

# CAT-TALES

BY CHRIS DEE



## BOOK 1

WHAT IF BATMAN WAS REAL? WHAT IF CATWOMAN WAS REAL?  
WHAT IF EVERYTHING YOU KNEW ABOUT THEM WAS WRONG?



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# FORWARD

Writing comedy is hard. Writing *good* comedy is extremely difficult. Then there is the daunting task of writing comedic material that is not only funny, but smart, witty, classy, poignant, thoughtful, emotional and, most importantly, fun to read. There are only a few people in this world that can accomplish this task. Chris Dee is one of those few.

Fan fiction writing is, at its best, a homage to the characters and ideas expressed in a mainstream body of work; be it a movie, a television show, or even a comic book. It is also a chance for a creative writer to expand the limits normally associated with the original, whether those limitations lie in the medium itself, or in the original's creator. In a time when many of the older Batman and Catwoman fans have become increasingly disenfranchised from the "official" product being released, Chris Dee's *Cat Tales* offers a refreshing return to the one thing these fans fell in love with in the first place: the characters.

In the earliest incarnations, mainstream comics relied on the heroic deeds of its heroes to define the characters. When it's done right, the result is an action-packed, enjoyable piece of escapist entertainment. However, somewhere along the line, the fans of most comic books grew up and started asking for a more in-depth look at the people behind the superhero personas. As is usually the case in these endeavors, the industry overdid it. Now, instead of these more-than-human characters of myth and legend, we are left with *less-than-humans*. Beings are so flawed and so fractured, it shatters believability far more than the premise that a man from Krypton can fly.

Enter Chris Dee. In her series, she dares not only to show a more human side to these beloved long-standing characters that fans love, but she does it without destroying the hero mystique that first defined them. While the original company, DC Comics, asks the question "Why did Bruce Wayne become Batman?", Chris asks the question "Can Bruce Wayne live a normal life and still be Batman?" She refuses to settle for the "status quo" as DC states it and instead, gives us a fresh and meaningful perspective into the lives of a group of people who, while they dress up in brightly-colored spandex and fight crime, also attempt to lead normal, productive lives. She allows us a glimpse into the world of the Rogues, not just the homicidal sociopathic tendencies, but also into the insane world of Rogue social life, complete with fractured relationships, theme-crime writer's block, Christmas parties, and karaoke nights. She not only allows the characters to act, think and feel, she allows them to *live*.

There were many things that drew me to Chris's series: her comedic style, her witty dialogue, her captivating action and her intelligent ideas. However, what really captured me and kept me coming back was her attention to the characters themselves. Over the course of the series, we have seen each of the characters grow, not only

psychologically, but emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Chris is not afraid to let these characters evolve, and through that daring, she breathes new life into them, making true 3-dimensional people out of these 2-dimensional characters. In a word, she makes them *Real*.

—**MyklarCure**

Author of the Cat-Tales spinoff series, *JLain't*

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# A GIRL'S GOTTA PROTECT HER REPUTATION

---

"HAHAHAHAHA!"

It was my instant messenger. Riddler set this system up for the "villain community" to keep in touch. I thought it was silly then, and I think it's silly now. But Harvey convinced me to go along. Every few months, one of those nutjobs comes up with an idea to do something social. Usually it's Harley. Usually it's bowling.

I never go. I'm not a joiner. Harvey bugs me about it. He's probably my best friend among the Rogues Gallery, a big brother-type, but he can be a real pest sometimes. Several months ago he called me:

...: *You going to this Karaoke Happy Hour or not? ...*

"Oh yes, I long to hear Eddie Nigma and Ivy singing *You Don't Bring Me Flowers Anymore*."

...: *You're getting a reputation, Selina. They're calling you a real prude. ...*

"Harvey, have you ever SEEN my costume?"

...: *Come, just for an hour. It'll be fun. ...*

"I don't want to. It's stupid. You just want me to come because you know it will be stupid and you're going to have a terrible time. So you want me there to have a terrible time with you."

...: *It'll be fun. If we didn't think so, why would we be going? ...*

"Cause the coin came up heads."

*Shit, why did I say that?*, I thought. The line was eerily silent.

"Harvey, I'm sorry, that was thoughtless and mean. You put me on the defensive—never a good idea—and I lashed out. I'm really sorry."

I waited.

...: *Y'know, Selina, you could make a bit of an effort to at least appear to be one of us. If there were half the stories about me and Batman as there are about you, I'd be very worried. ...*

I smiled—I hoped it would come through in my voice as I said, "Harvey, if there were *any* of the stories about you and Batman like there are about me, we'd *ALL* be worried."

He laughed. I was forgiven. But I was definitely on the hook for Karaoke Happy Hour. I went. I'll admit, it wasn't that bad. Hugo Strange was truly creepy. I figure he has a frequent-renter card at Sleezo-Video. In trying to avoid him, I wound up talking most of the night to Ed Nigma, who's actually a fairly interesting guy in his lucid moments. He doesn't have many of them, but something about Harley Quinn crooning *Don't Cry for Me Argentina* brought on a moment of clarity. So it wasn't

absolutely hell on earth, but it's nothing I'd want to make a habit of. That's why Harvey suggested going along with this IM idea.

...: *If you agree to a few of the little things,...* he said, ...: *it's easier to say no when they come up with something really obnoxious.* ...

"More obnoxious than karaoke?"

...: *There was talk of you hosting Thanksgiving dinner.* ...

"Okay, okay."

So I had this instant messenger on my desktop now. I knew it was only a matter of time before Batman found out and showed up on the channel. I dismissed the idea that that's why I installed it. Anyway, it was on my desktop and it was cackling: *HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!* Joker, obviously. I opened the dialogue window:

Catty, babe, what're you gonna do about this?

Catty? Babe? Who the hell did he think he's talking to?

A second line of text appeared:

That Carlton woman's got to be stopped, damnit. This is making us all look bad.

He was talking about Bronwyn Carlton, new reporter at the Gotham Post. Now the Post is a tabloid scandal sheet. The stories they print about Batman and the Rogues are *completely and utterly false* and everyone in the super-community knows it. 90% of everybody else knows it too. But when one of their libelous flights of fancy is appealing, everybody can make quite a distasteful show of *pretending* to believe it. That was the case when they printed a story that Batman and I were having a torrid affair (on the roof of police headquarters no less!), when they reported Nightwing was our love child (How old do these people think I am?) Oh, and my personal all-time favorite: that the time I helped the JLA with Prometheus, I just happened to be at the WatchTower because I wanted to try a zero-gravity three-way with Batman and Black Canary!

I typed...

Everyone knows the Post is a scandal rag, Jack. Or do you think Plastic Man is really Elvis?

But the things they're saying, Catty, you gotta protect your rep. fix this. no joke.

Pitied by the Joker.

This was serious.

The last time Jack spoke to me, he threatened to paste one of those deathsmiles on every cat in the city. He had just found out I had not really killed Batman as I'd told him when I dropped him at Arkham last year. What can I say; the clown has no sense of humor. Hee-hee.

And now he pitied me.

And it was all because Bronwyn Carlton and her chicks-behind-bars editor decided to name some (homely) Jane Doe in the county jail as "CATWOMAN CAPTURED!" They followed with a perfectly ludicrous series of articles about her arrest, abuse at the hands of the authorities, brainwashing by Harley Quinn (Harley Quinn? HARLEY QUINN?!?!? **HARLEY FUCKING QUINN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**). And finally, a supposed interview with this fictitious Catwoman, including her confession to a number of

robberies that would have been absolutely beneath my dignity to bother with, for a payoff that wouldn't cover my tips.

I had decided to quietly ride out this ridiculous episode just like all the others. How bad could it be, right? Well, it wasn't *that* bad—until I ran into Batman on the roof of a brokerage house.

Usually old Tall, Dark and Spooky will open with something grandly pompous. This time he just stood there, staring. And the side of his mouth twitched in an odd way.

"I thought you were in jail," he said and his mouth did that weird twitch again. And I thought: *Oh Jesus, it's a SMILE. He's SMILING. He thinks this IS FUNNY!*

I was so stunned I just let him take the bag... bearer bonds... Didn't hiss. Didn't scratch. I know what you're thinking and you're right: I dropped the ball and I'm damn lucky he didn't slap the cuffs on me right then...

Shit.

It suddenly occurred to me: Batman reads the Post.

He'd never made any mention of those earlier stories and I guess I figured he hadn't seen them... Ho boy, I'll worry about that one tomorrow.

Problem was, after a stunt like CATWOMAN CAPTURED what do you do for a topper? Ol' Ms. Carlton and her editor discovered my name sells papers, so now, so said tonight's edition, I'd gone and shot Commissioner Gordon. Yeah, like if I had a loaded gun he'd really be the one lying in a pool of blood right now.

Jack was right, this Carlton woman did have to be stopped. I just needed to figure out how...

Like all well-trained butler/valets, Alfred Pennyworth ran a hot iron over the newspaper he placed each morning on his employer's breakfast tray. Laying down the tray on a bedside table, he then opened the curtains, ran a hot bath, and laid out appropriate clothing for the day ahead in a small dressing room adjacent to the bath. He then returned to the bedroom. If Bruce Wayne had arisen, he would wish his employer a good morning. If he had not, Alfred would pour the coffee and make relentlessly polite smalltalk until Bruce accepted the inevitable and got out of bed. This morning, on returning to the bedroom Alfred discovered that Bruce was indeed awake, had unfolded the aforementioned paper, poured his coffee, and spat a mouthful of it all over the Entertainment section. Still coughing, he was simultaneously trying to mop up the puddle with a napkin and read the soggy words beneath.

The incident was caused by a box labeled Stage Views right beneath the fold:

#### **CATWOMAN PURRS**

They say God writes lousy theatre. They haven't been to Off-Broadway's Hijinx Playhouse lately, where Selina Kyle, purporting to be one of Gotham's most mysterious costumed nightcrawlers, The Catwoman, is currently starring in a one-woman show: Cat Tales. For nearly two hours, the buxom but athletic brunette, draped in a skin-tight purple catsuit that

leaves precious little to the imagination, enthralled the audience with anecdotes about a nightlife we all know exists in this city but which few of us have seen firsthand.

Ms. Kyle is certainly a striking figure. She purrs, hisses, meows and probably scratches with the best of them. She does a mean backflip. And this reviewer certainly wouldn't want to find himself in a dark alley on the receiving end of the claws she brandishes or the whip she wields with expert precision. The tales she tells about Gotham after dark and the figures that populate it are both amusing and insightful. But is she really Catwoman? That's the question on everyone's lips at intermission.

"If she isn't, she's taking a hell of a risk," says one camp. "The real Catwoman isn't likely to approve of someone else profiting from her name and image."

"If she is, she's taking a hell of a risk," comes the reply, "publicly confessing to any number of felonies six nights a week, two matinees."

It's the uncertainty that sells tickets, so of course there's nothing in the show to settle the question once and for all. To be sure, Ms. Kyle's monologue includes some knowledgeable details about breaking into an unnamed penthouse, but it wouldn't take much research into security systems to construct such a narrative once the facts of a crime were known. If authorities did charge Ms. Kyle and she claimed to be merely an actress playing a role, they'd be hard-pressed to prove otherwise.

Of course, the next most-asked question about this show is "What about Batman?" (*continued on E-5*)

Alfred was able to read this much over Bruce's shoulder. With the superhuman restraint heaven grants to English butlers, he resisted the urge to tear the paper from Bruce's fingers and turn to page E-5. Bruce looked up at him, seemingly waiting for a comment.

"Quite an unexpected development, sir."

"Quite," Bruce muttered sourly.

"Would you know, er, if this lady is who she claims?"

"How on Earth would I know that, Alfred? We fight, we wear masks; we don't exchange business cards."

"Indeed, sir."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, Old Friend, it's just... my mind's juggling a thousand possibilities right now."

"Of course, sir."

"Call whatshername—Gretta."

"Brandi, sir."

"Brandi. Cancel our date tonight. And get me a ticket for this thing."

"Sir, if you're going to be attending the theatre, why not bring the young lady along?"

Why indeed, thought Bruce.

"No, break the date," he answered, then offered an explanation although none was asked for. "I don't know what to expect from this thing, and I don't want anybody close by gauging my reaction." He wasn't sure if he was telling the truth or not, and it made him uncomfortable. "No, wait—call Dick, see if he'd like to go. Get two tickets if he does."

Alfred was perhaps the only person on the planet who could truly challenge the man behind the Bat at these moments, and part of that particular privilege was knowing when not to question. Much as Bruce's logic seemed bizarre and arbitrary, he made the required calls without comment.



Bruce Wayne sat in the audience at the Hijinx Playhouse, displaying the icy poker face that Batman assumed at JLA meetings. The Hijinx was a trendy off-Broadway blackbox, a holdover from the 60s when Gothamites went to experimental theatre the way they go to restaurants today. It was not the sort of establishment that had private boxes.

Bruce couldn't help but feel a little exposed, sitting in the middle of a row of people as the woman onstage told story after story about the very private world of Gotham City "After Dark and 40 stories up."

He knew the woman the program called Selina Kyle was the real Catwoman: The voice was right... the hair, long and dark, that escaped through the bottom of the cowl... the costume was perfect... the body was perfect. It was her. The detective in him insisted he did not know this for certain. She could be an opportunistic civilian who had encountered Catwoman in some way and had an eye for detail and mimicry. But surely anyone other than the real Catwoman would have opted for the look of that absurd imposter in the tabloids. That was the image the public knew. But this...

This was the Catwoman he knew:

*Modern architecture sucks, by the way. 87 stories of plate glass—boring. Now the older buildings, Stanford White—beautiful. Neoclassic lines, plenty of curves and molding—and footholds.*

She gave her "aren't I a naughty girl" grin. The audience laughed appreciatively. Bruce didn't. That was his grin. He didn't like her sharing it with 98 strangers.

*So I've got the trinkets. Brunhilda is still snoring away. Cujo, the killer schnauzer, is still locked in the bathroom. I close the safe, restore the power, slide the window back exactly the way it was—8 minutes flat. Personal best for a private residence where I didn't have the floorplan going in. I drop down to the alley—and there... he... is... The Batman. Caped Crusader. Dark Knight. Guardian of Gotham. Crime Fighter extraordinaire. I am Vengeance, I am Justice, I am in desperate need of a personality transplant... Batman.*

*In full regalia—looking like Sir Lancelot dipped in tar but not yet feathered.*

*And he speaks: "I don't think those jewels belong to you."*

...

*I salute you, World's Greatest Detective.*

The audience loved it.

Bruce couldn't help flashing on every single time he'd urged her to forego crime and find work in the legitimate world. Somehow this wasn't what he had in mind.

He sat stunned as this woman who never failed to flirt with and proposition him at every encounter, who seemed to feed on the sexual tension between them—this woman who gave every indication that the attraction and even admiration he felt for her was mutual—publicly roasted him for the amusement of strangers. She critiqued his manner, his voice, his appearance, his vocabulary, and his taste in cars. She called him humorless, paranoid, obsessive, smug, melodramatic, and pompous.

She told, in viciously witty detail, a tale of an early meeting when she had offered herself to him and he turned her down. The audience booed.

She told another that was a composite of several meetings when they almost moved beyond banter, but somehow never did.

She told an *utterly untrue* account of a time he supposedly used her feelings for him to manipulate and humiliate her.

The boos became hisses.

Bruce felt his cheeks grow warm.

Was this really what she thought of him?

Her taunts and his parries were part of the game, weren't they? Okay, the game had gone on for a good few rounds, and maybe if you looked at the pattern a certain way, a different and an unfortunate connotation might be... he looked up. Catwoman had stepped off the stage and was walking through the audience on the armrests. She stood now with one leg on his armrest, bent over and spoke directly to him:

*I mean, don't you think I have a nice body?*

He nodded. More laughter.

*If I came up to you and said "Hey, wild night of passion, no names and no strings, and I'll even bring the whip if you want." You'd say, what?*

The laughter rose.

*"Dear Penthouse..." she prompted.*

An explosion of riotous laughter ripped through the auditorium.

*So now I'm supposed to have had a thing with Nightwing. Can you believe it? I mean, he's a nice looking kid and all, but, c'mon, he is a kid. Some folks say he was the first Robin. Remember little Robin? I'm not saying I believe that, but it's possible, right?*

A few people applauded to signal their agreement.

*And I'm supposed to be getting it on with this guy. I mean, can you picture it?*

She sidled up to a post at the side of the stage and fingered it with a claw as she often did the insignia on Batman's chest.

*"Hey there, Handsome, let's get dangerous."*

Then she answered for it as if it were the imaginary Nightwing:

*"Why Mrs. Robinson, are you trying to seduce me?"*

The audience roared.

*But seriously, the gossip, it's a cost of doing business this way, and I try to take it all with a sense of humor as I think you've all seen tonight. But c'mon now...*

And from the pouch in her costume where she normally stashed her safe-cracking tools, Catwoman produced a copy of the Gotham Post, with a headline in second coming type screaming **OFFICER DOWN!** She paused while the audience took it in.

