clark, I take it?"

"No."

"Fair enough. I'll go make sure he knows to stay away, then. So he won't disturb us no matter how long we're in here, okay? Then I'll come back and talk to you."

"..."

"Cassie?"

"Is good. Will talk."

"Okay, I'll be back in just a minute."

Tim had only progressed through a third of his glass of lemonade and a sixth of his early patrol, up to a turn onto Fifth Avenue where he broke up some amateurs attempting their first burglary at Saks, when the phone rang.

...:Well, I've got the coroner's report,;... Dick announced grimly. ...: Don't think you're going to like it. Official cause of death is cardiac arrest.;

Bruce's eyes met Tim's. Both knew that didn't rule out murder, it just made it more complicated.

"And this was determined how?" Bruce asked tersely.

...: He notes micro-aneurisms in the retinas consistent with seizures suffered during a heart attack....

"That's also consistent with diabetic retinopathy," Bruce said thoughtfully. "What was her blood insulin like?"

...: Doesn't say. Bruce, I don't think you're getting the picture here. This is a small town. I'm not in a morgue; I'm in a funeral home. And it looks like the medical examiner is also the local G.P. So, it's one of those situations where, if he knows you've got a heart condition or liver disease or whatever, he's not going to bother with an autopsy and a full blood workup. He figures he knows what killed you and is just looking to confirm it....

"Absurd, in this day and age..."

...: We're not in 'this day and age.' Bruce, I'm holding a piece of paper I got out of a metal filing cabinet, okay? I started on the computer—the ONE computer in the building—and it's running Windows 95. All it has is the WayneTech accounting suite for small business, and solitaire. And it hasn't been powered up in three weeks....

Silence.

It was one of those silences Dick remembered from the old days as Robin. The ones after Penguin got away, or the Riddler clue didn't point where they thought it would. On the drive home, there would be this silence that was like: **BLACK HOLE!** Batman was not happy, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Then, finally, a terse huff, acknowledgement (but never acceptance) of what could not be changed, and a determined shift to work around it:

Bruce shifted to one of the laptops and brought up a handful of files that Oracle had put together for him.

"All right. Looking through Noel's medical records, there's nothing here to indicate she had ever been diagnosed as diabetic, we can eliminate that straight away. Previous exams and blood tests show normal blood sugar on all counts, including blood work done a little over three months ago. If she had a glucose problem large enough to cause retinopathy, there should have at least been minor variances in her sugar levels."

...: Plus, like I said, this is the local G.P. If she was diabetic, he'd know and he wouldn't be attributing a diabetic symptom to seizures from a heart attack. So we're back to the cardiac arrest....

"Negative. An injection of diabetic insulin could cause the arrest, and would account for the micro-aneurisms in the retina. And it's nearly impossible to detect unless you find the point of injection and analyze the underlying tissue. Look for an injection welt between the toes, or maybe hidden in a freckle."

The phone went quiet while Dick examined the body, and Bruce turned to Tim.

"Insulin as a murder weapon. Go."

"Shoot, knew I was getting off too easy," Tim said. Then he cleared his throat and recited formally, "One reason insulin kills is that the brain, unlike the rest of the body, can only function on one energy source: glucose. If blood glucose drops too low for too long, the brain dies."

"But chances are the body's attempt to battle the low blood sugar will kill you first. That's what causes most insulin-induced deaths: when sugar levels fall dangerously low, the body produces massive amounts of adrenalin and other hormones. A strong heart will keep going until the low blood sugar damages the brain, but in other cases,

the prolonged load of adrenalin on an otherwise weakened heart—like one who abused weight loss aids (didn't you say she was a model?), it's a lot more likely that they'll suffer a cardiac arrest before any kind of brain shutdown."

...: *Is that a Robin pop quiz I hear?...* Dick asked cheerily.

"Yes!" Tim called out as Bruce growled "No."

An exchange of ...: *Hey, Bro...* and "Hey" followed, and Bruce sank a little deeper into his chair.

"Keep searching for that injection welt," he ordered.

Tim took a deep breath and continued:

"Because insulin is made naturally in the body, it's nearly impossible to detect as a murder weapon unless you find the point of injection... And that's where I go off the rails, Bruce, because the medical abstracts start talking about 'formalin fixed and paraffin embedded subcutaneous injection marks' and my brain just shuts down. I'm sorry, I just can't help it. I read 'Cellular reaction of granulocytic character was present, with an uptake of insulin by inflammatory cells,' and I start thinking I should make a bag of popcorn and study for my history final."

...: *Don't worry, Bro, with me it was 'birefringent crystalline material like zinc phosphate revealing granular insulin deposits and staining along the lipocyte membranes,' nachos, and John Steinbeck...*

"Dick," Bruce interrupted.

"You had a final on John Steinbeck?"

"Tim," Bruce growled.

...: *Nah, I wrote a paper on Steinbeck. It was American Lit when I was doing the case studies on murder. Steinbeck was poisons. Hemingway was arson; I did real well on that paper too. Ballistics was F. Scott Fitzgerald. But then blood spatter was really interesting, and I tanked the last paper on Henry Miller. Whole semester brought down to a B+ because blood spatter analysis was pretty cool...*

Bruce settled even deeper into his chair, waves of disapproval pulsing around him as he tried to work out how to blame this on Catwoman. It was a fact that both of these Robins had been much more focused before their first encounter with the shapely cat burglar in skintight leather, and now, his Bat-family of operatives had been a lot more disciplined before Selina joined their ranks.

When I left the boathouse the second time, I found Clark sitting on a tree stump, studying a clump of mud on his dress shoe as if it was only now occurring to him that he should have worn something more casual.

"Were you listening?" I asked, figuring it was a pose. (After all, if he really wanted a more comfortable outfit, he could sprint back to Metropolis and get it, right?)

"No, I figured if she was that scared of me, I had no business listening in. Is she okay?"

"Well, she's a bit freaked... apprehensive... about the trip back to Gotham."

"You're watering it down, Selina, which is something I've never known you to do. That was more than *apprehension*. Elevated heart rate, shallow breathing, tense body stance... That was *fight-or-flight panic*."

"'Flight' being the operative word," I told him. "She's scared of flying with you."

"But that's impossible. This is Batgirl we're talking about. I've seen her leap off of a thirty-story building with nothing more than a Batline in her grip."

And there it was: the need for that non-male, non-hero perspective. Because the thought was so foreign to him, he wasn't even hearing the words when I told him. I had no choice. I was going to have to hit him over the head with it. Superman. I was going to have to bash him over the head. Probably more than once.

"I didn't say she was scared of *flying*, Clark. I said she was scared of flying with *you*."

"With me?"

Confusion knotted his brow as he looked at me at the same angle as that dog of his, like he just can't fathom that I don't want him flying up to face-level and pawing at my hair.

