

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



# Cat = Sales

*À Bon Chat, Bon Rat*



by Chris Dee



**CAT-TALES**  
**À BON CHAT, BON RAT**



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By  
Chris Dee

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## À BON CHAT, BON RAT

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At one time, the public Bruce Wayne practically made a career of globetrotting. He never used the word vacation. That term implied a respite from work, like the weekend. A vacation was something for those funny little people who worked for a living. Since the playboy did not work, he did not vacation. He drifted, like Fitzgerald socialites, to places where polo was played and people were rich together. It was convenient for Bruce Wayne to be in Gstaad or Mykonos or St. Thomas when Batman was pulling a heavy schedule. It was camouflage in the same way the women were camouflage. On those occasions when he did go to some jet set playground in person, he picked up local beauties to be photographed with. He did not bring his Gotham arm candy with him.

Both the travel and the women were something that looked like pleasure to the outside world, but were, for Bruce, just another facet of his work. Bruce the playboy might not work, but Batman most certainly did. Even so, he never felt the need for a vacation, not until Alfred tricked him into taking one. The effect was dramatic. It was years before he considered that the sudden release from the nightly pressures of his work, coupled with the idyllic change of scene, might have played a role in his decision to tell Catwoman his identity. He had to wonder if he was unusually susceptible to the effects of that release from having waited so long to do it.

Once he and Selina became a couple, one of the first shocks was the change she brought to Bruce Wayne's social life. That first winter together attending the endless whirl of parties, balls, and galas in the weeks before Christmas, to suddenly find himself with a partner who shared his perspective on the world. Selina thought like he did: it would be a crisis if the guest of honor was trapped in her embassy by rebel guerillas, not that she was trapped at the buffet with Gerald Knaff after saying Mrs. Knaff needs therapy more than another round of botox.

Years had passed since that first rush of discovery, but Bruce was still struck when he found himself revisiting one of those old playboy experiences now that Selina was in his life. This trip, for example. It was not globetrotting for Bat-camouflage, but it was the kind of travel-intensive schedule he'd often maintained in the early days. Three cities in Asia and five in Europe in less than two weeks. Yet with Selina along, it was all strangely different. Not completely different. Tokyo was still Tokyo. He'd wanted to see Tadao Toda while he was there, sit in on a class at Nippon Budōkan, and have sushi at Sukiyabashi Jiro. But for all the sameness, it was strangely and wonderfully different. Selina had enough sword training to revere Toda as much as Bruce did. She could sit in on the class legitimately, not as a rich man's plaything, and her presence did not disgrace him. Later, when she sat down to what many believe to be the best sushi in the world, well, Selina experienced pleasure like few people in the

world. She knew how to savor, and watching her make the most of whatever delights life brought her way was contagious and arousing.

It's what made the trip to Cartier so unique. The last city of the Wayne Tech tour was Paris, and Bruce had dangled the carrot of shopping when he asked her to come with him. He had given her jewelry before, of course, but never like this. Never walking into the store together. It was something he had done before with the bimbos, women whose aim was to guess how many diamonds they could get away with or how big a stone. Maybe Selina was different because she could "get away with" literally any piece in the store without any help from him—and, in fact, despite his best efforts to stop her. She had no agenda when she looked over the pieces in a case. She simply chose what she liked, which had more to do with cut and color, the design and artistry of a piece, rather than its price tag.

Bruce could see it as her eyes flickered around a case. She was drawn to clean lines, square cut stones and invisible mounts. Platinum or white gold over yellow. And the contrast between dark colors and light. She would linger over dark sapphires or the deepest, darkest emeralds set against white diamonds, while her eye passed over a dozen brighter pieces worth more than the sapphires and less than the emeralds. When she tried something on, it was like watching her savor dessert at d'Annunzio's. The bimbos just took in their reflection, contemplating all that money wrapped around their necks or dangling from their ears. They looked at themselves in the jewelry more than the jewels themselves—which was the point, Bruce supposed, but something about it always seemed a little perverse to him. Selina, on the other hand, looked at herself in a necklace, then at something beyond, within her reflection. Bruce imagined she was picturing herself owning it. Then came the little glow, that spark of delight, and her focus shifted back at the mirror—and at him standing behind her. He could see the link in her mind... Because the item came from him? Or was it something else? Something more private. He couldn't guess what 'it' was exactly, but he had a hunch it was connected to Batman.