*I'm sure you all saw this.*

*In the past year, according to this fine publication, I'm supposed to have been arrested, convicted, imprisoned, tortured, drugged, brainwashed, escaped, kidnapped, escaped again, captured again, driven mad, shot Gordon, forced his retirement, cut my hair, got a new costume, had plastic surgery and a breast reduction.*

*And all while I'm cleaning my oven.*

*Well, here I am folks. You can see for yourselves about the hair, the costume, and a-hem, my other physical qualities.*

*You can also see that I am not currently incarcerated. I hope that you'll see from our talk tonight that the little chippie who's supposed to have been caught, drugged, brainwashed, et cetera, et cetera just isn't me.*

*As for my mental health, well, I'm not going to stand here in skin-tight purple leather and insist on my sanity, so—Hey, where's my boyfriend in the fourth row? You there—*

She pointed at Bruce, then posed with hands in the air like a gymnast after dismount.

*Sweetie, what do you think, am I just as sane as you are?*

196 eyes turned to Bruce. What could he do but nod. She nodded back, laughing at him or herself or what exactly he wasn't sure.

*I'm a perfectly healthy, well-adjusted catburglar who taunts my uptight priggish adversary with my considerable physical charms in ways that blur the line between sexual harassment and performance art! Right? Nothing crazy about that!*

The audience cheered.

*Okay then. Let me say this to Ms. Bronwyn Carlton and her followers at the Gotham Post: If I wanted to make a project of ruining Commissioner Gordon, I wouldn't need a gun.*

She produced another newspaper with a conservative headline and columns of tight tiny type that read: **PRESIDENT LUTHOR ADDRESSES FOREIGN DIGNITARIES**

*This paper, despite its 150-years of service in which it has amassed 84 Pulitzer Prizes, has roughly 1/8 the circulation of the Post: "In Japan, criminals expect to be caught. The closure and conviction rate in Tokyo, a city more than twice the size of Gotham, with no Batman, is 92.4 percent. Gotham City's 8 year high was 68 percent. 41 percent if you exclude apprehensions by costumed vigilantes. Conclusion: Commissioner James Gordon runs the most incompetent and corrupt police force in this country and may in fact be the most inept peace officer in the Western Hemisphere." ...Wow.*

She clicked her tongue and considered the paper in her hand.

*That's really bad. I'd retire too if the President said that about me.*

*So, now that we've established that even though I have big breasts, I'm still smart enough to come up with more creative and less lethal ways to strike at an enemy than shooting them, let's take a short intermission. And when y'all come back, I'll tell you about the night the Rogues Gallery went to a karaoke bar.*

The lights came up, and a shaken Bruce Wayne retired to the lobby to hyperventilate into a paper bag until the second act began.



Dick Grayson was in the Batcave beneath Wayne Manor, shooting pool with Wally and Kyle... when his pool cue turned into a garden hose and the pool table morphed into an oversized viewing screen. Batman's face appeared on it, in an extreme close up, like Big Brother: "YOU'VE LET ME DOWN, SON," he intoned as a whirring tone sounded...

...:Twitterbringngng:...:

"Brainiac has analyzed pizza delivery patterns from Gotham City, Hudson University..."

...:Twitterbringngng:...:

"...Bludhaven, and the Titans Tower and deduced Dick Grayson is Nightwing...  
:Twitterbringngng:... Tim, Barbara and I are all exposed because of your midnight cravings for pineapple and anchovies..."

...:Twitterbringngng:::Twitterbringngng:...:

Dick's eyes flew open and his arm shot out to smash the bedside alarm.

...:Twitterbringngng:::Twitterbringngng:...:

Oh hell, it was the phone. Who the hell would be calling at... He picked up the battered but not beaten alarm clock... 5:15. He picked up the receiver.

"HelloBruce, noyoudidn'twakeme," he said without pausing for the other party to speak, "I only got in an hour ago and who needs more than forty-five minutes sleep a night."

...: Funny. Secure the line. ...:

What did I expect, thought Dick. "Oh gee, sorry kid, I never consider the possibility that other people have lives when they're not acting as my supporting cast." Aloud he said:

"Line's secure."

...: I'm coming into Bludhaven. Thought we could have lunch. ...:

"O-kay." (Did I really have to secure the line for this?) "Where and when?"

...: I'm at that diner across from your building. ...:

"NOW? That's not lunch. That won't even be breakfast for an hour. That won't be MY breakfast for another—yawn. Crud, I can't do math before I brush my teeth."

...: Dick, I came to talk. ...:

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

As he dressed, Dick calculated that even with the fastest of the civilian cars, Bruce would have had to cut Batman's patrol short by almost 2 hours to be in Bludhaven now. There was no way he'd do that for anything less than a cosmic crisis. "Dick, I came to talk," he had said. Bruce wanting to talk could indeed be the portent of a cosmic crisis. Maybe different timestreams were converging again. On the off chance that this was a chatty, sociable Bruce from an alternate dimension, Dick greeted him with a little harmless smalltalk:

"So how was the show last night?"

The scowl made it pretty clear that this was not a chatty and sociable Bruce. Dick backpedaled.

"I, uh, thought Alfred said something about you going to—never mind. What did you want to see me about?"

"Am I a self-absorbed, self-righteous, inflexible prig?"

Dick suddenly felt like he was playing a LucasArts Adventure Game. He imagined four possible responses to Bruce's question appearing under his chin:

- That's how I addressed your Fathers' Day card.
- Is that prig with an "R" Yes.
- Why are you having new stationery made up?
- YES YES YES! IN THE NAME OF ALL THINGS HOLY AND TRUE, YOU ARE THE KING AND LORD OF THE LAND OF SELF-RIGHTEOUS PRIGS!

And no matter which response the player chose, the character would say: "Why no, not at all. Why do you ask?"

Dick signaled to LuAnn, his favorite waitress, and ordered a bagel and coffee. Then he looked back at Bruce as if this, the most forceful personality in the JLA, might have forgotten his question. It didn't work. The scowl had deepened from the *Is-this-the-best-you-can-do* (Bruce reading his 9th grade history report) to *We-can-do-this-the-easy-way-or-the-hard-way* (Batman staring down street thugs).

"Yeah, I guess that description isn't wholly inaccurate, as applied to you, you know, by someone who felt you... were that way. Maybe."

"Is cop out one word or two?"

"See, that's the kind of thing you do that doesn't give people warm and fuzzies. You put me totally on the spot asking this unimaginably impossible question. Bruce, what the hell's going on? You show up here at the crack of dawn and drag me out of bed, I still don't know why, and you put me on the spot with this I don't know what of a—"

Bruce lifted his palm, fingertips extended, for silence. It was a strange gesture, something an ordinary person might do if they got the gist of what you were saying but had to think through their response. That wasn't Bruce. He just cut you off when he got the gist. And he never had to search for a response.

"I really wish you'd come to the theatre last night," he said finally.

Dick started to laugh, then looked incredulously at Bruce.

"You mean this is really about *that play*? Alfred made it sound like a hoot, but I wasn't going to drive all the way into the city just to see... So, what was it anyway, was it really Catwoman?"

"It was."

Dick grinned uncontrollably.

"Of course it was. Who else could get under your skin so thoroughly that you cut a patrol short to drive up here *AND TALK*."

"I know you don't like her, but could we just put that aside for a minute and—"

"Bruce, I like her just fine, considering she's a thief and all. But this thing you have about her, it's just too good for me to leave alone. It's like the only thing I can really rib you about. You love the wrong person; it makes you so *HUMAN*. You don't think I'm going to give that up, do you?"

Bruce sighed. He didn't even bother to challenge the use of the L-word.

"The first act was bad enough. She told... anecdotes... about us."

Dick raised an eyebrow.

"No, not racy ones. Just accurate. Hearing it all from her point of view, it was... disconcerting."

"And the second act?"

"Worse. She speculated how various figures in Gotham might react to her show. She did Two-Face, Joker, Riddler, Scarecrow, Ivy, Batgirl, Huntress, and Robin. I never realized she was so good at mimicry." He paused. "It was, it was actually pretty funny."

Dick stared, not quite believing his eyes or ears as Bruce chuckled.

"She imagined how Mad Hatter might rewrite her stories about me in the style of Lewis Carroll: 'First the cat kissed the bat, said we'd have such a ball, but that isn't all, no that's not all at all. If the bat kissed the cat, lo Original sin! One'd wonder just which Catnip patch he'd been in!'"

"That's more Dr. Seuss than Lewis Carroll."

Bruce gave him a dirty look, and again Dick backpedaled:

"I like it. So then what? Did she maybe speculate how Batman might react?"

"No."

"She didn't predict you waking me up at five in the morning next day, did she?"

"She said I was probably too much of an insufferable, self-absorbed egomaniac to even see the show, but if I did show up one night in her dressing room, she'd report back to future audiences with my response."

Dick laughed delightedly.

"So now, if you/Batman do acknowledge the show in some way, she's got a new finale. And if you don't, then you prove that you were too much of a self-absorbed egomaniac to go see it."

Bruce glowered at Dick.

"I'm just quoting you quoting her."

An hour later, as Bruce was driving home, Dick snapped open his cell phone. "Wally, it's Dick. Listen, are you doing anything this weekend? Call Kyle and Clark and the others. I just found out there's a new show in Gotham you're *all* going to want to see."



Raoul's Kafe-Kart had been on the corner of 59th and Madison for as long as anyone could remember. It served espresso, cappuccino and café au lait. Only. No hazelnut mochachino, no whipped cream, no flavored syrups, no oversized Rice Krispies squares. Raoul was there before corporate chains brought gourmet coffee into vogue. He remained while dozens of coffee bars sprung up around him. He would continue long after they had all been replaced with water bars and soup bars and chic boutiques selling eclectic pottery.

Bruce Wayne stopped this morning on the way to a too-early meeting at the Foundation. Raoul didn't see "Bruce Wayne," of course. He saw: Saville Row suit, dark glasses. Double espresso. Raoul had no way of knowing that the hoarse baritone that told him to keep the change was the result of Batman trailing a gun-running operation until after four a.m. when Bruce had to get up for a 9:30 meeting the next day.

Next was a stunning woman: Hermes bag. A dramatic silk scarf with an image of a jewel encrusted panther—the hallmark of a famous Gotham jeweler. A sweatshirt advertising: CAT-TALES at the Hijinx Playhouse. Dark glasses, too. Double espresso. Keep the change. Killer smile.

Some mornings, Gotham was a great place to be...

I took my coffee into the park, balanced it on the bench, and laid out Daily Variety and the Times. This was the choice, the same one I had been facing every day for a week. I opened the Times to the Lifestyle section. There are 8 million people in this city, a little over 4,000 millionaires, dozens of museums, hundreds of galleries, a wholesale diamond district; there had to be something worth purloining that's worthy of my talents.

I glanced at Variety. The show had been running for two months; I'd made my point. I cleared my name. And that was the point of the exercise, after all. I needed to close it and get back to work.

I looked back at the Times: An Egyptian Cat-God exhibit at the museum—*Been there*. Feline jade statuettes at AsiAntiques Gallery—*Done that*.

I peeked at Variety.

I wasn't out to become a star. In the past three weeks, I'd been approached to move the show to Broadway, air it as an HBO special, perform at the White House...

Maya Jaguar God at the University—*promising, but weighs 900 pounds if it weighs an ounce*.

...have my next caper filmed by an Indie film director, write the forward for a 'Cat Who' mystery, Co-host the People's Choice Awards with David Boreanaz....

Canary Diamonds! *Pretty, but hard to fence....*

"Live from Gotham City, it's Saturday Night."

No.

One thing I've learned from this: Show Business is perhaps the one field of human endeavor even more insane than dressing up in wild outfits to commit and/or foil crimes. Back to promising cat targets...

A memorabilia auction: Andrew Lloyd Webber's original working score of the musical CATS. *With a capital C, and that rhymes with D, and that stands for Dull.*

The thing is: now that I'd reestablished my reputation as an unrepentant but not homicidal thief, Catwoman's next caper would have to live up to the celebrated image.

What IS a People's Choice Award, anyway?

... ChatOn Software was moving their corporate headquarters here. Well now, *chaton* is French for kitten but that didn't mean they'd have anything I'd want to take. Besides, if Batman didn't get the feline tie-in... Much as I hate to admit it, stealing can be a chore. The thrill of a perfect heist sweetened with a little bat action is still a better rush than performing in front of any audience, but, let's face it: the legwork sucks.

Okay. Tomorrow the weekend edition would be out. One more day, I vowed, and I WOULD get back on the job.

I turned to Heather Hermoine's gossip column to see who else might have shown up in my audience. It was silly. Whatever heroes or villains had disguised themselves and come to see the show, Heather had no way of knowing who they were.... God, I hated to admit it, but it *was* fun. Doing my bit night after night, never knowing who was out there. Getting the last word on Bats....

The JLA sent flowers to my dressing room last night. I know it was them—the card had six anonymous comments, each in different handwriting:

*"we enjoyed the show, thank you very much"*

*"so glad to see you embrace the path of righteousness"*

*"most amusing"*

*"could you teach me how to weather that stare of his, cause it always makes me cave"*

*"intriguing"*

*"so funny I almost pee'd"*

I wondered if I should mention this in my act. *'The path of righteousness'* and *'almost pee'd.'* Who'd believe me? This is what's protecting the planet, folks, have a nice day.

There was still no response from the belfry. I was pretty sure he'd seen the show twice now, once the first week and once four nights ago. I had that tingly shiver up my spine.

At least Nightwing and Robin admitted they were there. 'Wing showed up at the stage door early the second week with a cheeky "Cucucachoo, Mrs. Robinson!"

Unlike his mentor, the kid has a sense of humor when there aren't diamonds and a grand larceny charge on the line. Good for him, I thought.

"Remember little Robin," he quoted sarcastically from the first act when I mock the idea of he and I as a romantic item.

"Hey, you wore green shorts. You made bad puns. You once said 'Holy Kitty Litter.' It warrants comment."

"You once said 'Purr-fect,'" he reminded me.

*I'll be damned,* I thought, thinking how Batman would've imploded into a black hole if I ever teased him like that. This one gave it right back. He really was a great kid.

"I make it a rule never to get involved with a man if I WAS THERE THE FIRST TIME HIS VOICE CRACKED," I replied. Mentally adding: *Don't have an answer for that, do you ya, Junior.*

He laughed.

"Okay, okay. Look, I just wanted to let you know I'd seen it and it's a great show."

I smiled back.

"Thanks... So, has Daddy been here yet?"

His grin morphed into a truly Batlike stonewall.

"You won't get your new finale through me. If he sees it, and if he wants to respond, that'll be his choice. I will tell you that Robin has seen it, and he liked your Joker and Ivy impersonations at the end. But he thought Scarecrow and Two-Face were over the top, and he thinks you should add Harley 'cause he always thought that Marilyn Monroe squeak-laugh she does is funny."

I stared. It suddenly occurred to me that the next rooftop encounter with these people is going to be very, very weird.



I'd disconnected the venthood, lowered myself into the power distribution venue, and began redirecting current to deactivate the motion-detectors without signaling a power outage. It's time-consuming but brainless work, and I got to thinking about my history with this institution, the oldest and most prestigious museum in Gotham City. I've documented eight separate ways in over the years. Thanks to me, they got it down to four, which is plenty.

I should explain that. In order to get on the museum's A-List to receive invitations to the good openings and receptions, you can't just be a regular member. You have to make a donation of at least \$5,000. Every year I do, happily. This museum is not only Catwoman's chief supplier, it's also a place Selina enjoys going on a rainy afternoon to commune with the Impressionists.

So the \$5,000 donation I don't begrudge them. I've always specified my donations go to the acquisitions fund. More and better art on their walls and in their vault is in both Selina's and Catwoman's best interests. But two years ago, *Impression Sunrise* was stolen—and not by me. It pissed me off more than the time Batman called me “kitten.”

Claude Monet's *Impression Sunrise!* This is THE painting! It launched Impressionism and, in a way, all modern art. The guy who took it came in through the skylight over the sculpture court. I mean, really! How movie-of-the-week can you get? I was pissed. I decided if they didn't tighten up security, every schmuck with a rock-climbing harness could walk off with whatever they wanted. We couldn't have that.

So, in the interests of keeping the masterpieces in the museum's collection exactly where they were for whenever Selina decided to view them or Catwoman decided to take them, I specified that my next donation be used to engage a top security consultant: Foster and Forsythe. I wasn't worried that a review by Foster and Forsythe would cut off all my entries. They can't, really. The Gotham Museum of Art has a complete mock-up of a pyramid inside its walls, a full-size Roman temple, and a loading dock that has to be able to receive monstrously large and heavy antiquities. And all of it has to be kept within very specific temperature ranges. The heating and ventilation requirements alone ensure that I'll always have plenty of options for breaking in, moving around, and getting back out along unexpected pathways.