"You're right, I guess I was 'watering it down.' It's called tact, Clark. The truth is, she's not 'apprehensive,' she's out of her mind terrified. She's the kind of panic stricken I would describe as 'reading Stephen King on fear toxin.'"

He let out a long breath as the words sank in.

"It's a matter of trust, then? I mean, it's not the first time I've encountered someone who's scared to be carried into the sky in my arms, but those were strangers. She knows me; she's seen me dozens of times..."

"Yes, she's *seen* you. But there's never been any talk of your flying her anywhere. Clark, listen to me. Fathers and daughters are a very complicated relationship. And I'm talking about *normal* fathers and daughters. But Cassie... David Cain instructed his daughter on all aspects of human behavior that she would need in order to *kill people*. He taught her nothing beyond that, but if it touched on her ability to find a target and exterminate it, then his teachings were very complete. 'Capes' fell into that category of things a professional assassin might need to know about. And the lesson on metas was simplicity itself: if it can kill you easier than you can kill it, it should be feared. Avoid if possible. Neutralize if you get the chance."

He looked like I told him his dog died.

"Selina, she's seen me a dozen times," he repeated. "We've been in *combat* together. And I know she's seen the care I take when taking someone up, always, even in those charged combat situations where every split-second counts, I've always—"

"I know. Clark, look, intellectually, she knows the bulk of what Cain told her is wrong. She's accepted Batman's teachings in place of her father's code, and so far, it seems to be working out just fine. But you can't reason with a clench in the pit of your stomach. No matter what you know intellectually, a primal urge that says 'run if you want to go on living' is going to have its say. 'Father say *'if it can kill you easier than you can kill it...'* Superman kill easier than I swat fly.'"

"Except I don't," he exploded—and there are times, different though they are, that he really reminds me of Bruce. Something about the frustration spike.

"I know that, Clark, and I know this is difficult for you. You have to make allowances for Cassie's way of talking. 'Superman *can* kill' or 'could kill,' it just comes out 'kill.' She leaves out little words."

And that's when he *really* looked like Bruce.

"In this situation, I don't consider that a *little* word," he said intensely. "The distinction between what I am physically capable of and what I would actually..." He took a deep breath, apparently trying to calm his own nerves. "Selina, you're right. This isn't 'easy' for me. He can *thrive* being an object of terror. I can't. I... Ever since I put on that suit and went 'public,' I've dealt with these questions, these fears. I know my power can be frightening to some, and I've gone to great lengths over the years to try to assuage those fears. I live with the fact that everyone around me is... Every time I touch a human, Selina, every time, I am acutely aware that..."

He sighed again, and I could see him trying to reign himself in.

"I'm sorry, Selina. I'm just... I never expected to have to explain to someone like Batgirl that I would never... I see that symbol on her suit, and sometimes I forget that they don't all think like *he* does. I forget that underneath it all, she's just a teenage girl... and that, that *little girl* is *afraid* to... In Rao's name, at the *height* of that mindwipe mess, you trusted me not to drop you into San Francisco Bay."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Poor Clark was already reeling to the point where he couldn't finish a sentence, and he really didn't need the shock of being laughed at. Plus, there was a murder investigation on hold. But I couldn't help it. Heroes are just that fucking adorable.

"You know, from the minute Cassie told me why she was frightened, I knew—I absolutely knew—that conversation was going to come up. Yes, Clark, *I knew* you weren't going to drop me when we flew together, but *my father* read to me from Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, not Vandal Savage's Commentaries on Sun Tzu."

...: *Hey, not to change the subject, but if you guys are just hanging out while I do this medical examiner's job for him, I do have one other piece of intel about that party up at Watermill Lodge,;... Dick said, pulling Bruce's focus back to the case at hand.*

...: *I don't know if it's relevant to the case, exactly, but, in the interests of full disclosure, I know the girl. Gracie. I never put it together until I dropped Cassie up at the lodge and saw her car, that 'Gracie' the fiancée this whole weekend was supposed to revolve around is Gracie Haswell;...;*

"And?" Bruce prompted.

...: *I knew her in college, that's all;...;*

"Ten bucks says she's a redhead," Tim whispers.

...: *I said I knew her, not that I dated her, Timothy. She was in at least one of my classes every semester at Hudson. All kinds of friendly, always offering me her lecture notes and wanting to study together. But I always got the vibe it was 'Bruce Wayne's son' she was interested in. You know the type. By senior year, guys in the dorm had officially changed "Haswell" to "Wantswell.";...;*

Bruce and Tim grunted quietly and in unison. They did, indeed, know the type.

"Just because she's age-appropriate doesn't mean she's not a gold-digging whore," Bruce murmured.

"Whoa, that's harsh," Tim said, a bit shocked.

"Selina overheard a fragment of a conversation," Bruce explained slowly, thinking it through as he went. "A while back, Fiona had said her step-mother 'might be age-appropriate' for her father, but that it 'didn't mean she wasn't a gold-digging whore.'"

It's a fairly famous quotation within their circle, and we've been operating on the assumption that what Selina heard was someone repeating it. And we assumed they were talking about Noel. But how much more likely is it that they were talking about a new marriage, not one that occurred more than fifteen years ago? The words were spoken to Rick Donohue, the groom-to-be."

"Yeah, but Noel is the one who died," Tim noted.

...: *Correction, Noel is the one who was murdered,;... Dick announced. ...: I found the injection site. I know people who aren't diabetic have been known to inject themselves for whatever reason, but I do not see this lady hiding the injection in her stretch marks;...*

Tim let out a low whistle.

Bruce emitted an aura of dark foreboding. There was no other crime that struck Batman so powerfully with the burning need to avenge it. A human life had been taken. Trapped in this wretched chair or not, he would do whatever was necessary to find the person responsible and bring them to justice.

I had never done anything like it before, but it felt right.

Once Clark got over his initial shock (and, more importantly, once he stopped taking an irrational fear *personally*) he lived up to that "S" on his chest. Watching the grace and ease with which he helped settle Cassie's nerves was like watching Bruce analyze a crime scene; he was definitely in his element. They talked for about fifteen minutes, right there on the water's edge, and after about five minutes, Clark started teaching her how to skip stones. I don't know if it was the light touch required to make a stone skip on the water's surface, or the simple act of teaching her something, but she started to relax. I don't think she realized it, I think she was focusing so hard on mastering this new thing that she forgot to be terrified. By the time she actually got the stone to skip, she was her old self again. She even smiled up at Clark and thanked him for teaching her, the way you thank a sensei for instruction.

I didn't think that settled matters as far as her flying the super skies. We had just worked our way back from a dangerously scared leopard to the regulation Saturday afternoon Batgirl. But then Clark asked, very directly and abruptly, if she wanted to go ahead with the back-to-Gotham plan. I really thought he jumped the gun, so I cut in myself and told Cassie that I would go with her. Clark could fly both of us together, so she wouldn't have to face the ordeal alone, and then he would fly me back to Watermill Lodge before I was missed. What can I say, it's not my style but, there and then, it felt right.