She decided finally on a pair of earrings—emeralds, which brought out her eyes beautifully—and she asked, naturally, to have her initial engraved very discreetly on the back. The salesman was confused, of course. Mademoiselle and Monsieur both spoke excellent French, but he was afraid there must be a misunderstanding. On the back, it would never be seen. Selina gave a magnificent portrayal of a she-fop as she explained that the world might not see it, but she would know it was there. Bruce smiled his approval: he would have suggested it himself if Selina hadn't. Engraving meant they couldn't take the earrings with them now. They would have to pick them up tomorrow—which meant Catwoman could return and take them tonight.

Return she did. Batman had taken up a position over the Ministère de la Justice, located conveniently between their hotel and Cartier's front door. He saw Catwoman climb out their window and to the roof, take the long route around Place Vendôme, redirecting the traffic cameras as she went. Finally she reached Cartier, made short work of their rooftop system, and disappeared inside. He'd give her four minutes to reach the vault and another five to crack it. If he timed this right, he should be able to catch her red-handed...



Tom Blake did not consider himself a homicidal maniac. He would kill things that were put on the Earth to be killed as a testament to man's dominance of his world: a rhino, an elephant, a giraffe or wildebeest, creatures whose very size and power challenged men like him to prove their own size and power through conquest. He saw himself a Hemmingway born by mistake into the age of Stephenie Meyer, a hard-living, hard-drinking Man among mice, a Great White Hunter in a world of video safaris shared on Facebook, COPY THIS MESSAGE IN YOUR PROFILE TO PROTEST IVORY POACHERS IN KENIA! (misspelled, naturally)

But he wasn't a killer. He was in the high security wing at Arkham, but he wasn't insane. He was just born out of his time. He never seriously considered choking the life out of another human being (except Batman, who didn't count). He never considered caging a human being (except Batman) and letting them loose in a deserted wood for the ultimate hunt that pulp writers dubbed The Deadliest Game. Okay *technically* he had considered hunting Robin, Nightwing and Green Arrow as well as Batman, and he'd had a rather spicy hunt dream one time involving Cheshire, but on the whole, caging, hunting, and killing people wasn't his thing. And he certainly never considered taking that torchiere in Dr. Bartholomew's office, removing the metal tube, sharpening it into a spear, and ramming it repeatedly into somebody's chest with a force to break through their rib cage and pound their heart into hamburger.

Not until now.

Best high EVER. Paris with Bruce. The most scrumptious earrings, ever so slightly evocative of the sapphire and diamond ones I left the night of that first rooftop kiss at Cartier, without being so similar that they leave uncomfy associations. After all, the Bat and Cat of that night blew it. They're long gone, and I don't want their memory tainting my beautiful gift from Bruce. But now, after Paris with Bruce, Cartier with Bruce, it's Paris with Batman. Cartier Paris with Batman. The best high ever. Getting to steal those purrfectly wonderful earrings right out from under his—

Stomach.

I was so high on the best heist I would ever have, my body registered it before my mind did. My eyes saw there was something off about the alarm box, and my stomach lurched accordingly. I'm not a detective, and I couldn't tell you exactly what it was I saw. It was just wrong. A dozen tiny details, too insignificant to be seen consciously, but they were all there, and subconsciously, they added up to this general feeling: something wrong.

I checked the edge of the faceplate and the hinges first, looking for an extra wire, a light beam, anything that indicated a trap. There was a slight sheen on part of the hinge, like it had been oiled, or at least spritzed with a lubricant. My heart decided to join my stomach and lurch around as I opened the cover and... felt more than saw that it had been opened recently. Once I got inside, I could see two clamps left on the Phoenix relay. No delicate wire splices, just a fat, ugly surgical clamp.

I headed for the vault, but had a much nastier surprise before I got there. First glance said it was a dead body. I've no love for rent-a-cops of any nationality, but I don't like seeing them gutted. Happily, in the next second, I saw the guy was breathing, so I went over for a closer look. Found an injection welt in his neck. Animal

tranq, probably. I'd heard it was in vogue in parts of Europe a few years back. Seems they got the idea from a TV show about a serial killer.