Within two months, Foster and Forsythe had identified four of my pet ways into the East Wing, and closed a lot of smaller, less-significant gaps in the security setup. That, as I said, still left me with four routes in—which is three more than any self-respecting catburglar needs. Tonight, like picking the parking space at the mall nearest the entrance to your favorite store, I went in through the climate control shell between that pyramid exhibit and the museum's actual roof.

As I lowered myself to the floor, the first sight that greeted me was a magnificent, full-size sculpture of a woman with the head of a lion. At her feet were four life-size statues of cats with jewel-encrusted necklaces. That, I knew, would be Bastet. Not to be confused with Sekhmet, the lion-headed woman in the outer alcove.

You see, the Egyptians understood cats better than any people in history. Bastet came first in their mythology. In the beginning, she was the mother of the savage-faced lion god called Miysis, “Lord of Slaughter.” She was a god of war, of sorcery, associated with the eye of Re, the power of the sun and moon, and the breath of the desert. Over time, the goddess's character became more and more friendly, her sorcery

associated with healing, her motherhood emphasized, she became a protector. And so the fierce and destructive aspects of her character became Sekhmet. Her dark side was recognized as an independent personage. Something about that has always appealed to me...

"That's breaking and entering. You want to stop there, or should I come back in ten minutes once you've added a few counts of burglary?"

The voice and the tingle were unmistakable... Him.

But the words weren't right. I'm the one who plays games. Bats is always direct. I turned to face him.

"Why the choice?" I asked bluntly, "I'm the one who plays games. You're always direct."

He did that quirky thing at the side of his mouth, and I realized I must've sounded just like him right then.

"Look, one of us has to be the straight man," I said, a bit defensive about that sudden lapse into battitude. "If you're not going to do it, there's a vacuum. It has to be filled. So I repeat: Why the unusual opening? Why has it been all of 45 seconds without your trademark threat to 'take me down?' ... And why are you doing that bizarre twitchy thing with the side of your mouth that I assume is a smile?"

A real smile followed. It was possibly the creepiest thing I've ever seen. The creepiest thing I'd ever heard was to follow:

"Because this isn't a crime and for once I'm not going to pretend it is. You want to talk 'whys': Why break into this painfully obvious exhibit the very first night your show is closed, huh? This isn't a burglary; it's a date. You wanted to talk to me, Kitten, well here I am. What do you want to say?"

I stared. It may be fair to say: I gaped.

The awful thing is he was right. For Catwoman, Egyptian cat gods are a hackneyed cliché. I needed another Bast statuette like I need a hole in the head ...I realized at that moment that I was even *thinking* in clichés, which was disturbing... And Batman was staring. I guessed the favor of an early reply was required. I'd been facing off against him for years. I'd never feared him like the others do, and I had never, *ever* felt this... *UNCOMFORTABLE*. I heard my voice saying the first thing that came into my head:

"Shouldn't we be fighting or something? I mean, it's midnight. It's a museum. You wear a cape. Isn't this all a little talky?"

"Talky? You've been standing on a stage every night for almost four months telling stories about us."

"You know why I had to do that," I hissed, "You of all people must understand the importance of—*respect*—for the masked persona."

"Yes, yes." He sounded annoyed, like I was deliberately missing the point. "As far as protecting your image goes, it was ingenious. It's just—did you have to drag 'us' into it that way?"

Oh. My. God.

I suddenly clued in that this was the dressing room visit I'd been dreading and hoping for.

"Well... Maybe I didn't *have to*—but I think the audience would've felt pretty shortchanged if I'd dodged so central an issue, don't you think. If it's any consolation,

after going over it 500 times, I don't understand it—us—what we do—whatever it is, any better now than I did before."

He scowled. I gave a flirtatious smile. At least that much was back to normal. Any second now, he'd grab my wrists and say how he's going to take me down.

"How are we ever going to get back to where we were?" he asked.

I'd been getting big laughs on the inanities of our relationship for 15 sold-out weeks, but I've got to say, at that second, I no longer found it funny. Something snapped.

"Why in hell would we want to? Christ, how many years... how many *years* has it been that you haven't noticed 'where we were' *SUCKED!* Do you think I *ENJOY* being taken to the brink and back time after time after time after time after time? Do you think I get off on that 'Thanks but no thanks' martyr routine of yours?"

He looked mystified.

"I honestly thought you enjoyed it. You certainly looked like you were having fun."

"Maybe I was, maybe it was exciting—the first five or six times—but it got old. Don't you think it's gotten old?"

The twitch-smile returned.

"Honestly? No. Maybe you've never noticed who else is on my dancecard. With week after week of twisted riddles, giant flytraps, fear toxins, SmileX gas, megalomaniacs, mutant assassins, not to mention the garden variety murderers, rapists, muggers, mobsters and drug cartels, I've always found our little scuffles to be a welcome and refreshing change."

"Most people that want a change would, you know, take a vacation. Long weekend in the mountains, maybe some skiing. Or snorkeling. Surfing's good. Some just lie under a palm tree eating those big shrimp, sipping frothy drinks with umbrellas."

"I don't."

I felt a quirky twitch starting on the left side of my own mouth.

"Workaholic, I take it?"

"That's what they tell me."

"So you'd actually be quite pleased if I grabbed, eh, that bronze calico with the ruby collar and took off for a sprint across the rooftops?"

"No. I wouldn't."

"But you'd get as closed to pleased as you CAN get."

Long silence. He was considering it. I could see the answer in his eyes: "Perhaps." But he couldn't say it out loud. That would be admitting too much. For some reason I decided to let him off the hook, changed the subject. I also shifted my weight in the direction of the altar with the calico.

"I had it all worked out you know..." <step> "...what I would say if I found you in my dressing room—so it would sound good later..." <shift> "...it started with 'is that a batarang on your belt or are you just happy to see me.'"

I gave him the naughty-grin. He loves the grin.

He took a step closer, closing the distance between us. He was as close to me as I was to the altar with the calico.

"This," he said, "is the part where I'm the killjoy, right? Wet blanket? Stuffed shirt? Pompous self-righteous prig?"

“Well, if you want things back to the ‘way they were,’ then yeah, that’d be the way to go.”

“Is that what I do in the scene you had scripted?”

“Well, if you really want to set up the perfect bit for my finale, in the show I’m no longer doing by the way, you put on your best Bud Abbott/Harvey Corman/straightman face... Yep that’s the one, you got that down... And you say ‘So Catwoman, doesn’t it bother you that you’re mostly thought of as a busty, leggy sex kitten?’”

“So Catwoman, doesn’t it bother you that you’re mostly thought of as a busty, leggy sex kitten?”

He did it. He actually did it. No hesitation, not a smirk. And not the slightest hint that the great Dark Knight was above this totally silly exchange.

“Hey,” I answered on cue, “We have a killer clown, birds and umbrellas, schizophrenic lawyer, Alice in Wonderland, Shape Shifter, Fearguy, Mutant Plants, *and Sex*...which would you pick?”

You keep setting them up, Handsome; I’ll keep bringing ‘em home.

The mouth twitch returned. I got him.

I edged towards the altar again, he countered. It wasn’t ‘where we were.’ This was a new place.

But we can’t change too much too fast.

# NORMAL

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I had the dream again.

I wish my subconscious would clue in that “The Relationship” is just a part of my public image and that Batman and I are nothing more than two adversaries who enjoy suggestive banter instead of spitting venom like other enemies do.

And yet every night since the museum, I’ve had this dream, the details of which are not worth remembering. All I know is it involves Him, and when I get up the gal in the mirror’s cheeks have this rosy flush going.

I’ve tried to explain (as well as you can explain things to the face in the mirror while brushing your teeth) that *Yes*- we got some issues out in the open that night, and *Yes*- our meetings since then have been a tad more lighthearted (if not downright playful at times). But that is just a normal reaction to having at last broken out of the absurd rut we were in. Like actors who’ve been on the same TV series season after season, we’re excited to finally move on and do something new. It means nothing beyond that. <Rinse> Men who dress up as bats and fight crime do not get cuddly with women who dress as cats and commit crimes, no matter how much they hint otherwise. <Gargle> So you may as well just stop rerunning that dream—or at least let me remember some of the details, ‘cause <spit> you’re obviously getting a better night’s sleep than I am.

I caught a glimpse of her reaction as I stepped into the shower: “*Right,*” she was thinking, “*anyone that wakes up with this half-smile and rosy glow is not going to be taking advice from a tightass with pillowhair that lectures her own reflection through a foam of Colgate and Scope.*”

“*Bitch,*” I thought. Since there’s no mirror inside my shower, I explained to the luffa that Batman is what we call ‘in the box’ in his thinking. He sees the world in black and white, good guys and bad guys, and there is just no way he can let himself develop this relationship beyond meaningless flirtation. If you ask me, that certainty that nothing will happen is the only reason he can allow himself the flirtation. “The bat has baggage,” I concluded emphatically. The luffa sponge offered no comment.

I threw on some clothes and crossed the street to Raoul’s coffee cart. I used to think being a night person precluded being part of Gotham –A.M., but I’ve learned that I rather enjoy watching the city come to life at the start of a new day. At first the streets are empty except for a few third-shifters heading home, maybe a half-dozen windows with lights on and silhouetted movement. Then the service people start to appear, then the lone jogger, a newsstand rolls open, another pair of joggers, and then within about fifteen minutes there are a dozen mini-dramas in progress involving school children, rollerbladers, commuters, delivery trucks, and street vendors.

Raoul at the coffee cart had a girl with him today, maybe 13 or 14 years old, too young to be an employee. It's a one-man operation anyway. I could see she didn't want to be there; she all but growled as she handed me my coffee. I told her to keep the change. When she smiled at her tip I could see the resemblance—gotta be his daughter. He wants to pass on the business, I thought as I headed down the street, and she wants none of it. Judging by the dramatic red and black of her sweatshirt and shorts combination, I figured her dream right now was to be a fashion designer; she thought selling coffee on a streetcorner was a drag. When she finds out how much tuition costs, she'll appreciate what Dad makes with that high-volume low-overhead cart in an upscale neighborhood off the park.

A suit in a hurry brushed past me. I know the type: from one of the bedroom communities across the river, he gets off his train two or three stops early to grab a tall cappuccino at Raoul's. It's not that the coffee is THAT exceptional, but it's a ritual. He likes to be seen walking those last few blocks to the office. It's a pedestrian city and this makes him feel a part of it, even though he sleeps in the 'burbs.

People who think Gotham is a huge impersonal place have never lived here. Every neighborhood is a village. I stopped for a paper and a loaf of bread on my way back. Pete at the newsstand and Giovanni at the bakery both noticed my coffee cup from Raoul's and asked if I saw Melanie, which I learned was the girl's name, helping her father and isn't she a beauty, going to be a heartbreaker someday that one is.

I mentally patted myself on the back for correctly doping out the father-daughter scenario. The way I figure it, Batman may be a great detective when it comes to crime, but he'd have never noticed something like that. Ordinary people like Raoul and Melanie aren't pertinent to his crusade.

As I returned to my apartment, Nick the doorman called after me as I stepped onto the elevator: He ran over with an envelope that had fallen from my coat pocket. I opened it on the ride up and read:

*Good morning, Kitten*

*You always get to pick the time and place. That's patently unfair.*

*Tonight, 9PM. Roof of the opera house.*

*I'll be there if you will, unless a real crime intervenes.*

It was signed with the silhouette of an impossibly arrogant flying mouse.

I read it again. And again. And once more. The doors opened and Nick looked in, concerned: I realized I'd missed my stop and the elevator had returned to the lobby. I smiled like an idiot and pushed the button again.

What did he mean "unless a 'real' crime intervenes?" What were my crimes, imaginary?

From what seemed like a hundred years ago, I heard the echo of my mother's voice: "Don't be a tease, Selina. You lead a man on for so long, he's going to get the idea that he can take liberties. I know you think you can handle anything, but believe me, you too can lose control of a situation."

Oh mom, if you only knew.

**8:55 PM.**

Two blocks from the Opera House.

I repeated to myself for the 600<sup>th</sup> time this hour that curiosity is a notoriously fatal flaw for my kind. The streets were still bustling with people. It was only barely dark enough to be darting over rooftops. But I had to know what he was up to.

As I approached the roof, I saw what looked very like Batman sitting on a thick blanket laid out near the famous rotunda. *SITTING* isn't something I've ever pictured him doing. It's not as bizarre as seeing him smile, but it's not quite right.

"You came," he said, not mincing words as usual. "I wasn't sure you would."

"If I didn't come, I wouldn't be able to tell you: Don't ever call me 'Kitten.' So what are we doing here at this indecently early hour?"

"We're eavesdropping on a dress rehearsal."

"Let me guess, *Die Fledermaus*."

"Not at all. A program of assorted arias by Giuseppe Verdi. Unlike some of you, I don't have this sad need to make everything I do revolve around my namesake."

"Oh really? Care to explain the car, the signal, the batarang and the target on your chest."

The opening strains of a familiar melody from below saved him thinking up a response. It was *La Donna e mobile*, the Duke's famous aria from *Rigoletto*. "Woman is fickle, fickle as the wind, one in a hundred won't..." do something nasty the minute your back is turned. I don't remember the details that well, but that's the gist. I didn't intend to let that pass unremarked:

"Nice choice of music for a first date, Stud. You do realize the guy singing is pretty much the biggest prick in the entire opera and that he's just projecting his own inability to dig in and make a commitment."

He looked stunned—like thieves aren't supposed to know about grand opera?

"Hey," I said, "just cause I wear a catsuit doesn't mean I don't have a grasp of musical history."

"That's not what I was thinking."

"What then?"

"Never mind. *Traviata* is next."

The soaring love duet that followed was a little much, and I was grateful when the tenor somehow offended the soprano and a spectacular diva fit erupted. Soon tenor, soprano and conductor were yelling at each other, and judging by the crash, someone, probably the soprano, threw something at the woodwinds. I stole a peek at Batman and saw he was having the same thought I was: the chaos made a much more appropriate backdrop for a date of ours.

Suddenly, under the blur of impassioned *Italiano fortissimo*, we heard the twanging of heavy coils uncoiling and a startled yelp. Our eyes met for a splitsecond, and I might have said "Go" but there was no need. He'd already taken off.

I glanced down to the streetlevel and noticed a jeweler across the way. Wouldn't that be delicious, I thought. I had a good fifteen minutes until he disentangled whatever stagehand was caught in the rigging.

Plenty of time.

I climbed down the grating, dropped into the alley and examined a window at the rear door. Alarm tape is nothing when you have razor-sharp claws. I let myself in and immediately noticed that one item had not been taken out of the showcases for the

night: it was a porcelain art deco figurine of a woman walking a leopard on a leash. I approached closer and saw sitting next to it... a basket.

For the 601<sup>st</sup> time tonight I reminded myself: cat + curious = bad.

I opened the basket anyway: bottle of Bordeaux, half dozen peaches, loaf of bread and a round of Brie. And another note:

*Selina,*

*You've said I'm inflexible, black and white, and incapable of change or compromise. It seems to me that you're the one declaring absolutes about what I will and will not do. Not to mention doing everything you can to sabotage this relationship before it starts. If you're willing to talk about it, bring the picnic basket up to the roof.*

*Otherwise, enjoy the leopard.*

*B*

That son of a bitch. THAT SON OF A BITCH!

I reread the note. I had to force my brain to associate meaning with the words. I felt lightheaded and realized it was because I'd forgotten to breathe. I took a deep breath and the intake of air going in collided midway down my chest with a welling of rage wanting to come out. The collision seemed to stop time while I thought...

Normal people, people like Raoul from the coffee cart and Pete at the newsstand, they think people like me must have split personalities. That's the only way they can make sense of being one person during the day and becoming another at night just by changing clothes and putting on a mask.

Freud thought that everybody's mind breaks up into different parts. He called them the Id (primal instinctive stuff), Superego (Conscience, Ethics and such) and the Ego doing an all out balancing act in between. Psychologists don't think much of Freud these days, but standing there with time stopped and a note from Batman in my trembling hand, I was a convert. Because I was conscious of three distinct thoughts coming from three independent parts of my brain with equal intensity:

1. ID: urge to claw Batman into 210 lbs of ground chuck.
2. SUPEREGO: need to return to the roof and hear what he has to say.
3. EGO: concurred on returning to the roof but realized ID would see it as a loss of face. Needed to find a way past the rage and the pride to find a rationale we could all live with... found one in the notion that the note was something of a challenge. If I didn't hear him out, it proved his assertion that I was the one stuck thinking in the box, throwing up roadblocks because I was afraid of letting this thing develop.

Ego then replayed my comment on Rigoletto's Duke: *"He's just projecting his own inability to dig in and make a commitment."*

ID said *Nice going, Selina, you just had to show off, didn't you.*

I returned to the roof.

Batman didn't comment on my return or the basket. But he did have two glasses, a corkscrew and a cheese knife laid out on the blanket.

I had no idea what to say. In this line of work, the usual thing to do when the situation gets this spiky is to throw a punch or toss a smoke bomb and get out of Dodge. Neither course of action was really appropriate under these circumstances—which is probably why we'd both gone to such pains to avoid letting things ever get this far.