She held my hand the whole way, but I knew we were going to be all right at the halfway mark when it went from a white-knuckle deathgrip to the way Nirvana takes my wrist in her mouth when she wants to turn it to lick this part of the forearm instead of that one. We left her in Chinatown, and she gave Superman a hug before we said goodbye.

Clark flew me back to Watermill Lodge, and, I confess, I figured that would be that. I was looking on him as transportation, not a partner, but he did one of those blink-changes back to Clark Kent as soon as we hit the ground. I gathered he was planning to stay.

"I'm afraid the death of a supermodel is what we in the business call 'news,' Ms. Kyle. It's big news. It's a very juicy story, in fact. Now, if you folks in the house party have something to hide and want to turn me away, I'll just have to go into town. I'm sure folks there will be a lot more talkative."

I grinned. Two 'folks' in one low-key threat. I absolutely grinned. The first time I met Bruce's fop, it was one hell of a shock. Somehow, Clark's 'butter wouldn't melt in his mouth' routine was hitting exactly the same note. It was certainly possible that this guy was a lot sharper than he let on (and if you bought into the guileless Midwest manner, you would find yourself the subject of a devastating Daily Planet exposé). It was *not* possible that he put on a cape and saved the world on a regular basis.

In any case, I reacted to his mild mannered threat exactly the way any other member of the household would: I took him back to the house for the cocktail hour. It worked. The family took turns being polite to him in the parlor, and as soon as they got "off stage," they relaxed. The first time I talked with Nicola, Fiona, Daniel, and the others, they were guarded. This time, every one of them was so pleased to have escaped that nosy reporter, they revealed something they hadn't shown before.

"You like working with Clark?" Bruce asked, aghast.

...: *All I said was I can see why you like working with him. He's handy...*

"If you need to power an ion engine or hold back an avalanche, I agree, he is very handy. But in a murder investigation—"

...: *I've got three theories on what Daniel Eagan does for a living: music producer, speculates on the gold market, smuggles Cuban cigars. Also, Richard says Nicola bought a fake Monet a few years back and never recovered from the loss. It was less than it should be, but not cheap. She thought the low price meant it was stolen, but no. Total fake. Richard is the one who spotted it. The cracks in the paint were too regular, that's a big red flag. Means it was baked to mimic aging, not aged naturally. So he had a paint chip analyzed, and sure enough, the paint was handmade from linseed oil, just like Monet did it, but the linseed oil had post-1945 levels of radiation... Uh, let's see, what else? Rick wrecked two Corvettes the year he turned sixteen, and he's been arrested twice: once for marijuana possession, and once for some kind of student protest about antibiotics in milk. Fiona had a little shoplifting problem in high school, but Daddy saw that nothing ever went on paper. Oh and get this, Oliver once hired a consultant to keep him from being targeted by Poison Ivy. How do you get that gig? ...*

"Sounds like you're doing an exceptional job investigating, Selina. There's no need to be giving Clark the credit for your own—"

...: *You're jealous, that's so sweet. Oh, by the way, speaking of stolen art, Richard Flay also thinks that you dabble. He's absolutely convinced that's how we met. Says he can always tell someone that has \*cough\* 'a hidden room in their manor with a shadow collection,' take that for what it's worth...*

"Noted. Anything else of direct bearing on the case?"

...: *Yeah, I'm pretty sure it was the will that Gracie was looking for in Noel's room. She's been staggeringly tactless on that score. Only question is if she's grasping and crass on her own account or if she's fronting for Rick...*

"Anything more?"

...: *Yes. I'm telling Clark that you were jealous...*

"Selina."

...: *I just think it's cute. You don't care about another fop playboy doing what fop playboys do, but another crimefighter cutting in on your detective action — ...*

"Selina, is there anything more about the case?"

...: *Maybe. It's not based on anything, no evidence, just a hunch...:*

"Hunches have their place in detective work. What is it?"

...: *I think it was Noel that I heard in Rick's room...:*

"And the 'whore' remark was in reference to Gracie. I've been thinking along those lines myself. If Noel didn't approve of the marriage and either Rick or Gracie thought there was some chance of his being disinherited..."

...: *Then that's why one or both are itching to see the will, and/or would have a motive to off Noel before it could be changed. I'm also thinking, just the nature of gold digging, it's got to be like casing a robbery target, right? I mean, they'd have to do a fair amount of research just to know who is worth going after. You don't want to spend six months establishing a cover just to get close to the Pattington tiara, only to find out they replaced all the diamonds with cubic zirconia after junk bonds tanked in the eighties. So, assuming Gracie did her homework—and I definitely think she is the type who does her homework—then she's be traveling in the more gossipy circles of Gotham's social cognoscenti before she ever got here. And the fact that she settled on Rick means she'd have checked on all of them, right? Or Rick would never have passed muster as a potential hubby. So she's presumably got the dirt on the whole clan, from Oliver on down.*

...: *Now, having something to tell and actually telling it are two entirely different things, but if I press her a little, if I let on that I know that Noel and Rick had words about her and that's where this obsession with the will is coming from, I'll bet she spills. I'll bet she tells me everything she knows about the rest of them, just to divert suspicion away from herself. She wouldn't give up anything that implicates Rick, of course, but the rest of the them — ...*

"That's it," Bruce breathed.

...: *What? What's it?...*

"That's... it."

...: *As in 'eureka?' Did I just do that Watson thing and babble right over the solution to the whole thing?...*

"Yes, Selina. You did."



## CHAPTER 6: WELL?!

Jim Gordon had never taken to retirement. The first weeks were unreal. Released from the staggering responsibilities of a police commissioner, it was as though one who had spent his whole life in an iron lung suddenly found himself breathing free. It was an unfamiliar sensation and a vast improvement in theory, but too foreign for him to feel really comfortable with it. As weeks gave way to months, the unreality gave way to a hulled anti-climax. It wasn't relaxing to be so unburdened. He simply didn't have enough to do.

Any break in routine was a welcome one, but the unexpected invitation to Wayne Manor was more than a break in the tedium. Of all those elements of his former life, it was the partnership with Batman that he missed most keenly. What other peace officers had formed such an alliance with the heroes in their jurisdiction? Of those who had followed Gotham's lead and forged those relationships, which could boast a crimefighter of Batman's stature and skill?

It was a rare privilege to work with such a man; that was Gordon's thought as he rang the bell. So, like so many others that Alfred had led through the foyer and across the great hall since Bruce's injury, his mind was occupied with the past. Unlike those others, he was focused only on the positive aspects, until he reached the study door and saw Bruce's unnatural posture in the chair.