There were a few other breadcrumbs to find, motion sensors dusted with silicon and the like, enough that I knew what I'd find by the time I finally reached the vault. The smell of burnt metal, the door left open, empty shelves, and wires dangling from the last line of defense: these three sorry little cameras on their own circuit. Two were positioned at waist height right outside the safe, left side and right, pointing at the door. A third hung inside, suspended from the ceiling on a thin silver rod, and rotating pointlessly while its little red light blinked on and off. I looked around stupidly. It's not like there was going to be anything left to find. Thieves who get this far into Cartier—any Cartier—aren't going to leave behind a fingerprint. But I looked. I looked for something, not knowing what, until I heard the heavy tread of a Bat-boot running up the hall. He must've found the guard, and once he saw that, he'd guess the rest.

**"Situation?"** he grveled when he reached the door.

Whenever Bruce scheduled a lengthy business trip, Alfred liked to take advantage of his absence. The Batcave in particular was such a complex operation, the only way to achieve the apparent miracle of keeping it all clean and equipped, while maintaining the illusion of effortless invisibility good service demanded, was to work ahead—far ahead—whenever the opportunity presented itself. During Bruce's last trip, Alfred had cleaned, inventoried, and restocked the main cavern, medical bay and chem lab. This trip, he topped off the medical supplies and then turned his attention to the gymnasium, adjacent showers, costume vault, and trophy room. The last didn't need much cleaning. Because it was the acoustic sweet spot of the cave, Alfred spent more time there than in other locations.

Whenever Master Bruce had guests he would wait there, unable to hear actual words but able to judge the timbre and mood of the conversation. It kept him from interrupting at inopportune times and also alerted him to those moments when an interruption was the best thing to break everyone's focus on whatever matter they were discussing. Even when there were no guests that Alfred knew about, he often passed through the trophy room as an elementary precaution. Because of all the extra time spent there, the cases were dusted and polished more often than most rooms in the manor.

Hence today, he really needed to do no more than flick his duster over the Mad Hatter case on his way to the gymnasium, a room which required serious attention.

"They got everything," Catwoman said bluntly. "And unless you can do some CSI voodoo on the guard or the knife that cut those camera wires..."

"The guard was injected with Etorphine a little over one hour ago," Batman said, stepping into the room and examining the severed wires. "These were cut with a carbon steel blade, probably an Opinel knife, too common to trace. Can you tell how the door was drilled, or how long it would have taken?"

Catwoman bit her lip and squatted down to examine the lower part of the door. Then she made Batman give her a boost so she could see over the top.

"Well, it's got a glass relocker," she said finally. "So they had to come in from the top. They used a thermal lance, and those things take a lot longer to get the job done than people think. You said the guard's only been out for an hour?"

Batman snapped a palm device off his belt and handed it to her. The screen displayed an analysis of "Sample A-1" presumably the contents of a square slide protruding by just a few millimeters from a slot in the side. The screen listed the time and location the sample was harvested, and that it was human blood, Type O, subject living, etc etc. It gave a range from 68 to 90 minutes since an injection of Etorphine (M99). Catwoman handed it back without comment.

She bit her lip again and thought through the break in, step-by-step. Assuming they came in the way she did, assuming they were as fast, the outside cameras, the outside alarm, the inside alarm with the clamps...

"Well," Batman asked.

"You're not helping," she hissed.

The inside alarm box with the clamps. Knocking out the guard...

He grunted. And she glared.

Getting to the safe. Drilling the safe. Figure ten minutes minimum with the thermal lance, that's if they...

Batman cleared his throat.

"Would you like a cough drop?" she said through closed teeth.

Ten minutes to get a decent sized hole, if they knew exactly where to drill. Drop in a camera, watch the tumblers as you turn the dial... loading up the loot sacks and getting away.

"How long were you out there watching for me?" she asked suddenly.

"Fifteen minutes before you came out of the Ritz."

She nodded. They had to be gone by then or Batman would have seen them. Even if he was waiting for her, even if he was looking towards the Ritz and away from Cartier, there was no way Batman would miss one to three burglars with two sacks of loot and a thermal lance traipsing around Place Vendome. So...