I suspected Batman is having similar thoughts, since it was taking him two full minutes to open the wine. I've seen this guy remove an armed warhead from a surface-

to-air missile using directions written in Farsi. He couldn't be that baffled by a nickel-plated corkpull from Sharper Image.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed the bottle, opened it, and without knowing what I was going to say, I started to speak.

"Look, I don't know how to ease into it either, so just jump straight to the middle."

He looked grateful, nodded, then gave a little grunt before he spoke:

"Okay," he said finally—and it was that other voice he sometimes used now. The one that would use more words than the gravelly Bat. "Here's how I see it. Loving someone is easy. It's not an act of will, it just happens. You don't decide. Acting on those feelings, that's something else. It takes work. And it's risky. If it doesn't work out, you get hurt. With me so far?"

I nodded, fascinated and astonished he'd put so much thought into this.

"Now the life we've chosen, all of this, it's not easy. And it's not safe. So if we haven't... *acted* on our feelings so far, I don't think anyone can say it's the result of laziness or cowardice on our part, we're neither of us afraid of hard work or taking risks."

"I don't know about that," I said lightly, "There's a difference between the risk of getting shot or running into a burning building, and risking getting your heart broken into tiny little pieces and handed to you."

"This isn't a time to argue, it's a time to listen and go along."

I smiled. I always thought his stubborn refusal to have his views challenged was part of the crimefighting hero thing: the law is the law, goodness prevails and all that jazz. I was beginning to see that it's just his way. He'd be just as adamant telling me the right way to squeeze the toothpaste as he was admonishing my criminal activities. He continued with his theory:

"The thing is, we're not like other people, and we shouldn't try to define our relationship in their terms. What we have might seem odd to them, but so are the costumes, the masks, and the animal-themed monikers. What's 'normal' for them doesn't work for us. Their kind of relationships don't either—I've tried. Making lame excuses to disappear from parties, trying to get physical without showing fresh scars I can't explain... Trying to look at myself in the mirror after one of those all-night heart-to-hearts where she bared her soul and I didn't say one single thing that wasn't a lie..." He picked up his glass and took a sip. It reminded him of something: "Once I took a girl to *Maison de Pierre*, world-famous for their wine cellar. I was patrolling later so I didn't drink. She noticed, didn't say anything, just filed it away. When she got around to breaking up with me, she included in the laundry list of my faults my *dishonesty* in never telling her I was a recovering alcoholic."

I laughed. I couldn't help it.

"But you were dishonest with her," I pointed out. "You were hiding a secret, just not the one she thought."

"Yeah. That was the last intelligent woman I dated. It's been bimbos since then. It's safer. But...not very enjoyable."

"I don't see how it could be, if your prerequisite for dating someone is that she be too dim to notice you're playing her for a fool."

“That’s my point. Normal relationships don’t work for people like us. What we have does. They’ll never understand it. We’ll never be able to make sense out of it using their standards. But it does work. Let’s just accept it for what it is. Whatever it is.”

I was at a total loss. I could see I was supposed to say something, but nothing was there. I thought of the dream I couldn’t remember. I thought of the rosy glow in the mirror and the chill his voice sends down my spine. I thought of how cute it was that he’s as pigheaded in casual conversation as he is threatening to take me down for felony burglary. He was right: it’s not a relationship any sane person would call normal—but it does work. I still didn’t know what to say, so I leaned over, gave his cheek a gentle kiss, and his chest a light scratch.

Selina had driven to her private preserve, The Catitat, in upstate Gotham and sat on a makeshift log bench, stroking her pet ocelot, Nirvana.

There's the kind of thinking you can do in the shower or at the gym—deciding to take a vacation or buy a new car... there's the kind of thinking you can do in your living room over a cup of tea—like balancing the checkbook, or learning conversational Japanese... and then there's the kind of thinking that requires a cat.

Today's thought absolutely required a warm mass of fur curled in her lap, a mass of fur that understood how things were.

Of all the cats, domestic and feral, she'd hooked up with over the years, 'Vana was Selina's favorite. She didn't know if any ocelots purred, but 'Vana did not. She growled. Selina would never forget the first time she heard that soft, low *Grr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrr*, like a small engine trying to turn over. She looked in the direction of the sound to see two amber eyes -and nothing else- peering at her from the black of a small cave.

Never one to fear cats, Selina had remained still, and a creature with the most exquisite markings she'd ever seen emerged slowly from the cave, sniffed her foot and her hand, then hopped into her lap and rubbed her head into Selina's arm to mark this new acquaintance with her scent.

And all the time this obviously friendly feline intoned: *Grr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrr*.

The quandary that demanded a trip to Catitat to commune with the wisest feline of her acquaintance was set off by a blurb in the morning paper, announcing a special collection of secular icons to be auctioned in Gotham City the following week: icons that pre-dated Christianity in eastern Europe, including a very rare series of cats made by an obscure cult called CatWomen.

Clearly, there never had been nor ever would be a prize so tailor-made for the Catwoman's acquisitive claws.

And yet, rather than salivating as she read this news item, Selina felt uncomfortable - and somehow annoyed. It forced her to acknowledge a reality she'd been avoiding for weeks: since she and Batman reached this new understanding, she hadn't been stealing. Oh Catwoman still went out at night, still prowled the neighborhoods she considered her territory, but she hadn't actually broken into anything or absconded with a single object that didn't belong to her.

Worse still, she couldn't justly blame Batman for this disturbing development. He hadn't said anything, hadn't done anything. On the contrary, he said "Let's accept our relationship for what it is."

*Grr-Rrr-Rrr-Rrr...*

She stroked the ocelot's silky fur.

Selina very much wanted to push the whole issue from her mind, but she forced herself to consciously and deliberately think through what had kept her from entering ...she picked a target at random... the Excelsior Towers two nights before: it was the eve of the Regatta Gala in the Grand Ballroom. Those attending would have taken their jewels from their safe deposit boxes and had them stored in those hopeless courtesy safes. Easy money, quick and quiet. So why didn't she take it?

It certainly wasn't that she was afraid of a confrontation with Batman. She'd handled him before; she was confident she could handle him again.

But then...

What exactly would a faceoff be like now that they'd become friendlier with each other when they weren't fighting?

No, she wasn't afraid of a *confrontation*, but she was, perhaps, just that much afraid of the unknown thing that might happen in place of the confrontation.

Selina jerked her arm reflexively. Nirvana had found a small scar on her forearm that, to a wild cat's sensibility, must have seemed like matted fur. She was patiently trying to groom it by licking the small area repeatedly with her rough tongue. It may have tickled at first, but Selina had been too deep in thought to notice. Now it was becoming sore. She slowly rotated her arm so Nirvana would lick a different spot... Nirvana had mothered many cubs more stubborn than Selina; she knew that trick. She took the arm gently between her teeth, turned it back where it had been, and continued licking the offending scar.

*Then again, thought Selina, maybe I'm over-thinking this. Maybe it's just... it took us so long to get past the adversarial stuff. What if the first confrontation brought us right back to square one...*

DAMNIT!

DAMN DAMN DAMN DAMNIT! DAMN

There comes a point where the stress and emotions tied up in a thought become a physical force. As she swore, Selina's body stood of its own accord -causing Nirvana to jump from her lap and run a few feet into the clearing- while Selina turned and kicked the makeshift bench (which was a lot harder than her foot). She landed on the ground (which was a lot harder than her ass) and examined her throbbing ankle. She looked up through tears of frustration and pain to see Nirvana, staring at her predicament with confused pity.

Selina was rationalizing and she knew it. She hadn't driven all the way up here to think up plausible excuses. She had vowed to be honest with herself....

It was fine to say "accept the relationship for what it is" —accept each other for what we are. But the truth is, if you care about someone you want them to be happy. And you want to please them. You don't want them to be miserable—and you especially don't want to be the cause of that misery.

If Batman found her breaking into some condo, however they might go through the motions of crimefighter and catburgler, he would be disappointed in her.

That's what she was avoiding.

Not the confrontation—the look of disappointment, maybe even hurt, that his mask would half-conceal but that she would know was there.

For the first time in their long, strange relationship, Selina dared to think about it from Batman's point of view. It wasn't easy for him either. He wanted... Oh who knew what Batman wanted... to stop crime, she supposed... but he wanted her too. The difference was that she had some control—his conflict depended on what she did. She was going to be conflicted no matter what, but if she decided not to steal, then he at least didn't have a problem...

Oh boy....

She had always tried to make Batman the source of the conflict: SHE wanted to be a free independent thief and HE wanted to tame her. How simple. How right. How PC. She was a woman refusing to compromise her job for a man.

She saw now it wasn't simple at all: Yes, she wanted to be free and independent but she also wanted to need and be needed. Yes, she wanted to steal if she felt like it, but she wanted to make someone happy too, she wanted to be the kind of person he would respect and be proud of.

It wasn't simple.

It wasn't about cats and their independence, or jewels & icons, or law & order or even Justice. It had more to do with... with... ? ... ? ... ? ...

Well it had to do with something—either something too complicated, or too basic to be put into words.

Nirvana seemed satisfied with this conclusion and trotted into the brush.

“Hey!” Selina called after her, “Wait a minute, I haven't figured anything out yet!—I don't know what to do next!”

But Nirvana was busy chasing a hare. The two-footed cats always made simple things so complicated.



“Stalactites stick *tight* to the ceiling; stalagmites *might* if they could.”

Bruce chuckled to himself. It’s odd the way those little tricks you learn at age ten stay with you for life.

Of course everything that happened to Bruce at age ten had stayed with him for life.

He’d retreated into one of the deepest caverns in the Batcave, where he came when he wanted to meditate after a workout.

Today’s workout hadn’t been productive. His concentration kept slipping.

Damn her.

It was bad enough at the beginning, when they’d meet as enemies in some alley and she’d distract him with a provocative move in order to stall or escape. It was bad enough when she was on a crime spree, that he thought about her (obsessed about her, Dick would say) more between confrontations than he did other criminals when they were active.

But now—now she was throwing him off his game WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING AT ALL! She hadn’t been active; he hadn’t even seen her in over a week, and yet she’d just brought his workout to a screeching halt.

Damn her.

He was aware that his anger was misplaced. He had only himself to blame for the recent shift in their relationship. He could have ignored the episode of her one-woman show, when she placed the ironies of their peculiar situation before the people of Gotham as a kind of performance art. If he hadn’t alluded to it, she never would have brought it up. It could have been—would have been—business as usual that night at the museum.

But how could he ignore it? She stood on a stage and said to anyone who bought a ticket that he was so out of touch with his own feelings that he wouldn’t do what any man in the auditorium would do if a woman like that offered herself to him. How could he let that pass?

Or maybe, maybe what she’d done was make him recognize there was a real person on the other side of all those propositions, a person who felt rejection when he said no. A person he was hurting. Selina wasn’t stupid. She knew he was attracted to her. God knows he’d never hidden it well. So in a sense, he had repeatedly led her on. He had encouraged the propositions and the semi-serious come-ons, only to reject them time and time again.

So yes, when this unintended but despicable behavior was brought to his attention, he’d lightened up a bit. He’d allowed himself... to smile at her. to flirt a little.

...And even to play a harmless joke or two.

He smiled at the recollection. It had played out so much better than he’d imagined. He’d figured that simple curiosity would bring her to the general area of the proposed rendezvous at the opera house, but that she’d probably back out at the last minute. When she did, she’d want to strike out with a bit of felonious bravado, and she’d break into the jewelry store. It was the obvious target in that neighborhood. She’d find the basket and his note and then...?... What would she do?

Well she’d surprised him straight off by coming to the meeting without breaking into the store first—and absolutely staggered him with her offhand observation that the Verdi’s Duke in *Rigoletto* projects his own inability to commit to a relationship onto

the women in his life. How can anyone, he wondered, criminal or crimefighter, be so insightful and at the same instant so very blind?

She had come to the rooftop without entering the jewelry store, and so never read the note he planted there. So he nearly said to her face that he'd accept that comment coming from a woman who was unquestionably the world's leading authority on projecting one's fear of commitment onto the other party... when the accident with the rigging inside the theatre called him away.

Then she'd shown her colors hadn't she—the minute his back was turned, *la gatta e mobile*.

What he wouldn't have given to see her face as she found that basket and read that note.

His smile faded.

Of course, when he'd said "accept our relationship for what it is," he hadn't mean to say it was okay for her to steal. But as he thought about it later, that's certainly what he'd implied. How could he have done that?

It was almost as though deep down he wanted her to remain a criminal.

That was ridiculous, of course. If she's a thief he would never be able to see her without feeling guilt... What was he, some kind of masochist? Did he want pain? Even when he's supposedly relaxing and enjoying himself ...What the hell did he have to be beating himself up for all the time?...

A dollop of moisture dripped off the stalactite and the drip echoed through the cavern.

She wasn't cooperating anyway. She hadn't been stealing.

It hadn't gone unnoticed.

Damn her.

I landed on the terrace, pure instinct getting me the last few yards—*home*—stumbled inside—heart still racing. I half-closed the glass doors, vision nearly blurring from the adrenaline—blood pulsing behind my eyes with the force of small rockets, limbs burning from the need to draw more oxygen than was currently available—collapsed into the nearest chair.

>>>>YEAOWRL!<<<< A blur of fur squirmed out from under me. *Sorry Whiskers, I'll make it up to you—cream in the morning.*

Goddess almighty... still breathing hard ... If I became Catwoman for the thrills, I could quit now. That was about as intense as it gets in one lifetime...

What happened was this: I decided I had been thinking too much, way too much. After the Catitit I saw that the only way I could continue to look myself in the mirror each day was to just get out there and DO IT. Damn the consequences, to hell with weighing all the whys and whatifs. DO IT! The thought was like a drug. All my frustrated rantings: DAMN DAMN DAMN turned to LIVE LIVE LIVE! And LIFE was a beautiful, beautiful thing.

I drove back to the city, changed into Catwoman, and waited impatiently for dark to fall. I went straight to the auction house, zipped into the vault, and found my way to the celebrated Cat Icons. There were five that were truly exceptional, and that was just about all I could handle without loading myself down. I had the third neatly stowed in my bag when this sick feeling came over me... I turned, and there he was, watching.

"Well that was predictable," he said finally.

I found I couldn't meet his eyes. I said the kind of thing you say when Batman finds you in the vault of an auction house filling a sack with icons:

"I don't look at it as stealing as much as observing practical socialism."

I never would have seen the slap coming.

The gloved arm just materialized at my cheek.

But he stopped himself.

Our eyes met then, and what I saw there I won't forget 'til my dying day. This wasn't Batman. This was ...how can I put this... a real person. A man whose wants and needs always came last, whose feelings Batman ignored and rode roughshod over more relentlessly than he did mine or Nightwing's or anyone else's. A man so used to being in pain he'd forgotten there was any other way to be.

The arm that only moments ago might've backhanded me into the wall now caressed my cheek. I heard my voice speaking:

"It would seem the 'accept the relationship for what it is' scenario isn't entirely workable."

"No," came the whispered reply.

Let me be clear about this—I did not intend to ram my knee into his gut when I started returning that kiss. He leaned in, and I may have let out a breath or something that he took as a go-ahead, because all of a sudden our lips were touching and there was this hand on my waist and another stroking my hair, and it was very pleasant for a few moments. But then, just as suddenly, it was way too real. I mean, just when I should've been thinking: *Wow, Finally, this is Batman, this is the fantasy*, I was acutely aware that this wasn't "Batman" at all. This was the guy inside Batman, and a very real and vulnerable man who could obviously be hurt very badly, and what the hell

was he doing getting mixed up with somebody like Catwoman of all people—and *that's* when I kicked him in the stomach.

He chased me, of course, not one to be put off for more than a second by a li'l knee in the stomach, not our Dark Knight. During the chase, I won't say I panicked but some kind of primal instinct took over. It was necessary that I not hear whatever he was calling behind me—that I be too focused on running to hear—that I be too far away to hear. I've never run so far and so fast in my life. I was paying for it now though, now that I'd caught my breath, my calves and thighs were on fire.

Whiskers, the cat I had evicted from the chair, looked up at me accusingly, and a horrible thought crept into my head: He was right. I am the one with more rigidly absolute, black and white ideas about right and wrong—not law, not crime—*Right...* and *Wrong...* There are things you don't do. There are Rules. Tonight, I broke the rules, big time. If I'd seduced Batman and then took advantage of the moment to hit him and escape, well god knows Batman can take care of himself. But tonight I was wholly aware that it wasn't Batman I was dealing with... more of a civilian... more than a civilian, an innocent... an innocent and vulnerable puppy of a person that I let kiss me and stroke me and then rammed my knee into his gut.

Shit.

In my mind's eye, I stand toe to toe with Catwoman back in that vault:

"It would seem the 'accept the relationship for what it is' scenario isn't entirely workable."

*Y'know what Catwoman, you cold-hearted bitch, It would seem the 'Don't think—Just do it' scenario isn't entirely workable either!*

I'm aware this conversation was a good deal more psychotic than talking to my reflection in the bathroom mirror. How did I ever come to a place where I was kicking Batman in the stomach to protect the guy inside from getting hurt by Catwoman?