"Thanks for coming, Jim."

The words were simple enough, except that they were spoken in Batman's all-business gravel. The form of address was Batman's, too. It had been some time since Gordon let Bruce Wayne know he was quite aware of Batman's secret. With his daughter marrying Dick Grayson, it seemed petty to go on pretending, to stand there at the altar and give his daughter away without ever telling Bruce, Dick, or even Barbara that he knew the truth about his future son-in-law. Masked vigilantes might be capable of that kind of compartmentalized hypocrisy; James Gordon was not.

Nevertheless, while they could speak openly now, Bruce's manner was still Bruce's and Batman's was Batman's. This was the first time Gordon had heard the Batman voice coming out of Bruce Wayne. That, coupled with the grim undertones reverberating under the "Jim," there was no question that this was Batman and Batman alone in the room with him.

"What happened?" Gordon asked, pointing vaguely at the chair where Bruce sat.

There was a moment's hesitation, during which the atmosphere intensified. It was a surge that Gordon recognized. All those nights he had summoned Batman to the signal, there was always that split second after he spoke a name: "Joker's escaped" or "Scarecrow again." It wasn't always a name. Sometimes, the mere sight of a question mark on an envelope, or, most disconcerting of all, the mention of an item coming into the city that would be a probable Catwoman target... That fraction of a second when Batman's mind registered the information and connected with a word or name in all of its significance... then, after that silent surge, an ominous declaration:

"Sit down, Jim."

Gordon did sit, but Bruce must have picked up on the discomfort his portentous delivery had created, because he quickly added, "It's not serious. Not permanent, that is. I am taking it very seriously so that it doesn't become permanent." He paused and sighed, then spat out the details that so offended his pride. "I had a bad fall. It exacerbated the old injury. Rest and anti-inflammatories will take it out in five weeks."

Gordon took this in quietly.

"Have you thought to inform Commissioner Muskelli?" he asked finally.

"It's not prudent," Bruce said evenly. "Bruce Wayne is known to be injured. Batman can't be suddenly out of commission at the same time. Nightwing or Robin will cover when the signal is lit, just as they would if I was out of town on a League mission. The Batmobile is visible every night. If we're lucky, Batman's absence won't be noticed."

"And if it is? You don't think the police should be made aware of the possibility? Let them prepare for the upsurge in criminal activity, and particularly *Rogue* criminal activity, if it is noticed?"

Bruce shook his head.

"Jim, due respect, they just can't do it right. What the GCPD is good at, they're the best in the world, but they simply cannot do covert. Anyone that knows what they're looking for can see it the minute you guys start gearing up for something. In giving them the opportunity to prepare *if* it were noticed, I would be guaranteeing that it will be."

Gordon checked the kneejerk impulse to disagree. He couldn't think of a single instance that didn't confirm Bruce's assertion.

"But that's the GCPD," Bruce said, a new tone softening the hard bat-gravel. "This is just us. I know you've always resented my not telling you the first time, with Bane. I'm sorry, Jim. It was never a matter of trust or any lack of confidence in our friendship. It was a difficult time, and my judgment wasn't what it should have been—in more ways than one. That's no excuse, but I offer it up anyway, man to man, with my deepest apologies."

Once again, Gordon took it in quietly. He seemed to digest the words one by one. While he was not a stupid man, the process took longer than it should. The sheer power of the words—coming, as they did, from Batman—slowing the process considerably. Finally, he signaled his acceptance of the apology with an awkward but manly cough, which Bruce answered with a light grunt.

"Very well," Bruce said, returning to the all-business delivery of the rooftop. "With those preliminaries out of the way, let me explain why I asked you here today."

Cassie had no difficulty finding the source of the paper packaging Selina took from Fiona's room. Tourists who had never set foot in Chinatown before could all find Eastern Spring Elixirs. It was almost impossible to pass through that part of the city and not see a dozen ads for the "authentic Chinese apothecary—the oldest and largest in Gotham." The store had often been likened to a magic shop in the Harry Potter movies (but only by visitors who hadn't been there when the tour busses rolled in, which rather ruined the effect). Cassie waited patiently through the show they put on for the tourists, the Q&A about acupuncture and herbal medicine, and the labored

posing for photographs. Finally, when the crowd had cleared and she had the personable young clerk to herself, she showed him the paper.

The clerk, who was a native Gothamite and a recent graduate of PS12, was used to tourists speaking to him loudly and slowly in an improvised pidgin English, often augmented with a homemade sign language, as if he wouldn't understand anything beyond "Good morning" without a pantomime. The soft-spoken Chinese girl charmed him with her shy manner and monosyllabic questions. He thought he recognized a fellow-sufferer, asked where she was from, and if she knew about the cultural center off Canal Street. He happily looked at her little paper, told her it was wrapping for a bottle of chang bai ciwuja, and that the calligraphy was definitely Mr. Wo over at Ho Shou Wu. He drew her a map, even though it was only a few streets away. And then he told her his name was Jai, and he asked her out.

She refused, and Jai asked for her phone number. She refused again, and he asked if he'd at least get to see her at the cultural center. They had some great programs on the weekends, he said, even some interesting classes. Uncomfortable refusing again when he seemed so sweet about the increasingly lesser requests, she managed a quick nod and then left.

"Catwoman. Investigating a murder," Gordon repeated, raw shock blotting out the vehemence of his disapproval. Once the shock wore off and he regained his equilibrium, he was pleased that he could answer Bruce's earlier critique of the GCPD with an equally unanswerable criticism of its own: "Remember before when you said your judgment was shot after Bane? Well it hasn't improved, my friend. If I had to call it between appointing that Azrael to step in for Batman and sending Catwoman to catch a killer, I'd have to say it's a tie for sheer—"

"Then you'd be wrong," Bruce interrupted. "There is no comparison. I knew firsthand what I was sending Azrael into, although I admit I misjudged his ability to cope with it. But I had no inkling there was a would-be murderer at Watermill Lodge. I never would have sent Selina if I had. But, as it turns out, it was fortunate that I did send her. She wound up being the key to the whole thing, and not even through orchestrated investigation but simply being who she is. And that's why I asked you here, Jim. The houseparty is about to break up, the guests will be leaving Watermill Lodge, and if you don't act quickly, then very soon, the following things will happen: a boy named William Foley will suffer some sort of fatal accident, and Selina might well be arrested for burglary and manslaughter."

"You can't be serious."

"Admittedly, arrest is a worst case scenario. But at the very least, I would expect police coming to the house to question her, repeatedly, and the kind of ongoing scrutiny that neither of us can afford. Now, Dick has been a policeman, and technically, he could act just as I'm asking you to, but he's also my son, and Selina is my... You understand why it can't be him."

"Nightwing, then. Or even Robin."