"They had to know the weak point," she said suddenly.

"The manufacturer's drill-point diagrams, made available to legitimate locksmithing professionals to bypass malfunctioning or damaged locks? Those are closely guarded."

"Yeah," Catwoman chuckled. "Who would guess that lock makers can't lock up their own secrets very well. It's the only explanation, Handsome. We know when the guard was drugged, we know when you were outside watching. They didn't have time, in between, to do it any other way."

"You're sure?" he graveled, his eyes burrowing into hers with that intensity that made hardened killers quiver.

"Oh yeah."

"Then that's our lead," he said, the intensity never wavering, but a slight twitch on the side of his lip changing its meaning completely.

Breakfast in the Gordon-Grayson home was a festive meal whenever Nightwing was covering for Batman. It was as if surviving another night—and surviving in such a way that Bruce wouldn't have a hissy when he got back—was cause for celebration. Dick came fresh from the shower, dressed only in a bath towel. He flashed his wife, kissed her neck, tickled her side, and refused to stop until threatened with a spatula.

"You could do worse," Dick observed. "I know there were traffic cameras all over Melnick when I nabbed Double Dare last night. A really vicious woman would be threatening to drop a few pictures into the log."

"You're very lucky to have a friend like Wally," Barbara noted. "Not only does he make a run through Bludhaven for you while you're watching Gotham for Bruce, he comes and gets you to take care of it yourself when he finds something."

"And runs me back before Gotham can miss me. It's a sweet deal. I'm very glad Wally is my friend and not Bruce's. Can you imagine, after the Joker escape last week?"

"I'm still surprised he didn't cancel the rest of his trip."

"Well, he couldn't really. For Bruce Wayne to cancel the Town Halls WE had scheduled all over Europe and Asia, it would draw a lot of attention. To do it midway through the trip, it would draw one hell of a lot of attention. And Joker was back in his cell before Bruce even heard the news."

"Which might matter if we were talking about a regular person but this is—"

"Bruce might be a little obsessive, and there might be a multiplier when Joker's involved, but he doesn't let it control him, not to the point where he'd jeopardize his identity for no good reason."

"I guess you're right, but I still wouldn't have liked to be Selina last Tuesday when you got off the phone with him."

"You wouldn't, I wouldn't. She loves it. The battier he gets, she loves it."

Selina was torn. Batman had a way of viewing anyone with criminal ties as pummeling material. She herself had no qualms about threatening, intimidating or beating the street scum of Gotham. Even before the Post started trying to paint her as some kind of sewer dweller who would hang out with them, she viewed the scum as, well, scum. But Igor and Francois were not scum. Francois was a French aristocrat, as well as a damn fine cat burglar and her first lover, and Igor was a celebrated Belgian art dealer who just happened to be the finest fence in Europe. Either could point her to the new information brokers of Paris, but they would do it because she was the one doing the asking. And she would ask nicely. She didn't want Bruce thinking he could put either of these men in Batman's rolodex as criminal persons he could call on and rough up for anything he wanted.

So she passed on the hotel breakfast, crept out of bed early, dressed silently in the bathroom, and tiptoed out without waking Bruce. She made her way from Place Vendome, bypassed the tourist cafés until she spied one patronized by a local, business crowd. She selected a man sitting alone, walked past with a hipsway usually reserved for rooftops, and then turned back and asked, with a note of urgency in her voice, if she could please borrow his phone.

Ten minutes later, armed with the information she needed (and an invitation from Igor to postpone her departure for a day and come see him in Brussels), she headed back to the hotel, stopping at a patisserie on the way for a few chocolate croissants to bring back to the room in order to justify her early morning excursion. She waited impatiently as the sales girl wrapped up her purchase with more care than seemed warranted for a couple breakfast rolls, took her bag and hurried out the door—only to run smack into Bruce coming in.

“Morning, Kitten. Get the intel we needed?”

“Well, the last town hall was yesterday,” Barbara said while Dick cleared the breakfast table. “Bruce will back soon, and everybody’s schedule can go back to normal. Are we going to do the usual thank you with Wally and Linda?”

“Yep,” Dick nodded. “Melting Pot, the gooiest cheese fondue and saltiest margaritas this side of... someplace they make really salty margaritas.”