The thing is: I know who that guy was. I don't mean I know a name or a face but... now that I'd made the distinction between them, I realized that he hadn't been *Batman* with me for some time. I couldn't say for sure when he stopped... Wait, yes I can. It was when he stopped calling me Catwoman. When was the last time he called me anything but Selina? Selina or that brazenly diminutive endearment...

"Kitten."

Almost against my will, I swiveled the chair around to face the terrace.

"I'd say it's been pretty obvious I knew where you lived since I slipped that note into your coat pocket."

An hour ago, I had stopped thinking of him as Batman. Apparently, he stopped thinking of me as Catwoman some time before that. Subconsciously, I knew that. That's what had spooked me in the vault. I guess I'd always thought, deep down, that it wasn't really me he wanted; it was just the forbidden bad girl.

It appeared we were moving beyond that.

This was *terra incognita*, uncharted territory.

I could tell because there wasn't one blessed cat analogy that came to mind to put the moment into any kind of context.

I slid the door open farther and considered this familiar stranger—I'd been so caught up in my own thoughts I had to play back the last thing he said to form any kind of rational reply: right, the note in my pocket, obvious he knew where I lived...

“Yeah,” I said, fully aware it’s not at all the sort of thing Catwoman would say to Batman. “I guess I would have thought of that if I’d been thinking clearly. Would you, um, like to come in and ah, have some coffee?”



If Alfred stayed up worrying every time Batman didn't return until dawn, he would collapse from sleep deprivation on a regular basis. Fortunately, he was a naturally light sleeper and his subconscious had learned to register the pattern of sounds that signaled Bruce's return:

- squeak, fourth step from the top of the main staircase
- one step on the hardwood floor of the landing
- soft brush of a heavy wooden door against the edge of the too-thick hallway rug
- faint gargle of water through pipe

Once he'd heard these sounds, Alfred's subconscious stopped listening for the Batcave intercom that would mean Bruce was home but in need of medical attention.

Alfred was unaware he did this, so he certainly wasn't aware that he hadn't heard the sequence of sounds the previous night. He just knew when he awoke that something wasn't right. Rather than dressing and preparing a breakfast tray, he grabbed a bathrobe and went straight to Bruce's room -only to discover that the bed hadn't been slept in.

He raced downstairs faster than was prudent for a man his age, collected the newspaper from the stoop, and saw with relief a picture of President Luthor misspelling the word "Potato" while visiting a junior high school in Utah. In Gotham City, any episode involving the Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy or other villains likely to do Batman harm would have dispatched Luthor's faux pas to Page 3.

Alfred was about to check the cave when a hunch told him to go to the kitchen instead. There he found Bruce, still in costume but with the cowl pulled back, hunched over a cup of day-old coffee. Alfred's relief that his employer was not dead was immediately displaced with a pang: Bruce looked younger and more lost than he'd seen him in many years. Alfred realized the reason with a start: Bruce's position at the kitchen table and the way he'd looked up when Alfred entered the room had flashed him back to when Bruce was a boy, waiting for the butler to fix him breakfast before going to school.

"Morning, Alfred."

The words too, and the inflection, took Alfred back the earlier time. In those days Bruce was always the first in the household to wake up, so eager to start the day, so hopeful and energetic.

Alfred deftly removed the coffee mug and replaced it with a glass of orange juice. He glanced at the cup: dregs with little bits of coffee grounds floating on the top. He thought about asking why Bruce would be drinking this revolting muck, but there was little point. It was most certainly the same reason he hadn't changed out of his Batman costume in the cave, and Alfred knew he wouldn't get an answer if he asked about that either.

"I'm sorry if I scared you, Old Friend, I didn't think there was any point in going to bed. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep."

Then again, perhaps a few questions would be productive. Evidently Bruce wanted to talk, or possibly to listen. That's why he was in the kitchen. It's where he would go as a boy if he was lonely or confused and needed a friend.

"I was not unduly concerned, sir," Alfred lied.

Bruce looked pointedly at the bathrobe Alfred still wore, an obvious accusation that the butler had been worried or he would have dressed before coming downstairs. Alfred just as pointedly kicked the corner of Batman's cape out of his way as he laid out plate, fork and napkin for his employer's breakfast.

Bruce knew when he was beaten. He might be a match for psychopaths, megalomaniacs, and interplanetary demigods, but he would never get the better of the man who raised him. Like a schoolboy who tried to waive the house rules "just this once" and failed, Bruce retired to the cave to change. When he returned to the kitchen, Alfred too had changed into his work clothes and had somehow finished preparing breakfast as well. How that was possible Bruce couldn't imagine, but he didn't know enough about cooking to know if the feat was really out of the ordinary.

"So, young sir," Alfred announced, setting a plate of French toast on the table, "suppose you tell me to what I owe the pleasure of having company this early in the day."

"She was there last night."

Alfred didn't need to ask who. There was only one 'She' in the manor or the cave these days. If you meant Harley Quinn or Wonder Woman or Lois Lane you said so. *She* was Selina.

"A not unexpected development, sir. You said yourself she could hardly pass up feline icons made by catwomen."

"It was bad. She was so flippant and I was so *angry* with her, with not being able to make her understand—I nearly hit her."

"Surely you've traded blows before, sir."

"I've done my job, Alfred. I've never... *lost my temper*. Not with her. But then, well, things happened... We got past it somehow. We talked." He smiled at the oddity of it, as if he was describing levitation. "We talked all night, in fact."

"Then progress is being made, I take it?"

"She invited me in; that was a first... 'for coffee'.... I thought it was a come on, but y'know, when I entered her apartment she was almost... *shy*." There was wonder in his voice. "And she made coffee and we talked like normal people. And neither of us screwed it up, can you believe that. It was—" for the first time in years Bruce Wayne laughed, "—it was great."

"Then progress is indeed being made, sir. I'm delighted to hear you and Ms. Kyle are finally pursuing a few of the more conventional courtship activities."

Alfred cleared the empty plates in front of him and began washing up with a quiet smile. He knew better than to ruin so promising a development by making too much of it, but he felt like laughing at the absurdity. The source of all Bruce's befuddled confusion was that he'd had a good time last night, and he was happy.

Long before becoming butler to the Wayne family, Alfred Pennyworth was a great fan of the most famous literary manservant: Jeeves. Jeeves organized (some might say manipulated) his employer's lovelife and personal relationships with the same ease and grace with which he managed his wardrobe. And Jeeves didn't have 1/20<sup>th</sup> the affection for Bertie Wooster that Alfred had for Bruce Wayne.

Bruce was happy. That wasn't a development to be brushed aside lightly. Alfred had never met Catwoman, but he was aware of Batman's preoccupation with her. In the

beginning he had mixed feelings about it: after the years of preparation, Bruce had been pouring himself into his mission with an intensity Alfred found alarming. This less-than-professional interest in the catburglar was at least a sign that there was still a human being in there who had not been wholly engulfed in “the crusade.” Nevertheless, Alfred’s principle concern had always been for Bruce’s safety, and there was no denying that being physically and emotionally drawn to an enemy was supremely dangerous.

It was Dick who put Alfred’s fears to rest. Like any young man, Dick was unsure of himself when he first began taking an interest in the opposite sex. He wanted advice, if only to ignore it, from an older, more-experienced man. Bruce was hopelessly ill-equipped for the job. Not only had he flummoxed all his own relationships with women, The World’s Greatest Detective hadn’t even noticed (or didn’t realize the significance of) Dick suddenly sporting a new wardrobe, combing his hair with Pythagorean precision, and asking to take out the Jaguar instead of the Porsche (bench vs. bucket seats). Alfred did see the significance, and he quietly instituted a new ritual: every Thursday while Dick was doing his homework, Alfred brought the boy a sandwich or a cold drink. He laid it on the desk next to him and then simply neglected to leave. Dick was a naturally amiable and outgoing kid. He lacked Bruce’s ability to coldly ignore another person hovering three feet away. Very soon they’d be talking about whatever was on Dick’s mind, and like most boys his age, what was on his mind was girls. About a month into the ritual, their talks expanded to include the women in that other half of Dick’s life: A healthy teenage male could hardly fail to notice the attributes of gorgeous athletic females in tight revealing costumes, regardless of their criminal or crimefighting affiliations. It was during one of these talks that Dick confided, with much amusement, that Catwoman was every bit as taken with Batman as he was with her.

Alfred was both relieved and piqued at the revelation. Batman was evidently not in danger of being killed by this feline fatale, well and good. But from the sounds of it, the lady was every bit as romantically inept as Master Bruce. What is the world coming to, he wondered, when grown men and women can’t manage so basic a human activity as coupling.

Alfred had watched the dramas and denials in the years that followed, but whatever his private feelings, he never seriously concerned himself in a matter that was, ultimately, none of his business.

That was about to change.

In recent months, the tempo of the whatever-it-was between Batman and Catwoman had quickened—with the unprecedented result of Bruce appearing in the kitchen before dawn, smiling, laughing, and describing something, anything, that happened in an evening spent as Batman as “great.”

Enter Jeeves.

Silencing a momentary qualm that interfering in Batman’s private life was something not even Superman would attempt, Alfred phoned Dick Grayson and told the boy, flat out, what he would be giving his mentor as a Fathers’ Day gift.

Bruce had rested, made a few phone calls on Wayne Enterprises business, and retired to the cave to analyze shipping records he'd downloaded for a smuggling case. He was scrolling through screens of data, not reading but looking for patterns and deviations, when he heard a soft cough. He spoke without removing his eyes, or his attention, from the monitor.

"I'm not hungry, Alfred; just leave it on the table."

"No sir, I've not brought you dinner. I wish to discuss the arrangements for the weekend."

"What? What arrangements?"

"This weekend, sir. Master Dick informed you he and Master Timothy would be patrolling the city in your stead so you could have some time to yourself—or perhaps not entirely to yourself, if I may be so bold to suggest it."

Bruce blinked and turned from the monitor in total confusion. Time to himself... Dick and Tim... patrolling... what the hell was Alfred blithering about?

Alfred repeated his statement, slowly and distinctly:

"Master Dick informed you last week, sir, that his Fathers' Day gift to you would be Nightwing and Robin watching over the city so you could have some time to yourself. As you may recall, sir, he attempted to surprise you with this kind of effort once before, but because of the surprise element you were not able to really enjoy it. He therefore told you in advance this time, with the understanding that you will take advantage of the situation by giving Batman a few days off."

Dick hadn't said anything of the kind, Bruce was certain...

But Alfred wouldn't *lie*, would he?

And, of course, Bruce wasn't above feigning attention when he was engrossed in work. Possibly Dick had mentioned something.

"I must say, sir," Alfred continued without a pause or a blush, "Master Dick was surprised and quite pleased when you agreed, as am I. I would never venture to bring up such a matter myself, but your own reluctance to take any manner of holiday does mean that I too never get any type of respite. I am somewhat anxious to begin this unexpected treat, so if you would be so kind as to decide where you are going, I can pack your things before I leave myself."

Catwoman returned from her evening prow, pulled off her mask, left the terrace doors open, and walked to the kitchen. She took a chilled bottle from the refrigerator and returned to the living room.

"I just noticed something—"

She gasped.

Did he always have to sneak up like that!

She held up a finger that warned "Don't say a single word" and walked deliberately up to him until the finger touched his lips. She took his hand in hers, and walked him to the doorframe, formed the hand into a fist and methodically wrapped the gloved knuckles into the wood.

"This," she said, "is called KNOCKING."

More and more often now, he stopped in after what he called his "late patrol." They chatted (sometimes easily, sometimes awkwardly), and they flirted (always easily, they

had so much practice). But he hadn't tried to touch her since the episode in the vault. This was as physical as they'd been since that night, and both were suddenly, acutely, aware of that fact.

*Can she feel my pulse racing through the glove?*

*Hand. Let go of the hand. Oh Hell.*

*How do eyes get to be that green?*

*How long have we been standing here? Somebody has to talk.*

"You, ah, just noticed something?" Selina asked in desperation.

*Why oh why oh why did I think this was going to be easier if we got past the claws and the Batarangs.*

"Yeah, um, cat stuff, you don't have a lot of cat stuff around your apartment. I always figured you would."

*Cat stuff? I've been thrown out of the finest preparatory schools on the Eastern seaboard. I run a Fortune 500 company. I outthink Ra's al Ghul. Why can't I string a coherent sentence together when I look into those damn green eyes?*

"Well, this isn't a hideout; this is my home."

The incongruity of the thought had shattered the mood and Selina's tone changed entirely. She wasn't angry, like Catwoman clawing at his eyeballs angry; she was miffed, like, like girlfriend miffed. Batman wasn't used to needing rescuing, but this was one instance where he was quite clueless! And his inexperienced fumbling was a danger to himself and others. Fortunately Bruce Wayne came swinging to the rescue:

*Yo, Caped Crusader! You see that gimlet look in those green eyes you were just admiring? That look means you've said something WRONG and you need to figure out what and FIX IT—right now.*

"Oh I didn't mean stolen cat stuff..."

Inwardly Bruce shook his head in his hands.

Finally Selina spoke.

"I have two house cats, Whiskers and Nutmeg—also a small curio in the bedroom..."

*...which we won't be seeing anytime soon, thank you Dark Knight.*

"...with figurines, and a not so small preserve upstate where the wild cats live."

"Really a preserve, now that I'd like to see sometime."

Inner-Bruce's head shot up. Batman had said something right!

The gimlet look melted into a warm smile.

*Now! Ask her now, before you can mess it up again.*

"Anyway, I wanted to ask you something. It's going to sound odd, but... Remember the night at the museum when you said most people that want a change go on vacation?"

"The words ring a distant bell."

"I was thinking of taking one. Actually I think I've been tricked into taking one. And I wondered if, I mean, I said it was going to sound odd and all, but I wondered if maybe, just—for a weekend, a longish weekend, a long-weekend-ish... thing..."

He ran out of syntax. Fortunately Selina was too busy laughing to notice.

Most educated people know Xanadu as either the name of the mythical pleasure dome built by Kubla Kahn or else as the equally spectacular residence of Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*. Only a few hundred people in the world ever heard of the real Xanadu, a resort on a very private island offering a hot spring, beach, mud baths, grotto, nature trails, and five-star dining—but most of all absolute privacy for movie stars, royalty, heads of state, and others for whom privacy is a virtual impossibility. The guests are known and referred to only by letters (“Mr and Mrs M will be dining in the grotto at 8:30.”), and rarely glimpse any of the hotel staff or each other.

As one of the true elite that knew of Xanadu’s existence, Bruce Wayne had occasionally thought about telling others in the JLA. No mere rock star had the privacy problems or the need for discretion presented by a dual identity. But what was the point? He was the only one who could possibly afford it. And besides, it would only take one tactless hero (Clark!) to go marching in there looking for a suspect and the place was dead.

Bruce never dreamed he would have cause to go to Xanadu himself. His appearances with the flavor of the month debutantes, supermodels, and divorcees (or “the bimbos” as they were universally known in the inner circle) were meant for the paparazzi cameras. Privacy was the last thing he wanted when he escorted a Gretta, Bambi or Candace to the Tommy Hilfiger party at Lot 61.

But the unexpected change in his relationship with Selina occurring just as Dick’s Fathers’ Day stunt forced this vacation on him had started him thinking. And the more he thought about it, the more tantalizing the idea became.

Hence, on Friday afternoon, “Mr. B” and his guest checked into Bungalow #4. They arrived in a private, chartered plane, prepaid by a numbered offshore account. Mr. B wore an Arab dish-dash and a black band that appeared to be the most outrageously expensive designer sunglasses on the planet, concealing his face from the bridge of the nose to the top of the eyebrow. The woman’s hair was wrapped in an elaborate silk scarf and she too wore sunglasses day and night. By Xanadu’s standards, they were a most unremarkable couple.

The understanding that was slowly evolving since the breakthrough in the vault was almost entirely between Bruce and Selina. Batman and Catwoman had stayed out of it, until now.

“I absolutely guarantee you will enjoy this a hundred times more without the shoes and socks.”

They were walking on the beach. Selina immediately kicked off her sandals and walked where the surf would lick her ankles. Bruce walked on the dry sand. Apart from the headgear, he was wearing what he wore at corporate retreats: polo shirt, casual slacks, boat shoes and dress socks.

“C’mon, kick ‘em off and walk with me in the surf.” The intonation was precisely the same as when she once said “*You’re part of the night, just like me.*”

“My slacks will get wet.” The intonation was precisely the same as when he had replied “*You’re a thief.*”

He might have read the determined glint in her eyes if they weren’t hidden behind dark glasses. As it was, he could only register the slight tilt of her head before he was

thrown on his back, one shoe off and a pantcuff rolled up to his knee. He easily flipped her over, pinning her arms and legs beneath him, and coolly pointed out that she'd only got one shoe and no one ever, *EVER* gets the drop on him twice.