“Oliver Lyon tried to involve Batman in this matter, and I’d rather not let him know that he succeeded. I will have ‘Wing make the arrest if I have to, but I would prefer that it comes from you.”

Gordon laughed heartily.

“Don’t lie to me, Bruce, we go back too far. You would *prefer* to take the perp down *yourself*. Except ‘prefer’ doesn’t begin to cover it. If you could get out of that chair, you’d mow down a dozen cops to get there first and take them down yourself, every time.”

“Yes,” Bruce admitted. “And since I can’t, I am asking you.”

“So it’s a compliment?”

“It’s a necessity. Jim, right now the killer believes this looks like a natural death. That’s the only reason William Foley is still alive, because another death in the house would raise suspicions, and no killer will risk that if they think they’ve got away with it. But he’s a loose end, and we both know murderers do not leave loose ends for long. We also know that having killed once, it will be easier to do again. Anyone they might see as a threat is in danger.”

Gordon nodded. Lives were at stake, and for him as much as for Bruce, that was the first and last priority.

Mr. Wo said he sold a lot of *chang bai ciwuja*, and he was sorry but there was no way to tell who bought the particular bottle that was wrapped in that particular paper bag. Batgirl asked about white customers, and he said he had several. Finally, she asked about white customers who bought *chang bai ciwuja*. Mr. Wo said he did have one regular customer, who was a tall, blonde-haired white man, that had only just added *chang bai ciwuja* to his order.

Batgirl pushed forward her paper triumphantly and told Mr. Wo to write down everything else the tall, blonde-haired white man bought.

Fast-growing vines were snaking through the city from the west as a seductive purple fog rolled in from the east. Bane, the chemically engineered monstrosity, rose from the pavement at the Westside entrance to Robinson Park, only to be covered over in green before he could even complete his war cry. On the other side of the park, another monstrosity rose: Az-Bat, the abomination an insane Jean Paul Valley had made of Batman’s mantle. Before he could draw his sword, he was enveloped in the purple fog and vanished into nothingness.

Both advancing forces continued their movement towards the city center, but before they could meet, a giant coin rolled down Broadway, creating some kind of impassable barrier. A Ben and Jerry’s billboard in Times Square found it amusing and began to laugh, spewing out the letters “HA HA” until they formed a whirlpool in the center of the square. Streetlights, taxis, newsstands, and even Robin were pulled into the center, the cackling growing louder with each new object that vanished into the core. The purple fog began to purr in reply, but the vines took advantage of the distraction and began advancing in a new direction. It edged south towards a batarang that had fallen, unnoticed, into the street on Park Row, right on the sidewalk in front of Leslie’s clinic.

With the omniscience that comes in dreams, Batman knew that when the vines reached the batarang, the boiler would blow and the city would be ripped to pieces by the explosion. Except... the vines weren't moving, and the whirlpool was no longer laughing. There was just that purring from the warm furry cold... wet...

The dream receded, but as Bruce's eyes fluttered open, the purring grew more distinct. Nutmeg's cold wet nose pushed into his palm, while the sleeping cat stretched herself out in his lap. Bruce rubbed her ear absently, envying the cat's ability to nap at will. Batman's sleep schedule being abruptly displaced by a "normal" one, coupled with the painkillers and Selina's sudden absence from their bed, had produced a nauseating weariness. So he'd opted for an hour of shuteye before—

The cat's head snapped up suddenly, full awake, and it took no great detective (as Selina would have said) to deduce the cause. The manor walls were thick, and the approach of a car or the opening of the front door could not be heard from Bruce's study—not by him. But with the cat tipping him off, Bruce could time it out in his mind:

Park in the front circle, figure on moving the car out to the carriage house later if she doesn't go out to prowl tonight; she'll decide later, meow. Get her suitcase out of the trunk, open the front door herself, clip-clip into the foyer, set down the suitcase, drop her purse on the front table, and clip-clip into the great hall. Clip-clip, clip-clip crossing the hall until Alfred gets there. "Ah, welcome back, miss. I trust you had a pleasant weekend?" Some kind of sassy rejoinder from Selina, probably reiterating that Catwoman is a thief and not a crimefighter. Then: "Where is he?" "In the study, miss." "Giving you much trouble?" "Not at all, miss." Clip-clip-clip-clip...

Nutmeg jumped down from his lap and trotted to the door a moment before the clip-clips became audible in the hall. They slowed as soon as she saw the cat. A moment of murmured and predictable fussing followed. And then a few more clips, and she appeared in the doorway.

"Meo-oh," she gasped. "Bruce... What are you doing on your feet? You're supposed to be resting."

"Special occasion," he said, kissing her cheek. "Welcome home."

They settled together on the sofa, and Bruce took her in. He was used to her beauty, used to her smile, and used to her banter. This was something else. This was Batman on alert. Since the moment she said she was leaving Watermill Lodge, since the moment he hung up the phone, something inside him began bracing for it—although he couldn't say what "it" was.

He knew he was proud of her. She'd shown a surprising aptitude for investigation, despite her "I'm a thief, take it or leave it" attitude.

He also knew she would be chafing from all the orders he'd given. For as long as he'd known her, Catwoman's independence demanded payment after any accommodation.

And he knew he missed her. The bed had been cold and empty without her, and the manor lost that sense of "possibility" that existed whenever she was in the house. But none of that quite explained Batman's heightened sense of... the helicopter.

Of course, it was the helicopter.

Everyone in the Bat Family had been wrestling with memories of his Bane injury. Selina wasn't a part of Bruce Wayne's life back then, but Batman had been very much a part of Catwoman's. They had never talked about that time since they'd become a couple, not even the day they went through his hologram safe in the Batcave, not even when they came to the documents on the Order of St. Dumas. But he knew it affected her deeply. No detective, no one with the slightest understanding of human nature, could fail to see it. One had only to look at her hatred of Azrael. If there was one thing Bruce understood, it was that passionate hate that comes from loss. Batman's sudden disappearance, and the unexplained appearance of another man in his costume... He should have realized what it would do to her, what it would mean to her. At the helicopter, he saw it.

Catwoman had been there when he confronted Azrael to reclaim his mantle. In the midst of the battle, a helicopter's fuel tank was damaged. Nightwing was down, Azrael was escaping, Robin was occupied with a mobster's bodyguards... and the pilot was not moving. He couldn't pursue Azrael without checking the man and getting him clear before the copter blew. And then, his peripheral vision saw that flash of purple—Catwoman purple. And a voice called out his name, telling him to go. She'd take care of the pilot. He'd turned, fired a line, and swung away after Azrael.

The chase, the battle that followed, there was no time to breathe let alone consider... it was days later when his memory showed him what he had glimpsed in that split second as he turned to fire the grapnel: Catwoman's eyes, her face, her posture, everything about her was off. Riveted on him to the point of losing balance.