Barbara’s lower lip crimped into a slight frown, the unamused frown from long-ago rooftops in response to his Robin antics.

“Holy Punchline, you really blew the follow through on that one,” she said flatly. Then she broke into a teasing grin. “A backhanded shot at You-know-who?”

I really should have expected it. We all joke about the “I’m Batman” thing, but the truth is, the best of us have a fifty percent failure rate trying to slip one past him. He called me Kitten, he kissed my cheek, and he asked if I got the information. Just like that.

So I told him to get a coffee to go if he wanted one, we were taking the Metro to Père Lachaise Cemetery. Just like that. If it was going to be a foregone conclusion that I’d sneak out to get the intel behind his back, then it was a foregone conclusion that he’d know about it and follow. *À bon chat, bon rat.*

Père Lachaise is a popular tourist attraction—and Bruce and I are in total agreement that that’s an odd commentary on the typical Parisian sightseer—so we were able to stop at a touristy convenience store nearby and pick up a Polaroid camera. We took a photo of me and drew a figure on the bottom like a scarab, then followed the crowd to Jim Morrison’s grave. We weren’t the most typical-looking visitors to leave an item there, but it’s not like you can do anything peculiar enough to surprise the French.

That mission accomplished, we made our way to the public toilets under Place de la Madeleine. These are also, believe it or not, a tourist attraction. Built in 1905, they are, I suppose, very impressive examples of the Art Nouveau style: the carved wood panels, brass and mirrors, floral frescos and stained glass windows in each cabinet. But ornate public toilets aren’t really unique in Paris. La Madeleine is just the one some Fodor guidebook decided to write about. In any case, we were to go there and wait after leaving the Polaroid on Morrison’s grave. Since Cancrelat’s people would know what I looked like from the photo, they would come to me.

Bruce—who insists on being my sherpa on crimefighting missions, no matter how much the activity draws on my expertise more than his—said I should be prepared to

wait a long time. They would want to watch me for a while, watch me critically, see how I reacted to the waiting, until they satisfied themselves that I wasn't a policeman.

I stopped, right there in front of Cerruti's window—not because I thought the multi-textured grey-brown leather and suede jacket might be just gorgeous enough to excuse its similarity to the Post's zip-up biker chick horror—but because I needed to yank Batman out of the land of the hero-addled crimefighter and back into Bruce Wayne's Paris.

"This suit is Yves St. Laurent," I said bluntly. "My bag is Hermes, and my shoes are Ferragamo. Do you imagine for one second there's a crook anywhere in France who think cops dress this way?"

He started to say something about Ferraris confiscated from drug dealers, and rather than pointing out that this wasn't Miami, Detroit or Metropolis, I just pushed past him and went down the stairs to the toilets.

In less than a minute a girl came up to me, about Cassie's age, with that scarab shape painted on her fingernail. I admired her scarf, and she admired my shoes. I gave her fifty Euros and she gave me Canelrelat's address. I went back upstairs and was pleased to see Bruce still looking around the square for a place to stand.

"You're done already?" he said, failing to hide his astonishment.

"Yes dear," I said in French. "I even took a minute to wash my hands."

"How could I be so stupid?"

It wasn't like the question had never been heard before within Arkham's walls. "How could I be so stupid?" "How could I have missed it?" "Who carries a UV flashlight in their boot?" Tom Blake had uttered them once or twice himself.

"How could I be so stupid? How could I be so stupid? How-how-how could I be so 'because it was a little horse' stupid?"

It wasn't the question itself, it was the repetition, and the fact that Joker was repeating it. Thirty four times since breakfast, by Blake's count.

"Why did the pony cough? Because it was a little horse. THAT kind of stupid. How how how could I miss it, Blakeypoo?"

"I couldn't say," Tom said dully.

"It was right there..."

When he wasn't repeating the phrase, he was repeating the story behind it:

"Nightwing was down, I still had three henchmen in reserve, and there he was, on his knees, eyes unfocused. You could almost see the little birdies tweeting around his head."

"I—" Tom began, trying to interrupt the story just to... well, he couldn't really say why. If he did stop Joker from telling it again, he'd go back to the original refrain.