A negotiation commenced: to get the other shoe off she had to tell him the whereabouts of some Roman mosaics never recovered from a robbery at the history museum two years before. The socks cost her an opal tiara. He would have claimed an Etruscan vase for the second pantleg, but for the impossibility of saying "Etruscan" with another person's tongue in your mouth.

They were exploring a nature trail near the lighthouse.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" he asked suddenly.

"You can ask. I don't guarantee I'll answer."

"Why?"

"Cause I want to hear the question before I commit to answering."

"No, I mean 'Why Catwoman?'"

"Oh. I have no idea."

"Seriously, Why did you become Catwoman?"

"Seriously, I have no idea. There's no way to answer a question like that."

"Sure there is. Look, first time you put on the mask: why did you do it?"

"Why does anybody do anything: it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"You're impossible."

"I'm self-aware. There is no true answer to a question like that. Anybody who tells you otherwise is deluding themselves."

"If you ask me 'Why Batman,' I could tell you in one sentence."

"Then you're deluding yourself. And P.S., I'm not asking."

It took exactly nine seconds to make the decision. Bruce had come this far into the weekend without showing his face or revealing any specifics that could expose his identity. He would never consider doing so now just to win a point in a fairly lighthearted argument. But there was something deeper at work—a truth to be defended. Or maybe it was a part of himself he wanted to share, wanted her to understand:

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

Selina was stunned—not just by the revelation itself, but that he would make it. She had no desire to make light of a personal tragedy, but she could see from his manner that she was expected to genuflect to this as the supreme end to all argument. That's undoubtedly what everyone in his inner circle did. At the end of the day he was Batman, and Batman was the final answer to all questions by authority of this awful thing that had happened to him. And in a flash of insight she knew, as certainly as she'd ever known anything, that what he needed from her was to not be another acolyte at the sacred temple of his ... Loss.

"Let's go back to that fork and go the other way."

Bruce was confused. He'd made this huge personal revelation. She considered him for half a minute then changed the subject entirely, like it was nothing. Like telling her

about the murder of his parents before his eyes was nothing at all. And here they were ten minutes down a new path, more trees, lots of birds twittering, a creek of sorts, more or less the same stuff that was on the other side. There didn't look to be anything special here, but she seemed to know the way, was practically racing down the path, getting farther and farther ahead of him. Finally he actually lost sight of her—lost sight of her altogether—until she bobbed in front of him, upside down, legs suspended from a tree, and kissed him full on the lips.

"How did you come to be standing on that rockbed, Handsome?"

He smiled, seeing instantly where this is going. They were still talking about Batman and Catwoman.

"I followed you."

"I didn't know that bed was there; I've never been here before. You took us left to the lighthouse. This is the other path and I wanted to see where it leads."

"I get it."

"Not yet, you only think you get it. So you chose a path at a fork in the road. The rockbed isn't here because of the fork or the path. The creek made it long before the path existed. The hot spring in the grotto made the creek; continental drift made the hot spring. And people made the path by chance cutting from the grotto out to the lighthouse, SO..."

Bruce was now beaming. "No easy answer, I get it." She nonchalantly lowered herself from the tree, and he gave her an affectionate peck on the cheek. "Next question: How did you get to be so wise, anyway?"

"I'm not wise, I just don't think there are any simple answers where people are concerned. They're too complicated for that. You cannot sum up a human being's existence in a sentence like a listing in the TV Guide. What's that saying: If you accept one truth to the exclusion of all others, you make the truth a falsehood, and you become a fanatic. Something like that—The exception makes the rule, and the contradiction makes the truth."

"Like a crimefighter loving a thief."

Beat.

"I've been avoiding that word."

"I'm not. I love you, Selina."

Long beat.

... Then an impossibly understated smile.

"And I love you."

"Bruce."

"Excuse me?"

“My name is Bruce. We’re alone in the middle of nowhere; nobody can overhear. I’d like to hear you say it.”

“I love you, Bruce.”

And the creek beside the rockbed trickled from the hot spring into the sea.



## HEARD THE LATEST?

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12:22 AM

Harvey Dent was once an ambitious politician. He fought for law & order. He did it less from moral indignation than because a crusading district attorney in a city the size of Gotham was the fast track to the Senate, the Governor's Mansion, perhaps even the White House. Nevertheless, he *did* crusade for law and order; he was a friend and ally of the police, the Batman, and leading citizens like Bruce Wayne (whose billions would come in handy when Harvey made a bid for the Senate).

Two-Face was a bitter, bloodthirsty, psychotic obsessed with chance, revenge, duality, and being Harvey's polar opposite in all things.

They agreed on nothing; it was the nature of things. Black and white, Good and Evil, yin and yang. They *could not* agree on anything. Hence the need for the coin to settle their eternally opposed instincts.

They agreed on nothing—except a hatred for organized crime. In his mind(s), it was the mob war between the Maroni and Falcone crime families that scarred his face and split him into this freakish force of fate.

Tonight Two-Face flipped his coin because it was what he had to do, but the outcome was predetermined: Good side up: he would strike at evil by blowing up the warehouses along Pier 22 owned by the Maroni Family, depriving them of soldiers and whatever guns, narcotics, or other resources were stored there. Bad side up: he would machine gun every living thing at Pier 22, then enrich his own operations with whatever guns, narcotics, or other resources the Maronis had stored there.

12:45 AM

Poison Ivy had given up her attempts to reclaim Robinson Park where she had ruled so serenely during No Man's Land, but she still had hopes for making a home in the smaller but less-popular Riverside Park. There were practically no people to force out, which was a nice bonus. But there was a reason there were no people to force out: the smell. Much as Ivy liked to believe she was a humanoid plant, she had olfactory senses that mere shrubbery did not. And something happening upriver was reacting with the exhaust in the air as it neared the city, creating a truly revolting odor.

In her mind, it was concern for her beloved plants that took her upriver to investigate the source of the odor. The contaminant was most certainly coming down the river. And if it was in the river, it could poison the more delicate grasses and foliage in her park. She told herself she didn't want to live in a park of only crabgrass and dandelion. The truth was, she didn't want to live in a park that smelled like a chicken farm build on a garbage dump next to a sewage treatment plant.

She tracked the source of the odor to a warehouse where some mob boys—ah, that explained it—had set up an illegal chemlab. It was probably intended to manufacture drugs most of the time, but right now they were making explosives, hence the smell.

Before she could decide on a course of action, a blade materialized at her throat. Then a hand pulled her hair taut and a venomous voice hissed in her ear: “Make one peep and your hair won’t be the only thing that’s red.”

Rather than resisting, she allowed her head to sink back against the chest of her attacker, then she turned her eyes upwards.

“Why hello, Harvey, it’s been a long time.”

### 2:10 AM

Barbara yawned and stretched her arms, considered brewing a fresh pot of coffee, then stopped. It was a quiet night—maybe for once she’d opt for sleep instead of caffeine. One final pass of the police-band turned up a domestic, a gang-related drive-by, and—what was this? Just a scuffle... but at the Iceberg Redux, Penguin’s nightclub.

She glanced at the OraCom panel and allowed her finger to pause for a quarterbeat over Nightwing’s comlink before moving down and hitting the button below it:

“Robin. Oracle. You want to check out a D.P. at the Iceberg? Probably nothing, but considering it’s Penguin’s place...”

*...: Sure thing, O. There was a possible Joker sighting there earlier, any chance they’re connected? ...*

“Disturbing the peace? Joker doesn’t get into barroom brawls; he kills people twenty and thirty at a time.”

Or sometimes he just shoots them, severing their spinal column and condemning them to life in a wheelchair as a mere waste product in some plot to torment Batman... but that was no reason to snap at Tim, one of the genuinely nicest people to ever put on a cape.

“I’m sorry, kid. I’m having a mood. Hey, have you heard the latest? Azrael caught up with Mad Hatter last night—found him with some callgirl dressed up as the White Rabbit.”

*...: No! You’re shittin’ me. ...*

She heard his voice grow soft, then there was a girlish giggle. He just told Spoiler. The girlish voice said something, which Robin repeated into the link:

*...: Az isn’t exactly cool when it comes to women. How’s he handling it? ...*

“He does his job, kid. Which is what you should do. Check in after the Iceberg, okay.”

*...: Alright, I’ll stop picking on your new pet. Robin out. ...*

Barbara punched the button on her console, cutting the link even though Robin had already done so. Children. She was dealing with children, she told herself, and that required patience. Jean Paul *was* painfully awkward with women. He’d had little contact with them during his training, and in some respects he was naïve in ways no crimefighter could afford to be naïve. If he had grown comfortable enough with her to flirt a little, there was no harm in that. And if she chose to ignore the signs that he’d made her the object of his first crush, well, that was her business. It was certainly healthier to let it run its course than to coldly shoot down his first real relationship with

a woman, possibly scarring him for life. Flirting and crushes were not the monumental affairs kids like Robin and Spoiler seemed to think.

It wasn't like they'd had a tawdry one night stand like *some people* who shall remain nameless, Mr. Grayson, you two-timing prick.

**11:30 AM**

A Wednesday.

79 degrees.

Winds were from the NW at 10 mph.

Sunrise was at 6:35 AM, Venus was rising into Capricorn, The Dow opened at 10,290...

...and Bruce Wayne was in a fantastic mood.

Batman's takedown of a drug cartel had unexpectedly exposed a gun-smuggling operation as well. *Guns off the street* was a wonderful way to start a new day.

And Dick had called for no apparent reason other than to be sociable.

Dick was taking rather more interest in "the Selina Situation" than seemed necessary, but still, it was a good phone call—meaning both men had remained civil and both had actually said goodbye before hanging up.

The look on Selina's face when he'd given her the second cat pin was nothing less than magical. And tonight, she was to be his date. Not for some dry society affair either, but for a genuine party. Lucius's daughter and her husband moved into a new condo and were having a housewarming for a few close friends.

And best of all, the budget meeting Bruce had been dreading was over in record time. Last month it had dragged on for four hours; today it wrapped up in under two. That left him a few hours with nothing to do. There was no point in going home to the manor when he'd be coming right back into town for the housewarming. He decided to drop in on Selina.

He was remembering the delightful outcome of his last surprise visit when he'd discovered her wrapped in a bathtowel, snuck up behind her and...

...his good mood evaporated as he rounded the corner. He spotted a vaguely familiar car parked near her apartment: a green and white Dodge. License plate: **Game 'n' ID**, an anagram of Ed Nigma. The Riddler.

Rather than announcing himself to the doorman as usual, Bruce went round to the service entrance and slipped up the back stairs. He approached Selina's door, still unsure what he was planning to do or how he felt about it, when he heard voices inside that made the decision for him. He slipped a small metallic disc from his pocket, fastened it onto the door, and clipped a small speaker to his ear. The first voice he heard was Selina's—or Catwoman's? No, it was Selina's but with a strange hushed intensity.

"I said no, Eddie, and I meant it. This is absolutely none of your business."

"Lina, listen to me, you're the only one that's close enough to tell him without—"

"Getting myself killed? I think you overestimate the strength of our friendship. He's going to totally freak out."

"Yeah, well, who can blame him?"

"Then explain to me again why I should tell him."

"Because he should know. Because something like this should be handled 'in the family.'"

Selina sighed audibly. "Yeah, I guess it should. I hate that expression by the way. You lunatics are not family."

"Riddle me this, Pet: who are the people you didn't choose, can't live with, can't stand, can't sell for the spare parts, but can't escape this strange, indefinable bond of common somethingness?"

"Eddie, seriously, those new herbs you've been taking? I think you should stop."

A lifetime of Tibetan breathing exercises enabled Bruce to stifle the snort that would have exposed his eavesdropping. The conversation inside continued, but without the hushed intensity. They were moving on to lighter topics:

"Paradoxes and conundrums work for me," Riddler insisted.

"Not as well as you think. What happened to your eye anyway?"

"Nothing. Run-in with the Junior Bat. Speaking of which, have you heard the latest? Remember the rumors a couple months back about Huntress and Nightwing?"

"I never put much stock in that one. She really doesn't seem like his type."

"Oh, it happened. I got it from Hatter. And Hatter is never wrong about these things, the little shit. Anyway, it turns out, Nightwing was on the rebound 'cause his regular girl's taken up with that Azrael Angel-guy."

"No way."

### 12:30 PM

Selina cancelled a lunchdate and went instead to a flat above the Jekyll and Hyde Club on 22nd Street. Her host was pleased to see her, but curious about why she'd come. They made small talk:

"Heard the latest?" he began.

"About Nightwing and Bony Ass? Yeah. Don't believe it."

"Oh, it happened. Hatter's never wrong about these things. No, that's old news. Fresh dirt: Seems Black Canary's doing the dirty with—wait for it—Ra's al Ghul!"

"You're kidding. BC and *THE CADAVER*? She could do so much better. Why on earth?"

"We heard she wants to distance herself from the Bat-clan. Time was she was thought of as a lot more than a bat-groupie."

"I guess taking up with Ra's would drive a wedge. Still... not an appealing picture."

He noticed the exquisite set of pins she was wearing.

"Did you wear those just for us, Selina?"

"Of course."

"What a lovely bit of loot. Wherever did you pick them up?"

"Not loot, they're a gift."

Harvey Dent let out a low whistle.

"Quite a gift. Who from?"

"Old friend of yours: Bruce Wayne."

He winced.

"Selina, really. We know he's loaded, but what do you care? You can steal for yourself anything he could buy you. Bruce goes through women like Kleenex. Why would you sign on for that?"

“Harvey, there are very few people in this world I get to say this to: Your love life is far too strange for you to be giving me advice, ‘kay.”

“Two-shay.”

It was common knowledge on both sides of the criminal divide that when Harvey Dent was District Attorney he was briefly involved with a beautiful research chemist, Pamela Isley—now known to be Poison Ivy—and that she’d seduced him with the intention of killing him. It was not widely known that after he became Two-Face, they’d somehow restarted the affair. Only a very few in the criminal community knew, and absolutely no one in the legitimate world was aware. Today. Nobody in the legitimate world was aware today, but that could all change by tomorrow. They’d been indiscreet. They’d met, whether by design or chance, near a mob warehouse with very special security cameras. There was a videotape.

“Harvey, look, that’s actually what I came to talk about.”

“My love life? As you so delicately put it.”

“Yeah. Um, here’s the thing. What you and Ivy do on your own time is really nobody else’s business. And games, even rough ones, well y’know, consenting adults and all that.”

The Two-Face side of his personality proposed a dozen lewd comments about the pussycat pussyfooting around. The Harvey side rejected each one.

Selina was a friend. He didn’t want to be “Big Bad Harv” with her. But he did wish she’d get to the point.

She did.

“There’s a tape, Harvey. I have it on good authority that a cousin of your very favorite mobster, Boss Maroni, owns the warehouse where you were... ‘gardening’ last night. And word is: he plans to make copies and sell them.”

DA Dent held Two-Face’s rage back just long enough to ask: “Who’s the source?”

“Penguin. Maroni’s people approached him to distribute. Pengy told the Riddler and Eddie told me.”

The degree of Two-Face’s rage may be gauged by the fact that he did not pause to flip his coin before calling down the sting of two thousand scorpions on Maroni, on the Penguin, and on anyone else involved in this monstrous outrage. This was not a matter for the coin to decide because he was not “of two minds.” On the contrary, while Two-Face conjured images of machine-gunning every Maroni in existence, Harvey searched the annals of his Harvard education for appropriate epithets:

*Come not within the measure of my wrath.*

—The Two Gentleman of Verona

*Ne’er had been read in story old,  
Of maiden true betray’d for gold,  
That loved, or was avenged, like me.*

—Marmion. Canto ii

*Which, if not victory, is yet revenge.*

—Paradise Lost. Book ii

And just for good measure:

*I don't want to kill everyone. Just my enemies.*

—The Godfather Part II

### **1:00 PM**

A distinguished older gentleman, neatly but too-formally dressed for a suburban park, scrutinized his reflection in the pond. He thought he was long past the age where you make discoveries about yourself. Yet recent events—or rather, the lack of recent events—were forcing him to face one of those revelations.

He, Alfred Pennyworth, was every bit as much of a workaholic as his employer. It was just possible that the example he'd set of tireless dedication had somehow contributed to Bruce's tendency to put the job above any personal interests.

Now that Bruce was finally making a bit of a life for himself, Alfred found himself with time on his hands. Today, for instance, he'd finished his minimal housework by 11:00, pretended to dust the cave until 11:30, and examined the contents of the refrigerator until 11:45, making a grocery list although there was no evening meal to prepare. Finally, at 12:05, he admitted defeat and took the afternoon off. He returned to double-check he'd locked the back door no fewer than four times before taking a walk around the Wayne property. Then, realizing it was a sad commentary to actually remain on the grounds on his "time off," he headed for this public park.

He had a chance to relax, to enjoy himself, to play. And here he was, sitting on a bench, with no idea in his head about how to spend his free time.

### **1:15 PM**

Silencing a momentary qualm, Selina flagged a cab and headed for the Iceberg Redux, the Penguin's refurbished nightclub. She hadn't seen him since No Man's Land, when his conduct had been less than laudable, even by the liberal standard of Gotham City Rogues. Still, one couldn't hold on to grudges like that forever or no one in the city would be talking to each other.