They had never discussed it, any of it. Not as Bat and Cat. Not as Bruce and Selina. But now... the night in the med lab, even through the haze of painkillers, he could see the condition she was in. And the next day, before he sent her to Watermill Lodge, she was almost clingy. Catwoman the unconquerable had offered him a massage from *a topless slave girl*.

Now he knew. He knew why Batman was on alert. He knew what his instincts had been bracing for since the moment she said she was coming home. The helicopter. Bane. Azrael. Here it was. They had never talked about it.

The glad-to-be-home smile had given way to an air of expectancy.

Like she was waiting for something. The whole vibe in the room was "Well?"

"Well," Bruce said, taking a deep breath and ready to delve into it. "Welcome home, Kitten."

"Screw that. Who did it?"

*...: Buys too much herbs. Too much for one person....*

"You got that right," Tim murmured, scrutinizing the list on the giant viewscreen.

He had been sent to the Batcave to receive Cassie's report from Chinatown, so he would have the full array of Batman's resources at his disposal, Bruce said. (Also, he could stop in the kitchen on the way downstairs, rather than having to stop at home before patrol and facing another one of his stepmom's tofu casseroles.)

"This guy isn't like Alfred. He gets temp work and catering jobs for a lot of families. He's probably selling to many of his employers. He might be selling other drugs too, illegal stuff, not from Ho Sho Wu."

...: *Have picture. Will ask around neighborhood. See if he buy from triads...:*

"You have his picture?" Tim asked. "Where did you get a picture of this guy?"

...: *Selina phone...:*

"Oh."

...: *She take picture in phone. Send on OraCom...:*

"She's better at this than she lets on," Tim laughed. "Better not let her hear me say it though."

...: *Did hear...:*

"Not you, Cass. I meant Selina."

...: *Oracle hear. Oracle tell Selina...:*

"Barbara, you're on the channel?" Tim yelped.

...: *Technically... I'm not really paying attention, Tim... Kind of preoccupied looking up what these herbs do... Phonetic mandarin translated into English is a little beyond Cassie's vocal abilities, so she sent me the list typed into her wrist unit... I think your ill-considered words about Catwoman will remain a secret... long as Nightwing's patrol is covered on my birthday next month...:*

"Oh yeah. Lady can do nasty things with a whip. Bludhaven is covered."

...: *I want to go up to Vermont for the weekend. ...:*

"Sure. Right. I mean, it's your birthday and you want more than one night. That's understandable."

...: *A long weekend. ...:*

"Is there an end in sight, Barbara, or should I just figure on attending Bludhaven Junior College?"

"You're smiling," Selina observed.

"Screw that. Who did it?" Bruce quoted, "It's not what I was expecting, that's all."

She came round behind him, rubbed his neck, and purred in his ear.

"I kissed you first, didn't I?" she said, her tongue just barely making contact with the inner ridge of his ear. "I thought that showed admirable restraint. I was replaying our conversation the whole drive back," she said, torturing him with that wisp of hot, moist breath on the hypersensitive flesh of his ear. "I can't figure out what I said that could possibly..."

He reached up swiftly and grabbed her arm in a Nexi hold.

"If you keep tickling my ear like that, I won't be able to concentrate," he managed hoarsely. "Please, just... this is why there's no sex in mysteries. Just... sit over there," he pointed. "Less Irene Adler. More Watson."

She went to the chair, laughing that, after all these years, she had finally short-circuited the great bat-brain—and at the worst possible time for Kitty's trademark curiosity.

"Are you finished?" he graveled.

She put on her best rooftop temptress manner before saying "Hell no. Brace yourself. Here it comes..." and crossed her legs. Then came the naughty grin...

"Now, I'm finished."

...and a comfortable silence.

"You really missed me?"

"More than you know."

"Good. Now who did it?"

...: *Well that's interesting...:*

"The impending death of my academic future?"

...: *You've got araliaceae root and chang bai ciuwa, both relatives of ginseng, essentially a high octane metabolism booster, and ma huang is an appetite suppressant, the source compound for ephedrine. ...:*

"This lady was a fashion model, Babs. I think we can assume weight loss is her religion."

...: *Yeah, but wu wei zi is a cough suppressant and asthma treatment that can also be used for insomnia. Suan zao ren, an mian pian... I think we're looking at someone on the standard pill popper's rollercoaster. All the fat burners give her energy, but then she's over stimulated and needs the sleep aids and anti-anxiety meds for the resulting insomnia, headaches, and stress...:*

"There's no guarantee all these herbs were going to one person, Babs. It's almost certain they weren't."

...: *Well in that case, all bets are off, but I'll send you the annotated list...:*

"Wait, before you do, mark off the ones that are related to heart problems."

...: *Oh, that's easy, the ma huang. Tim, it's ephedrine; it's a vasoconstrictor. ...:*

"A wha?"

...: *I thought you were kicking butt on the medical quiz earlier. ...:*

"That was poisons, not diet pills."

...: *You can be such a guy sometimes. Just like Dick was, I don't know what it is about that costume. Vasoconstriction is the narrowing of the blood vessels resulting from contracting of the muscular wall of the vessels. When blood vessels constrict, the flow of blood is "restricted" or slowed. Usually results in an increase of the blood pressure, causes pupil dilation, and in men... well, we can skip that. Medications that cause vasoconstriction include antihistamines, decongestants, methylphenidate (commonly used for ADHD), cough and cold combinations, pseudoephedrine, and caffeine. ...:*

"It's not a book report, Barbara."

...: *AND taken consistently over time, it could be pushing her towards a heart attack...:*

"Ah. Well, I know times have changed, but slow, long term poison is still a woman's weapon," Tim noted. "That stepdaughter, Fiona—I mean, you don't have to be a model to take a lot of diet pills, right? The note Selina found was to an F. There are three of those at the party: Fiona, Rick whose full name is Fredrick, and Richard Flay. Flay wouldn't be getting a delivery at somebody else's house, right? So it's one of the kids, and I say it's her. She could've got the stuff and been slipping it to loathed stepmum all this time, a hopeful sort of crime. It might never have any effect at all, and if it does, she can convince herself she didn't have anything to do with it. But then this thing with Rick getting married opens up all the old wounds and pushes her over the edge. She knows her stepmom's got a weak heart by now. Gives her a shot to finish it off."

...: *Couple problems with your theory, Tim. For one thing, poison is still a woman's weapon—with one exception. A man that wants to make a murder look like a natural death. Like a husband that would be the prime suspect if she were shot or stabbed. Plus.....*

"Yeah, the second one I already know. All indications are that Mrs. Lyon was obsessive about her weight and she took the herbs knowingly and willingly. I guess I just wanted to make the case, hear how it would sound out loud."