"How could I be so stupid? How could I miss it? TOM! HOW COULD I MISS IT? The black and blue bat boy was all black and blue, HAAAAHA... No, I can't laugh about it, Blake. Thanks for trying to cheer me up, though. You see, when the hero is down that way, it's time to rub a little salt in the wound. Make sure he knows that he's dying for nothing. Make sure he fully understands that his failure means death to all of Gotham, HAAAAHA—sigh. So I struck a pose and said 'I want to thank my fans for all their undying support.' (The henchmen applauded. Very sentimental folks,

henchmen. Easily moved.) They applauded, then I bowed and said ‘And I want to thank the people of Gotham, who I’ll be seeing very, very soon.’”

Tom Blake sat very still, waiting for what was to come.

“Thank my fans for their UNDYING support, and the people of Gotham WHO I’LL BE SEEING SOON? How could I be so stupid?! It was there, Tom, it was right there! Thank my fans for their undying support, and what? What’s the punchline, Tom? Even you must see it.”

Blake sat very, very still.

“SAY IT!” Joker bellowed, and then leaned in so his nose was within an inch of Tom Blake’s, and he hissed with bone-chilling hate. “Say it.”

“Thank the people of Gotham for their dying,” Blake murmured.

“OF COURSE! Thank the people of Gotham for their dying support, or—as even a muscle-headed nitwit like you can see—just thank them for their dying. Because it scans better.”

Joker sank to his knees and sobbed.

“It scans better, Tom. Why didn’t I see it? How could I be so stupid? Thanking the people of Gotham—who I would be seeing very soon?!”

Blake looked piteously at the guard, who seemed to be ignoring the situation. The rat bastard. He was seriously considering making a run for it. Infirmary, sedation, anything would be better than this.

“How could I be so stupid?”

He was saved by the door opening to Dr. Bartholomew’s inner office.

“Patient Blake, you can come in now,” Bartholomew said, ignoring Joker’s sobbing.

“Maybe Joker should take my session,” Tom offered. “He seems like he could use another hour.”

“NO!” Bartholomew said too quickly. (The rat bastard, Tom thought.) “No, you must trust the professionals for this kind of thing. Patient J and I have had our little talk for today. Now it’s best if he returns to his cell and gives it some serious thought.”

“Thank the people of Gotham for dying,” Joker said, with an ‘it’s so simple’ gesture to the watercooler. “I want to thank the people of Gotham for dying. How could I miss it? How could I be so stupid?”

Cancrelat began as a fence, and he still dabbled when a score was tempting. But as the years passed, he decided it was almost as lucrative (and much safer) to act as a go-between without taking all that stolen merchandise into his home. The woman who called herself Cora Colette, however, was making him reconsider the wisdom of that decision. She was stunningly beautiful, and obviously in the trade. For a client like that, a man could certainly risk a few Rembrandts in the attic. He regretted that she only wanted something as dreary as drill-point diagrams.

He gave her a name, but she made a face—and as lovely as she looked making a simple inquiry, she was beyond beautiful when she was displeased. She said she knew Jean P. from the old days, and he overcharged disgracefully. She then hinted that her profit margin was thin enough with her current fence (*quel dommage*) and if she had to go to Jean P, the heist really wouldn’t be worth the trouble.

Cancrelat did not poach thieves from other fences, not as a rule, but clearly the delightful Mademoiselle Colette was unhappy with the fence she had. He dropped a few hints of his own, and though she was as careful as he never to say anything explicit, he understood that if he could save her enough on the drill-point diagram for the safe she wanted, he would have first refusal fencing anything she stole.

As it happened, she wanted the SL85 5-Point, and he did know a crew who had purchased the drill points for that very model from Jean P very recently. He couldn't guarantee that they would sell it to her, but he guessed they would jump at the chance to recoup some of their investment, for as Mademoiselle observed, Jean P really is very overpriced...

It's not that I don't enjoy date nights crimefighting with Bruce, but the prospect of a date night with him robbing a place with me? Me-ow!