She paid off the cab and announced herself to the doorman. As she waited in an outer alcove, she told herself she was not being a big softie. It was not being "soft" to simply warn the poor ass that he'd just made Two-Face's list of *Top Twenty People to Obliterate with a Double-Barrel Shotgun*.

When she had talked to Harvey, Selina thought she'd made it quite clear: Maroni's people only *approached* Oswald to distribute the tape. There was no evidence that he had agreed. But Harvey didn't want to hear it. There was no reasoning with his Two-Face side once Harvey had 'left the building,' as it were.

A too-amiable voice interrupted her musings: “

Catwoman, my felicitous feline, come in, come in. You haven't seen my renovations have you? Come in, you must see them.”

Evidently Pengy was willing to pretend the whole No Man's Land episode never happened. He waddled eagerly towards the club dining room—perhaps with just a tad more waddle than usual. Selina took in the room appreciatively. The little bird had clearly spent a bundle—the effect of a room interior carved out of a glacier was stunning—as was a conspicuous hole in the ice-effect behind the bar.

“What happened there?” Selina asked.

“Oh, haven't you heard? There was a bit of a ruckus last night. You know Joker got himself thrown back into Arkham last month... -Hic- ...Well, it seems the Riddler took advantage of his absence to put the moves on the lovely Miss Quinn. The Mad Hatter was nabbed over the weekend, and when he got back to Arkham he told Joker about Riddler and Harley. Joker broke out and came after Riddler last night. Found him sitting right there,” Oswald added pointing to a table “and threw him over there -Hic.”

Selina smiled. That explained the black eye Eddie had unconvincingly attributed to a run-in with Robin.

“Psychos in love,” she said out loud, “it's rather sweet in a disturbing, Kafkaesque way.”

Although he had no idea what Kafkaesque meant, Penguin apparently found this hysterical. He laughed—too loud and too long. Selina stared, then saw the significance of a half-dozen odd details: “Oswald,” she asked pointedly, “are you drunk?”

### 3:10 PM

Tim was home from school. He powered up his desktop, and glanced at his e-mail—one in particular caught his eye, and he double-clicked on the subjectline: Heard the latest?

*From: Dick Grayson <D.Grayson@oraclesecure.bludhaven.net>*

*To: Tim Drake <Drakester@oraclesecure.gothamheightshigh.org>*

*Re: Heard the Latest?*

*Care to confirm a story going around the squad room that they had to put The Mad Hatter into solitary at Arkham because the other inmates were hounding him for information from the outside? Don't think I'll ever look at Scarecrow the same way now that I have this image of him under a hairdryer clicking his tongue about Ross and Rachel. :)*

*btw, I talked to the B-man this morning and wouldn't you know it, he did have the second pin. Gave it to her last night. Whew. Didn't want to be on the clean-up crew if that one blew up. Y'know, I was just trying to be a guy and help him out in case he didn't have a second pin, and what do I get in return? A 10-minute lecture on how I should **worry about my own affairs**.*

*Now what is that supposed to mean? You don't think he's heard about me and Helena do you? It was nothing, and it was months ago.*

*Tell me what you know.*

Tim thought for a second about how Oracle was so quick to defend Azrael. He hit reply and typed:

*Bro, ah, maybe B wasn't talking about your end of it at all. It might be the other side you should be worried about.*

Hell, what was the point in worrying him about a hunch... Tim hit delete and typed:

*Don't know about Hatter and Arkham, but I was at the Iceberg last night and Penguin was drunk as a skunk—crying in his beer that he'd borrowed big from the Maroni Family to rebuild the club, and now they want some kind of 'favor' that's gonna get him killed twice.*

### 3:30 PM

Every rehearsal, every performance, and every casual meeting at the Bristol Heights Community Playhouse began with a certain amount of gossip among the regulars, which had to crescendo in that actressy-squealing sound before the business of the day could proceed.

"Heard the latest from Sally?"

"No, what?"

"New guy came in to ask about auditions?"

"That's news?"

"Now wait a minute. Sally says he's *really* classy and he has an *actual English accent*. A real one, not the bad actor kind. And he'd been a real actor, a *professional*, in London!"

"Whoa, hot stuff! What's this guy look like anyway?"

"Sorry, I asked. He's really old."

"Bummer."

"Sally figured he'd want to, like, do Shakespeare or something. But no, he had the flyer from the park."

"The ones Janet said nobody would read?"

"Will you get over that?"

"So he's auditioning for *How's your father?* "

"He's auditioning for *How's your father!* "

Then both actresses were so overwhelmed with excitement at the thought of sharing the stage with a real English actor, even if he was old, they each made the girlish squealing sound that signaled rehearsals were ready to begin.

**4:30 PM** Officer Dick Grayson reported, as requested, to Detective Porpora of The Multi-Jurisdictional Task Force against Organized Crime, an office he was beginning to respect. Their failure to adopt any catchy acronyms (MuJu-TaF-OrC ?) hinted that they might actually hope to accomplish something.

Dick had been called in, he was told, in "an unofficial capacity," because he was a former resident of Gotham City. Could he, they asked, provide some information on one of that city's peculiar criminal characters, one Poison Ivy. Yes, they realized, he was not a cop but a private citizen when he lived in Gotham, but still, anything might be helpful. Did he know anything, anything at all, that might not appear in the official files?

Dick maintained a poker face that would've made his mentor proud as he thought over the many and varied details he knew about Poison Ivy that were not in her official

files: she dyed her hair, she was a perfect size 6, she liked reggae music, when she got angry her pheromones smelled like Lemon Pledge. None of this trivia could be relevant to Detective Porpora's investigation, even if Dick could concoct some reason why he would know such things.

"No, sir, I'm sorry," Officer Grayson said formally, "I know nothing about those characters except what you'd find in the newspapers. May I ask why you want to know?"

"A few hours ago, the FBI began losing the signal on a number of mob wiretaps. When they investigated, they found some kind of moldy moss is infesting every Maroni property in the tri-state area. Bad news for us, but worse for them—it's wreaking havoc on everything electronic."

"Whoa. Too weird."

"Well, thank you for coming in, Grayson. Oh, as you're from Gotham, did you hear the latest speculation about that Joker escape they had? Seems his girlfriend, Harley Quinn, heh, is known to 'team up' with this Poison Ivy character from time to time, and not necessarily for a crime spree, if you know what I mean. Heh heh."

Dick smiled politely. This man was his superior, and he spent his days buried in reports of heinous mob wars. If it brightened his day to gossip about women in tights, what was the harm?

Dick was quite certain, however, that the Joker was not jealous about some imagined liaison between Poison Ivy & his sidekick. Joker—and every other man on both sides of the criminal divide—had spent some considerable time speculating about (if not actively visualizing) the relationship between Harley & Ivy.

### **6:15 PM**

Dr. Harlene Quinzelle presented a convincing ID badge identifying her as Maude Sinclair, PhD to the nightclerk at Arkham Asylum. She signed in and walked with confidence into the high-security wing. No one gave her a second glance. Nightclerks at Arkham have a short lifespan. There was probably no one left who could have recognized her from her brief incarceration here, or her even briefer term on staff.

She gave a soft sigh as she passed the entrance to her Puddin's special cell—they still hadn't cleaned all the blood off the walls from his escape.

Finally, she came to the door she was looking for, punched a code into the intercom panel, and spoke:

"Jervis, it's Harley. You've gotten me into quite a spot with Puddin'."

An unabashed voice replied: "I blew the trumpet, I did indeed. The Knave of Hearts should know, don't you think, if the March Hare is stealing his tarts, don't you think."

Harley rolled her eyes. The Joker's mad ravings were so adorable. But Mad Hatter's nonsensical doubletalk wasn't nearly so appealing. She purposely came before they distributed the evening meds to avoid this bullshit.

"Nobody stole his tarts, Jervis. Riddler made a pass and I was handling it. I'd never cheat on my Puddin' with some other funnyman, you know that. Everybody knows that! We should be together now that he's out, and instead he went and put Riddler through a wall—and who knows what he'll do to me."

"It began with the tee. The tee? No, the tea! Yes, that's right. And the bread and butter was getting ever so thin. When, calloo callay, they all came to say—"

"HEY!" Harley pounded on the intercom. Though she would giggle, prance, and cower with her Puddin', Harley Quinn had a fiery temper when provoked. "I'm not playing games, Jervis. I have a grenade in my purse and I want to know WHAT YOU TOLD HIM and WHY YOU DID IT. If I like the answers, I'll leave it on this side of the door and break you out, and if not, it goes on your side of the door. Understand... Calloo Callay?"

It got through. A far more reasonable voice came through the intercom:

"They were so interested to know what was going on outside, in the world of outside, don't you know. So I told them about the Iceberg, where all the world comes and goes, in a room carved from ice..."

"Jervis."

"...and I told who all was there, and that you were there, and that Ed Nigma had his hand on your leg," he finished in a rhyme-free rush.

Harley let out an exasperated puff. That was that.

"Why, Jervis! Why oh why oh why did you have to tell him?"

This last was a rhetorical question. She wasn't expecting an answer and was surprised at its vehemence when it came.

"BECAUSE IT'S NOT FAIR! HE'S FREAKISH AS THE REST OF US! MORE! HE'S MORE OF A FREAK THAN ANY OF US! AND HE FINDS THE ONE WOMAN IN ALL THE WORLD WILLING TO PUT UP WITH HIM AND HIS TEMPER AND HIS CACKLING—WHO ACTUALLY LOVES HIM FOR IT! ...AND HE TREATS YOU LIKE THAT! IT'S NOT FAIR! IT'SNOTFAIR IT'SNOTFAIR!"

Harley backed away from the door, leaving the Mad Hatter ranting about the unfairness of it all. They'd be bringing the evening meds in a few minutes, and that might calm him.

### 7:00 PM

Alfred returned to the Playhouse for his audition, having prepared two monologues as requested: one classic, Sir Andrew Aguecheek's from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and one contemporary, Elyot Chase from Noel Coward's *Private Lives*.

"That's refreshing," said a mature but feminine voice from the back of the house, "two comic monologues. Most actors choose a tragedy for the Shakespeare."

And so might Alfred have done at one time. But he was doing this for a change, and he'd seen more than enough vows of honor and vengeance in real life to enjoy reenacting it onstage. Naturally, he wouldn't explain this to the director. Instead, he said, "I was given to understand this was a comedy for which I was auditioning."

The figure at the back of the house came closer to the stage, where Alfred could make out a petite woman with a length of neat salt-and-pepper hair pulled into a becoming chignon. As she came closer, he observed a face that may have once been pretty in the generic ingénue sense, but had matured to assume a character and dignity far rarer in women her age than mere prettiness is in girls of twenty.

"It is a comedy, in a manner of speaking," the woman replied, "The title page reads: '*How's Your Father*, A Comedy.' Whenever I read that I can't help but thinking 'I'll be

the judge of that, buddy.' You understand it's a small role, just a character part really—some good lines, though, comparatively speaking."

"I do understand. I was expecting to start small, get to know the company a little better."

"That will take precisely ten minutes. Once you've met one twenty-something actress/model/whatever, you've met them all."

Alfred was intrigued. The words were harsh, but, unless he was mistaken, there was a begrudging affection in them. He seemed to be signing on for a role with a director whose cynical style of expression rivaled his own.

"You've trod the boards professionally, I understand," she remarked.

"That was many years ago," Alfred confirmed.

"Still, once an actor, always an actor. I know, I was married to one forever."

Alfred remembered the claustrophobic world of the theatre well enough to know he would not need to ask if the past tense arose from death or divorce. He would know the complete biographies of this director and everyone else in the company by the end of the second rehearsal.

The woman paused. Alfred had the uncanny feeling he had just been sized-up. She must've reached a favorable decision because she continued...

"So you know the classics: Shakespeare and Shaw and such. Reason I ask, once this silliness—*How's Your Father*, A Comedy—is done with, I'm putting together a little program to take round the schools, scenes from the classics. Show 'em early that it's not hard to understand. There's more of sex and violence and soap opera in a Shakespeare play than any Hollywood blockbuster. If you're able to free up some time, maybe we could talk about it some time after rehearsal."

### 8:30 PM

Dick woke from the hour of deep meditation that substituted for a full night's sleep more often than he cared to admit. Every time he did it, he felt he was turning into Bruce. Meditating instead of sleep. Wasn't this his version of Batman's famous: *I'm not hungry, Alfred, just leave the tray on the table*. Bruce wasted far more time bickering with Alfred than it would take to just eat the damn sandwich. In the same way, Dick knew this meditation dodge was simply borrowing against his body's reserves, and he'd wind up sleeping twice as long when he finally crashed. So why did he do it?

*What kind of numbskulls pretend they don't need to eat and sleep?* his inner voice asked.

*The kind of numbskulls that don't want to admit they're human*, came the answer. *The kind of numbskulls that don't want to admit they're mortal. The kind of numbskulls that don't want to die.*

Oh man, sometimes he hated the part of his brain that did that. It was the voice of reason, the voice of conscience, and it sounded disconcertingly like Babs.

He should call her.

Tim's non-answer to his e-mail meant there probably was something up with Barbara—something to do with Helena, no doubt. He could call and tell her about his meeting with Detective Porpora. She'd see through it, of course; she was Oracle. She'd already know about Poison Ivy's attacks on the Marconi family, and she'd know he'd know she'd know. They were a knowing little circle, the Bat-Family.

Better still, better than making up a dumb transparent excuse, he should go into Gotham and see her in person. Bludhaven could do without him for one night. He would go see Barbara and later he would patrol with Robin and ferret out what he wasn't saying in that e-mail.

**9:05 PM**

Daniel Kuph stood an uneasy post at the front door at the Iceberg Lounge.

He'd reported for work to learn he'd been promoted from dishwasher to head doorman—there was no doubt as to why. The Joker's visit last night had put his predecessor into the hospital, along with the bartender. Daniel was a half head taller than Bobby the busboy, so Daniel was promoted to doorman and Bobby was promoted to bartender.

What's more, the boss was drunk. Mr Cobblepot had given explicit instructions not to let "him" in, but when Daniel asked who, Mr Cobblepot merely slurred: "Who? Yshou need a descript-pt-shun? It's not like you can misst-take him for anybody else."

That statement applied to almost everyone the Penguin might have a beef with, from Batman to Bane. And since Daniel had no hope of stopping any of the costumed lunatics of Gotham from going anywhere they pleased (and no intention of trying), he figured he'd be much happier tending bar. The biggest risk there was being hit by an airborne lunatic caught playing around with some other lunatic's girlfriend.

**10:05 PM**

Nightwing tried to make his voice sound casual and devoid of subtext as he linked in to Oracle to ask Robin's location.

*:: Oracle, 'Wing ::*

*read: Barbara, how friggin' long are you going to punish me for Helena, huh? What does a guy have to do for pity's sake?*

*:: I'm in Gotham unexpectedly. ::*

*read: I saw him. I saw him leaving your apartment just now. How could you do this? Why him—why that cursed Azrael of all the people in the world? Don't you know what it did to me when Bruce gave him the mantle instead of me? Don't you know what it means that you pick him of all people to have some flirtation with? How can you fucking do this to me?*

*:: Can you tell me where Robin is at? :: read: You can't be serious about this. Is this payback? Grown men and women have sex sometimes. It doesn't mean it's the start of the great American romance. Sometimes it's just an unpremeditated and meaningless roll in the hay, and we enjoyed it very much.*

*..00.. The Redbird's parked at Mason and Fifth. There's a taco drive-thru near there he likes to take Spoiler.*

*..00.. read: Being jealous over Az is just a cheap excuse to get out of feeling guilty for sleeping with Helena.*

**10:30 PM**

Amanda Fox-Appleton pulled her father's sleeve and motioned him into the kitchen.

"Dad, tell me the truth. Did I screw up? Is the party a flop? Mr. Wayne left kind of early."

Lucius gave her hand a reassuring pat.

"Sweetie, you did fine. That was actually a record for Bruce. He usually disappears before the second tray of canapés comes round. You should see what his butler and I go through to keep him at company shindigs long enough to satisfy the stockholders."

**11:45 PM**

Robin slammed the door of one ambulance bound for the Arkham Infirmary as Nightwing slammed the other. Between the two of them, they'd just captured Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn without any help from Batman. Granted they'd had a bit of help ... from the Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn.

Nightwing had just reached the RedBird when the call came in: disturbing the peace at the Penguin's club.

"Déjà vu," Robin remarked.

"What do you mean?" Nightwing asked.

"Had one of these last night."

"You mean this is the *SECOND* D.P. at the Iceberg *REDUX* in *TWO DAYS*?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean... well, he is on the loose, isn't he."

By the time they reached the club, Daniel the accommodating (and terrified) doorman practically ushered them in. There was Two-Face, scarred side of his mouth gushing blood, arms wrapped around Joker's shoulder, ramming the dazed clown into the wall head first. Joker clutched a broken bottle and tried to stab his assailant in the thigh while Harley Quinn jumped on his back yelling "Put my Puddin' down!"