...: *Tim play detective,;... Cassie teased.*

...: *Yes! ... Barbara laughed. ...: Hercule Poirot laying out the solution for all the suspects in the parlor....*

"For two batgirls on the OraCom, you mean... Although... You know what, I think it helped. 'Cause I just saw what we've been missing. She takes the herbs herself, right? So those who are close to her *know* that she's been weakening her heart for years. They'd know the extended rush of adrenaline from a shot of insulin would trigger a heart attack before the insulin could do anything more suspicious to her brain. But the real beauty of those herbs is it's a way to knock her out for the night. I mean, getting into her room is easy. Two in the morning, the whole household is in bed. But you're not going to risk plunging a needle into somebody unless you're damn sure they're not going to wake up screaming, and that's just if you're sticking them anywhere. If you need to actually hide the injection point on their body, they've got to be OUT."

Sherlock Bruce and Selina Watson were seated in front of the fire in the detective's study. Alfred completed the cliché, bringing a tray of tea.

"If you make me ask a third time," Selina warned, making a clawing motion.

"Okay, okay," Bruce grinned. "'Who did it?' As you know, it was something you said on the phone that really snapped the case into focus for me. Without realizing it, you drew my attention to one of the most intriguing features of this mystery, and you did it in a very specific context.

"I was not jealous of Clark, Selina. But the way you teased me about it, that clarified a great deal. Remember what you said about 'another fop playboy doing what fop playboys do?' Daniel Eagen's interest in you was the key to the whole thing.

"You're beautiful, Selina. You're sexy, you're intelligent, you're passionate, and no man alive would need an ulterior motive to find you attractive. But you are also with me, and the last time I ran the numbers, my net worth came in just under \$9 billion, not counting Batman's assets. I could swat Daniel Eagen like a fly, and there are plenty of beautiful women out there whom he could hit on without risking that."

His lip twitched.

"To a playboy, one handsome woman is as good as another. But he hit on you, and that started me thinking. No one has a straight answer on exactly what this man does for a living, and a woman dating—or married to—a billionaire has a lot to lose. Getting a rich man's woman into bed with a hidden camera rolling and then blackmailing her with the evidence of her infidelity, that would pay the bills very nicely."

"Son of a bitch," Selina murmured appreciatively.

"So while this vague idea of blackmail is slowly forming in my head, you babbled on about casing a target. You said you don't want to spend six months establishing a cover just to get close to the Pattington tiara, only to find out they replaced all the diamonds with cubic zirconia after junk bonds tanked in the eighties. That was it, correct?"

"Word for word, Dark Knight," she winked.

"And that was it, the explanation for the one thing that's been driving me crazy: why the diamond in that necklace was a fake. Catwoman is no slouch at identifying jewelry, and at dinner you were too far away to make any kind of accurate assessment of the stone. That means whoever made a fake good enough to fool the family couldn't have been working off some sketch made across the room when Noel went to the opera. They had to be in the presence of the original, up close, for an extended period of time. And who could arrange that more easily than the owner? There's no doubt in my mind that Noel swapped the diamond herself, because her lover and blackmailer Daniel Eagen forced her to."

"Okay, I'll buy that," Selina nodded. "And if Daniel was our corpse, Noel is now our number one suspect. 'Ingenious, Holmes, victim killing a blackmailer is the classic scenario. Only way to make them stop, right?' But the blackmailer killing the golden goose, that's bad for the bottom line."

"I'm not saying Daniel is the murderer," Bruce grveled. "I'm saying he's a gigolo, a creep, and a blackmailer. It's an important piece of the puzzle. It's *the piece*. I was jealous, Kitten. Not of Clark, of the other fop playboy. I would have gladly punched him, and he hadn't done anything more than give you 'the vibe.' Can you imagine if it was more than that? Can you imagine what *Oliver Lyon* would feel if he discovered that diamond was a fake and worked out why? Not only did his wife cheat on him, she stole from him? You don't steal from men like Oliver Nathaniel Lyon."

"Well, I do, but—"

"No, Kitten, you don't. You never did. You haven't stopped to wonder why you never targeted this man? He had a consultant advise him how to avoid tripping Poison Ivy's wire. Given that his name is Lyon, I'm sure he's sought advice on staying off your radar... Until now."

"Wait, wait, wait, I did target him. I looked into those famous Miros that he's got."

"And you didn't bother pursuing it when you found out they were only prints signed on the plate. He's managed to stay out of your sights all this time. Now, he invites you to his country house and very cleverly maneuvers you into paying attention to his wife's necklace in front of the other guests, i.e. witnesses."

"You know, it's bothered me all along. I know Oliver and Noel slightly. Well enough to be invited to the garden party or the clambake or the barbecue. But the whole weekend? It was a small circle asked to stay at the house, family and intimate friends. Why us? As soon as I formulated the theory about Noel and Daniel and the diamond, it all made sense: it wasn't me Oliver wanted in the house that night, it was you. It was Catwoman."

Selina set down her cup thoughtfully.

"I should suit up," she said tersely. "I have a feeling I will need to claw something very soon."

"Possibly," Bruce agreed. "Because that's also why he contacted Batman a few weeks ago. I'm sorry, Kitten, I had good reasons for not telling you. I had a dozen theories about why he might want Batman involved, but I never came close to the truth of it."

He chuckled before saying the next words:

"We were to be his alibi, Selina, you and me. Batman and Catwoman. He never wanted me involved with the houseparty. He expected the brushoff. All he wanted was for Batman to know the necklace *existed*. Then, when Noel died on a night Catwoman happened to be a guest in the house, he assumed it would draw my attention. If it didn't, he could always discover the substituted jewel himself in a few weeks, executing the will or for some other mundane reason. As soon as it's discovered, what he's told Batman makes it all 'elementary': Catwoman swapped the diamond. He can get a fat insurance claim to compensate for the 'stolen' jewel. He may not need the money, but to a man like Oliver, pride would demand restitution. And, most importantly, there's now a plausible *reason* for his wife's heart attack: she awoke in the night and found an intruder in her room..."

"Great, just great," Selina growled. "I just got home. I just kicked my shoes off, and now I've got to drive all the way back up there to claw out that guy's kidneys."

Bruce couldn't suppress a smile, although it was a sad smile.

"Don't bother," he said. "Gordon will have him under arrest by now."

Selina stared. She stared at the fire, at the sugar cubes on the tea tray, at the fringe of the Aubusson carpet that the Justice League of another dimension had set on fire during her climactic dimension hop, and finally, she stared at Bruce.

"That is just INCREDIBLY UN-SATISFYING," she declared.

"It's the fact that a woman is dead that is unsatisfying," Bruce said. "Nothing we do to Oliver at this point is going to make it feel right."

"No wonder you scowl so much. This bites."

"Agreed. But at least you have the option of going out tonight and taking out your frustration on as many bad guys as you can find."