The Cartier heist was the work of the Edgar Lhomme crew. Edgar had a sweet arrangement living at the country estate of a disgraced politician and storing his ill-gotten gains behind the kind of security that disgraced political families get to secure their privacy as well as their valuables. In short the place was catworthy: a thousand acres of woodlands, surrounded by a 14-foot electrified fence and only accessible through one security gate—to the unimaginative, that means one way in, one way out. The main computer at the front security gate controlled the separate alarm systems for each wing of the house. And, of course, in addition to the man at the security gate, there was another guard who walked the perimeter—with a trained dog.

Alone, I would have had to hire a local and charter a plane, parachute in the old-fashioned way. Not with Batman as a partner. Bruce never goes anywhere without a glider, and in fact, he has a number of Bat-ultralight capabilities stored outside many major cities. But for our purposes, the bat-glider was plenty. We flew in low, jumped out, and an automated system kicked in to send the bat-bird home while we floated to the neatest parachute landing you could imagine. (Even his parachutes are better-designed than other people's... which I mentioned to him, and he grunted.)

We split up: Bruce was all set to hack into the security system, get the passwords and use them to deactivate the alarms, disabling each wing in turn as I went through the house. He had to get to the gatehouse to do it, that's where the controls were, and there was a guard to distract, somehow. That's much easier to do from the inside, where we were now, but there was still Fido to contend with. The dog, ironically, was my job. There are two effective methods: a big juicy steak and the urine of a bitch in heat. Both short out the best dog's training and keep them fully focused on the priorities of being a dog. I prefer the former approach, because Fido actually gets to eat the steak. It seems mean to taunt him with the other, particularly when the bitch in question is a thousand miles away in another country, but in this case, I had no choice. The dog was on the end of a leash with a paid guard on the other end. If Fido found a steak, the guard would know what was happening. If Fido was crazy about the scent of a particular bush, not so much.

...: Gatehouse secured. ...: I heard in my ear.



“Even for you, that was fast” I whispered.

I could swear I heard the lip-twitch.

With the dog preoccupied, I made my way to the back entrance, picked the lock, and let Batman know I was in.

...: *That was fast even for you, ...* he noted, which was sweet of him, and I purred.

The house was a bit of a maze, and I'd only had a half hour to study the floorplan, but I found my way to the second wing without too much trouble. Bruce had the second password cracked by the time I got there. We decided to race to Wing 3, seeing if he could crack the passcode before I reached the threshold. He had an advantage, because I had an extra stop. Wing 2 housed the controls for the electric fence, down in the basement. It took me almost three minutes to get there and find the fuse box... (A word about that basement: there was a live cat down there dining on a recently-live rat. We agreed not to disturb each other, and I did my best to hide my disgust) ...and then I had to evade Lhomme himself, heading to the kitchen for a cup of cocoa, I would guess. It's what I do when I'm on a post-heist sleep schedule and can't sleep through the night.

Lhomme was like me in another way: when I walk through the house at night, I don't turn on the lights either. It seems more natural somehow, not forcing your eyes to adjust back and forth to the different light levels, but it's rather creepy when you see someone else doing it. I knew now that if he came into a room and saw me, I wouldn't know he was there. Not from the lights anyway. I would have to stay extra alert.

...: *You finished in Wing 2 yet?* "... I heard as I was squatting down to leave a trio of small black canisters, each with a silver bat emblem embossed on their bases, behind the curtains at each of the floor to ceiling windows.

“Jackass,” I answered. Then...

...: *Wing 3 alarms disabled.* ... as I reached the threshold.

“Wing 3” is a bit of a misnomer, as it's just a single room. Possibly an armory, originally. There was one serious iron gate leading into it—ironically, with the easiest lock to pick. Inside, I found the thermal lance and a few other supplies from the Cartier job, and the feeling of kinship faded. Apparently Mr. Lhomme was a bit of a slob when it came to putting his tools away, something I can't stand.

The Cartier loot was all present and accounted for, along with a few paintings, a portfolio of animal prints, a few bottles of wine, some watches, a carved family crest, and a stuffed bear.

Shrug.

I took my earrings, and just for kicks, the portfolio of animal prints, since they didn't look too valuable. Then I legged it.

...: *Move. They've discovered the fence is down.* ...

“Just finishing up,” I told him as I ran.