James Gordon pulled into the parking lot of the Briermere Market that had so eluded Dick and Cassie. It wasn't that he was that much better at navigating the backroads of Watermill, it was simply that Superman hovering over the intersection was hard to miss. The Man of Steel descended and handed over the revised pathology report, as well as a statement the GCPD had taken only minutes before from a William Foley.

Named by the Red Fire Triad as a buyer of semi-legal herbs and blatantly illegal cocaine, ecstasy, meth, and prescription painkillers, Foley was quick to identify which of his employers he then sold to, including Fiona, Noel, and Oliver Lyon. Of particular interest was the diazepam and chloral hydrate purchased by Oliver Lyon. It seems that Foley removed a bottle of herbs from his wife's room shortly after her death, and her diet pills were laced with those same sedatives...

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" Selina exclaimed.

"No. It's *frustration*. Only two days in this damn chair, and it's... this not being able to do anything is driving me insane."

Selina's eyes snapped shut as if hit by a magician's curse or a post-hypnotic trigger.

"Selina?" Bruce called.

"Shh, I'm counting to ten," she hissed.

"Selina,"

"EIGHT, don't claw his eyes out, nine, don't claw his eyes out, and... ten."

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes with a serene smile.

"Falconi Jewelers," she said with a ferocious intensity. "I grabbed a police van transporting three prisoners from the courthouse back to Arkham for the sole purpose of keeping you busy while I got Queen Anunaki's golden dollhouse. It was only supposed to be Harvey and Oswald in that van, but instead, I got Harvey, Oswald, *and Joker*. Did I leave you to deal with the homicidal clown while I traipsed off to St Moritz? NO, I caught him by myself and I left him tied up for you at the Bat-Signal. Did I get so much as a thank you? NO, I got a batarang thrown at my head, but that's just you being you. I then HELPED YOU nail Oswald at Falconi Jewelers, and when I offered a partnership at the end of it, you said 'That's not good enough.' One and a half Rogues in ninety minutes—my *first* ninety minutes even attempting \*koff\*-fighting—and I got a Rogue an hour."

Bruce was sitting absolutely still, his fingers interlaced thoughtfully, his whole manner that of a Buddhist monk meditating in a hurricane...

"Good ones! Joker! Penguin! Not like I'm talking Kite-Man and the Trigger Twins."

...or a hapless antelope that had wandered into a lion's den and was hoping, if he remained very still, the lions wouldn't notice.

"Always been tempted to ask just how many Joker and Penguin caliber fiends you nailed in your first two hours on the job."

It was like she'd found some new-fangled way of breathing. The words just kept coming without her ever stopping for breath.

"But what would be the point? You'd probably just toss another batarang at my head."

It was clear she'd been holding it in for a long time, her "How hard do you want it to get" moment, perhaps. The night you'd said nothing, and it haunted you ever after. Only six months later, replaying the scene for the thousandth time in your head, do you finally find the words.

"I mean for God's sake, give it *two weeks* before you decide I can never possibly make up for a few purloined Picassos. Two *nights*, even! I'd already got Joker and half a Penguin, my average had nowhere to go but down."

It was also clear that... that she'd stopped.

And she was staring at him, apparently expecting a response.

"I really thought if we were going to be talking about the past, it was going to be Azrael," he said bluntly.

"Well we're not. It's this," she said. The passion had spent itself, and her tone was reason itself. "I made a mistake, I realized it, and as soon as I did, I tried to correct it. That effort resulted in the capture of two A-level Rogues in less than a full night. You said that's not good enough. Bruce, you've been in that chair for a little over two days,

and you've already *solved a murder*. Is it possible that your standards are just a *little* too high?"

Alfred withdrew quietly from the room rather than risk betraying the dignity of his position with a cackle of triumphant glee. If there was one single element Miss Selina had brought into the manor that none of them had ever anticipated, it was this ability to present Master Bruce with an alternate perspective of Batman's activities, and to do so in a manner he couldn't ignore. Although his curiosity was keen to see what would happen next, he thought it prudent to step even further from the study door, lest that suppressed cackle of glee explode into a fully articulated war whoop.

Behind him, in the study, there was an odd rumbling coming from the center of Bruce's chest, which meant either he was about to implode—or it was a laugh. Alternate universe experiences with alternate reality Batmen argued for the laugh, and Selina risked a naughty grin.

"Okay," he said at last.

"Okay what?"

"You didn't *help* catch Penguin, you *caught* Penguin. Your whip, his foot, the display gimmick, his head. I wasn't anywhere near it. You stopped him on your own while I was still tangling with his goons. Saved me the chase—and that was after you disarmed the thug pointing a gun at my head. That's two A-level Rogues in your first ninety minutes. It is good enough, and I accept your offer. Full partners. You can start tonight."



## EPILOGUE

"..."

"Kitten?"

"..."

Selina appeared to have frozen: her pupils fixed, her breathing shallow, and a certain un-feline stiffness in her posture around the neck and shoulders.

"..."

"Look, Selina, for the next five weeks, the city is short one Batman."

"You can't be serious," she murmured dully.

"Oh good, you can talk. I was saying: the city is short one Batman."

"You can't be serious," she repeated after an incredulous swallow.

"I'm not asking you to answer the signal or wear the cape. I'm just saying help the team."

"You can't be..."

"You offered!"

"It was like three presidents ago!" she exploded. "Gas was a dollar twenty-nine. Trump carried his own golf clubs. Eddie had a full head of hair!"

"Exactly. Long before the Gotham Post's nonsense became an issue, when you had nothing to prove about a lying tabloid saying you were something that you're not, you... fought crime. Rather well. And offered to do it again."

"That was a personal offer, directed to Batman and Batman alone, and under very unusual circumstances."

Bruce smiled.

"I'm Batman," he said, punctuating the statement with Bruce Wayne's charmingly coy playboy wink. Then his face hardened as he added, "And these are also very unusual circumstances."

"Look, Selina, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thinking about Gotham, but I'm not *only* thinking of Gotham. I'm thinking of us, too. Back then, you said you'd made a mistake and you were trying to make up for it. I made a mistake too that night. You did catch Joker, you had my back when that thug pulled a gun, and you caught Penguin. When you offered more, the answer should have been yes without a moment's hesitation. But that kiss scared the hell out of me. *You* scared the hell out of me. I wanted you so badly, I could feel the possibility of... compromise. And we'd only fought together for a minute. It was fifty-eight seconds from your crashing through the skylight to tripping Cobblepot into that display. *Fifty-eight seconds* and I could barely summon the will to pull away. If I gave it two weeks, how could I possibly... That's why I had to refuse."

"You're saying... if I do this... it makes up for both our mistakes?"

"Nothing can change the past, but we have both learned a lot since that night."

"I don't believe I'm even considering this," Selina muttered.

"I don't either," Bruce murmured, then added with a twinkle. "But you are."