By the time I reached the Wing 1 threshold, I could hear the sirens. By the time I reached Bruce at the gatehouse, it was pandemonium. A dozen cars and vans outside the gate: Judicial Police from Paris, Judicial Police for the province, Police Nationale, Gendarmerie and Interpol all claiming jurisdiction, the house guards saying they had everything under control, and the dog, barking. It was wonderful. There was enough chaos that we could have slipped out right then, but that would have wasted the

protocol. I couldn't resist giving him a quick kiss for luck before he depressed the button on his belt, setting off the firecrackers inside the windows.

The whole platoon went racing through the gate—the Interpol guys still arguing that they had jurisdiction as they ran towards the house—and we walked right out the open gate and took their car.

The next morning, we watched the press conference while we packed. The Paris police won the jurisdictional battle, since they were responding to a tip about the Cartier robbery. Lhomme would be tried in a Parisian court. And then, well, French television likes viewers as much as their American counterparts. Since Captain Gerard of the DCPJ wasn't much to look at, they shrunk the press conference down to a small box in the corner while the rest of the screen panned across all the jewelry from Cartier seized at Lhomme's "lair."

"That's why I took my earrings," I noted, tucking them into my jewel case. "There's no telling how long that stuff is going to be tied up in legal limbo."

Bruce cleared his throat.

"And why did you take this?" he asked, inspecting the portfolio.

"World's greatest detective, my ass," I said, opening it up and paging to the third print down. "Tiger," I said, pointing.

He scowled—which is the one expression of his that is worlds different without the mask. On Batman it is unspeakably sexy. On Bruce...

"Don't be that way," I asked, hoping to make it go away.

It didn't budge.

"It's not like they're valuable," I assured him. "They're not even very good."

Lip twitch. I WON! (I thought) But then...

"World's greatest cat-thief, my ass," he said, snatching up the portfolio and sliding it into his own suitcase. Before I could react, the bellman arrived to take our other things down to the car. I was stuck, surrounded by hotel flunkies, drivers, and passport clerks, until we were safely alone on Wayne One, flying home.

"Well?" I said, because really, he knew damn well what I was referring to and it shouldn't have been necessary to say more.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Here I should open a bottle of champagne," he said in that infuriating fop voice. "Michel sent some foie gras and sea scallops for us to enjoy on the flight home."

"I'm not talking about a box lunch from L'Espadon, Bruce, and you know it. What did you mean, world's greatest..."

He had his laptop out and swiveled the screen around 180 degrees for me to see. It was an uplink to the Batcomputer, displaying an old Interpol report on the left and a slideshow of prints from the portfolio on the right:

*Margaret Winfield, a descendent of Rudyard Kipling, died without heirs at the age of 93. While her estate was being prepared for auction, a portfolio of faded prints was discovered in the attic. The cardstock portfolio itself bore an embossed seal reading "From the library of Rudyard Kipling." Inside, among the various prints of no artistic merit other than having belonged to a famous author, a particular print depicted two tigers cavorting in a stream as the royal hunt approached in the distance. Like the rest, it was of questionable artistic merit, but in the margin was a thin column of penciled notes in Kipling's own handwriting, notes hinting at what would one day become the passage of "How the Tiger Got His Stripes" in The Second Jungle Book.*

*The prints, along with a Georgian tea set, coin collection, enamel snuff box, and two vermeil candlesticks were taken from Winfield Hall the night before the scheduled auction by person or persons unknown.*

*Closest matches on 12-point M.O. analysis:*

*The French Ghost, 71% probable.*

*Shadow Thief, 63% probable.*

*Tomio, 62% probable.*

*Catwoman, 11% probable.*

I swallowed. I stared. I swallowed again. I looked at Bruce. I looked at the screen. And finally, I sat.

"Y-" It was really too soon to try and talk. "Lhomme had the... Lhomme was the... I *accidentally* stole the inspiration and working notes for 'How the Tiger Got His Stripes?'"

"So it would seem."

"Damn, I'm good."

Bruce's lip twitched. His eyes said "Yes, you are." His lips said "You know, Kitten, before you, the public Bruce Wayne made a career of globetrotting, but I never took an actual vacation. Bruce didn't work. And even though Batman did, it never occurred to me that I might benefit from a break in routine. These past two days in Paris... have sold me. Best vacation I've ever had."