While Nightwing watched the scene in wonder, trying to decide how (and when) to intervene, Robin nudged him and pointed. At a side table, Scarecrow sat before an impressive stack of cash with Hugo Strange, Killer Croc, and some nameless nogoodniks huddled round.

Nightwing walked over to their table, neatly sidestepping the scuffle as Ivy pulled Harley off Two-Face and Harley spun around and slapped her.

'Wing held out a \$50 bill and asked, "What're the odds on Harley?"

Scarecrow looked up at him suspiciously, "You want to place a bet?"

"What, my money's no good here?" Nightwing snarled.

Scarecrow looked at Hugo Strange, who shrugged. Scarecrow took the bill and muttered "3 to 1 on Blondie." There was a slight murmur of approval from the assembled rogues at this unexpectedly matey behavior from the vigilantes.

"How'd this start, anyway?" 'Wing asked casually.

"Joker was after Harley for...something or other..." Strange answered.

"Cheating with Riddler," Croc put in.

"...and she went running to Pammy for protection," Scarecrow continued.

"Par for the course."

"Pammy's here with Two-Face with some axe to grind against Penguin."

"Hey, where is Penguin?"

"Passed out in back."

"Joker caught up with them here."

"Probably followed Harley."

"He wasn't surprised to see her with Ivy..."

"...but Two-Face threw him..."

"He said Two-Face shouldn't be allowed to have a three-way."

"Then he said maybe he didn't consider it a three-way—two of him + two girls."

"That's when Harvey decked him."

"Okay, that's all I need to hear," snapped Nightwing as he dove into the fray.

The four combatants were already battered, but they had just enough fight left that Wing managed to work out some of his Oracle-frustrations.

**11:59 PM**

Catwoman heard a light swish on the rooftop behind her. She turned to see a glimpse of dark disappearing behind a chimney: black against black, knight against night. She'd been a little put out when he took her back to her apartment after the party and kissed her goodnight. They both knew he'd be patrolling in less than ten minutes. Why didn't he invite her along?

She smiled now, beginning to understand: he had just invited her in the only way he could.

She joined him on his rooftop where he was just tuning in the police band. He looked up with the lip-twitch that was his version of a smile:

"Heard the latest?"

# CATFIGHT

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“Careful,” the shadow in the doorway thought to himself, “This is an unprecedented opportunity, but taking advantage of it is a dangerous and delicate undertaking. If you don’t time this just exactly right, if you waste the element of surprise, the target will have time to react, and the precise nature of that reaction is impossible to predict.”

Batman was a master strategist, schooled in the art of move and counter move. Bruce Wayne was a CEO, exploiting opportunities and anticipating contingencies were part of the job. Both skill sets were required for this exceptional set of circumstances:

Selina Kyle lay on her stomach reading a magazine, back to the door, damp hair and torso wrapped in a bath towel. The intruder didn’t make a sound. And the sixth sense that usually warned her when the Dark Knight was near hadn’t so much as quivered when she felt her body spinning over as the towel was pulled from under her like a conjurer’s trick. Before she could gasp, he was on top of her, playfully pinning her naked body against the bed and smothering the would-be scream with a passionate kiss.

“Sneaky Bat,” Selina laughed to herself. Then she corrected the thought, “No, not Bat. Bruce.” It was four weeks since he’d made that startling revelation, and she hadn’t entirely recalibrated her thinking to accommodate the new information. The “guy inside Batman,” as she’d come to think of him, had a name. His name was Bruce. And there was a lot more to him than the brooding Bat’s dayface. Bruce could be charming, playful, sneaky, adorable, urbane, and even sexy in ways Batman could not.

He *could* be, but not right now. The hands pawing her legs and neck were ungloved, the face was unmasked, but this raw lustmonster was all Batman. They’d denied themselves for too long. And he was making up for every time he’d stared into those green eyes on some freezing rooftop, wanting her, wanting to take her in his arms and hold her, but couldn’t because he was the Batman and she was a thief.

Bruce was perfectly aware he was acting like a kid with a new toy, brushing against her or slipping a hand round her waist on the slightest pretext, patting her ass or kissing her cheek almost as punctuation. He couldn’t help it. She fit into his arms so well; she fit into his *life* so well....

His shoulders stiffened a little at the thought. It reminded him that he hadn’t come to grope Selina, but to talk to Catwoman.

“We have a problem, Bruce,” Lucius Fox had said. The Wayne Enterprises Chief Operating Officer was not an alarmist. He didn’t overreact to simple, everyday setbacks. “LexCorp’s declared war,” he had said. “We can’t stick our heads in the sand

and pretend it's not happening. Now I've commissioned this report from Foster and Forsythe to upgrade security, and I need a decision: Do we act on their recommendations or not?"

Bruce massaged his temples.

Lex Luthor could not serve as President and remain CEO of the multinational corporation that bore his name. So he'd hired—to the disbelief of the financial world—Talia Al Ghul to run it in his stead. *The Daily Planet* questioned Luthor's sanity in appointing an unknown and unqualified amateur to run his company. *The Wall Street Journal* called her a Poison Pill chosen to make the firm undesirable for a takeover in his absence. And Nightwing joked that Displaced Daughters of Demons course at the Learning Annex must've really paid off. Only Bruce saw the subtlety of Luthor's strategy: Talia was in no way qualified to run a legitimate corporation, but she was supremely experienced at hovering around the top of a vast criminal empire, ignoring the moral quandaries posed by the guy in charge scheming to take over the world.

Since the election, LexCorp had opened offices in Gotham City, taking over the old Knickerbocker Tower directly across the street from the Wayne Enterprises Corporate Headquarters. There were rumors that an entire floor of LexCorp-Gotham was devoted to nothing but observing the comings and goings from the Wayne Building.

Lucius hired these consultants to beef up their security against corporate espionage, and of course Bruce considered their recommendations with Batman's professional acumen. There was nothing really *wrong* with the recommendations. But Foster and Forsythe were looking at the problem with a policeman's mentality only: how to stop the bad guys getting in—in all the ways they imagined bad guys would try to get in. They could only protect against attacks they could *anticipate*, and they had precious little imagination in that regard. Whereas he... he was acquainted—and getting better acquainted each day!—with someone used to looking at these matters from the other side. To Selina, no security setup was a deterrent or even an obstacle; it was a puzzle. She'd certainly find the weaknesses in this proposal, and he could close the gaps before even building the new system. And he'd get to see her mind work—that alone would be a treat. Better still would be the look on her face when he told her...

"You want to hire me?"

"Yes."

"To break into Wayne Enterprises?"

"To figure out how to break into Wayne Enterprises, yes. Look, I already hired these guys—"

"Foster and Forsythe. They're good."

"Everyone says they're the best. And yet you *routinely* get past security they've set up. So I want you to figure out how you'd get past this."

He tossed her their proposal. She started to look it over, then stopped and looked up at him.

"And you don't have any qualms about hiring your girlfriend?"

"About hiring my..." Bruce broke off chuckling. She couldn't be saying this...

She was.

"You can laugh all you want but romance in the workplace is a seriously bad idea."

Bruce stared for a long, long minute, trying to fathom just what goes on inside a woman's mind that doesn't happen in a man's. This was Selina—this was *Catwoman*—Catwoman that routinely pressed her breasts into his chest and her pelvis into his crotch while they fought, who whispered things about heat and animals in the night that brought a blush to his cheeks even now....

She held the deadpan for almost a full minute until the grin, the *"I can't believe you fell for that, you're so cute when you're stupid"* grin, stole over her features.

If he'd been worried taking off the masks would defuse the strange adversarial charge of their relationship, he needn't have. She could still sucker him in anytime she wanted.

As a devotee of Shakespeare and Milton, Alfred Pennyworth would certainly have dismissed the words "Be careful what you wish for" as a pedestrian cliché best suited to the inside of a fortune cookie. But however uninspired he found the wording, events of the past few days made him a staunch believer in the idea it expressed.

His inspired Jeevesian manipulation of Batman's lovelife had borne greater fruit than he could have hoped for. Bruce could not have been as dead to human feeling as everyone had feared, for he had offered surprisingly little resistance to the vacation suggestion. And he'd apparently let himself go most satisfactorily once he actually found himself on holiday. For he had returned, quite as gruff and non-communicative as before, but with the addition of this startling new companion in his life.

For that much Alfred would give daily thanks. The lady herself was certainly beautiful, and seemed bright, confident, witty, and cultured besides. Certainly he'd expected nothing less of any woman able to capture Master Bruce's attention. And her good humor seemed to balance Bruce's tendency to suck everything in his vicinity into a black hole of brooding despair. For this too, Alfred would be eternally grateful.

"But the fact is," Alfred confided to the heavens, represented at the moment by the stalactites of the Batcave trophy room, "that since the master hired Miss Selina to work on this project, I have two of them to look after instead of one."

On accepting the job, Selina had handed back the Foster and Forsythe report. She refused any information about Wayne Enterprises or LexCorp but what she could find for herself, as if she was truly working from the outside. All she needed, she said, was a computer terminal and quiet. This she promptly amended to: a computer terminal, quiet, *and for Bruce to please refrain from blowing in her ear in that very distracting manner.*

She'd spent four days hunched over a laptop in Bruce's study, shooing away all interruptions, refusing sandwiches, letting the occasional cup of tea Alfred brought grow cold—and generally doing such a thorough recreation of Batman on a paperchase that Alfred nearly called her "sir."

It was at the end of Day Four when Alfred entered the study to collect the untouched lunchtray and stone cold cup of tea, that he found Selina staring, not at the computer screen but out the window, with a cold, hollow glare.

"Where is he, Alfred? Where is he right now?"

Alfred didn't know Selina had a "Catwoman voice" the same way Master Bruce assumed a deep growl when thinking as Batman, and the revelation gave him a chill.

Nevertheless, he answered with the same butler's detachment he would assume with Master Bruce:

"Downstairs, Miss," he said, meaning the cave. "He returned a few minutes ago."

Selina stormed out in the direction of the grandfather clock. Alfred glanced at the laptop screen and saw a scanned memo on LexCorp letterhead with a brief handwritten postscript:

*Beloved, why must we still be at odds since I've abandoned my father? This opposition is as needless as it is futile.*

Hollywood likes Buddy Pictures. Two men whose backgrounds and personalities are entirely incompatible are brought together through a roadtrip, a prison break, or an invasion of intergalactic cockroaches—and at the end of two hours they’re the best of friends. In real life, the Buddy Picture phenomenon seldom occurs. But it is true that there is something on the Y-chromosome that enables men who are at odds on any number of subjects to put their differences aside and achieve an eerie camaraderie when one of them is getting some and the other wants to hear about it.

Bruce and Dick’s relationship may have been strained at times, but no rift could have prevented Dick’s coming to hear, firsthand and in person, about the extraordinary aftermath of “The Jeeves Conspiracy” in which he’d played a small but significant role.

“So she’s living here now?” he asked, incredulous.

“No, she’s not exactly, well, she’s stayed over a few nights. But y’know she’s working late on this security thing, and it’s a drive back to her place in the city, and I do have these 25 spare bedrooms, so...”

“But you’re sleeping with her?”

“Dick!”

“C’mon Bruce, you can’t hold out on me on this. I’ve been following this thing from the beginning, well, almost the beginning. You remember that time you had her pinned and sent me off to ‘find some evidence’ in an EMPTY PARKING LOT! You OWE ME, MAN! Tell me what’s happening.”

“Dick, no.”

Bruce was shaking his head, laughing in an odd, embarrassed way his former partner had never seen. He was truly happy, and that was good to see. Dick smiled at the man he finally, when all was said and done, considered a father.

Then the smile dissolved, and he abandoned the locker-room tone.

“Bruce, seriously, I’m glad for you. Really. But... this is *Catwoman* we’re talking about. And you *told* her. You’re really that sure... about... everything?”

“Dick, this is *Selina* we’re talking about, okay. There’s a difference.”

“BASTARD!” On cue, she was in the cave in full Catwoman mode, so intent on venting her rage that she didn’t even register Dick’s presence. “ARROGANT, DUPLICITOUS, HYPOCRITICAL, PRICK-FOR-BRAINS, BASTARD!”

Dick’s eyes met Bruce’s and, for a split-second, the quasi-telepathy they’d once shared as partners returned. Bruce could hear Dick’s thought: “*Lovely girl. I’m just gonna sneak away and ‘find some evidence’ now*” as distinctly as if he’d said it out loud.

“SHE KNOWS!” Selina continued without pausing for breath. “You didn’t tell me that she knows. I have wasted FOUR DAYS going about this BULLSHIT JOB you hired me for without telling me that SHE FUCKING KNOWS! I’ve spent *four days* looking at this like it’s Wayne Enterprises vs LexCorp, but NO, this is some sicko tango between you and your little demonspawn chippie!”

“You knew from the beginning that Talia was CEO of LexCorp.”

“Yes, *Beloved*, what I didn’t know was that *she* knew the CEO of Wayne Enterprises was Batman! Or do you expect me to believe she tosses that nauseating expression at everybody in pants thinking every man will swallow whatever bullshit lies follow as gullibly as YOU DO!”

Dick backed quietly towards the showers. Bruce had assumed an icy tone that would freeze molten lava; and Selina, an irony that made it quite clear she wasn't going to be intimidated by a little bit of frost in the vocal chords. In seconds, this exchange between Bruce and Selina had escalated beyond anything he'd ever seen between their costumed personalities.

"...as if you wouldn't have mentioned it if it was anyone other than your Third World thing-on-the-side who was pulling the strings!"

"What possible difference does it make if it's Talia or Luthor or... *Michael Eisner* heading LexCorp? Security is security!"

"ARGGHHH! Hey, Batboy, how many corporate headquarters have you broken into, hm? IT MATTERS, OKAY! Look... Look, where do nice, prep-school, trust fund, playboy executive types keep files they don't want other people to know about? Encrypted disk in a safe in the private office, right? Or maybe, if they're half-way computer literate, an E-Nig partition on a laptop...."

Bruce blinked. Somehow in the course of two sentences it was over. Between the two "looks," she was Selina again, explaining her position with something resembling articulate calm. His own heart was still pounding in his chest. He'd snapped into Bat-mode at the first sound of that voice cursing him out. He needed time to compose himself before he could listen to... What was she saying?... What the hell was an E-Nig partition?

"Batman, on the other hand, keeps his private files in a Cray network in a hole in the ground linked to the JLA satellite and a space station on the fucking moon."

"Okay. Okay I see your point." If she could be reasonable, he could. Really he could.

...

No he couldn't.

"I see your point, but I *DON'T* believe for **ONE SECOND** that that's what this is about! Are you **REALLY** pissed because I didn't tell you, or are you pissed because *she* knew before *you* did?"

"....."

"....."

"I don't know," she said finally. "Both, I guess... This was a really shitty thing to do, Bruce. You shouldn't have... dropped me in this chess game with her without telling me what was really going on."

"I know. I wasn't thinking of it as you against Talia, I was... I'm sorry. It... *'it seemed like a good idea at the time.'*"

She smiled, reluctantly, at the quote.

"Well," Bruce did his best imitation of a mischievous schoolboy, "We just had our first Batcave fight."

She said nothing. If he thought he was getting makeup sex after this nth degree screwup...

"Shall we try it again? Wayne & Kyle vs LexCorp, no secrets."

"Okay. But let me make one thing painfully clear. Somebody that knows is going to go about ferreting out your secrets much differently than somebody who doesn't. This just became a job nobody else on the planet is qualified to do like I can, and that, Mr. Wayne, means I am raising my fee."

True to her word, Selina went about the problem of breaking Wayne Enterprises security much differently. For starters, she moved from Bruce's study into the Batcave. There she often chatted with Alfred, learning a surprising amount about Bruce's work habits in the manor and in the cave. One afternoon, she charmed Tim into helping her with the computer: Batman's purchasing habits for the Batmobile and other equipment were a genuine concern to her. If he used the same vendors as Wayne Enterprises or diverted money from company accounts to pay for them, he exposed the firm in ways Talia would be uniquely able to recognize and exploit. Tim walked her through the procedures, and she noted a sequence to get into the core of the system.

Then she waited. On the 20<sup>th</sup> she placed a call:

"Harvey, how're you doing, Pal."

...: *Selina, long time no meow. What do you want? ...*

"I can't call my old friend just to talk?"

...: *You could, but you never do. What do you want? ...*

"I need a favor."

...: *A good favor or a bad favor? ...*

(That was a hell of a question)

"That's a matter of perspective."

...: *C'mon love, We need an answer. ...*

Selina shook her head sadly. He had to flip his coin.

"A good favor."

(Was it?)

...: *And the winner is... Unscarred. What do you need, pet? ...*

"I want you to make a few appearances tomorrow. Nothing newsworthy, you understand, just so people see you're in town—the dogtrack, that plaza in front of the federal building, the train station."

...: *That's three, We'll need one more. ...*

(It had to be divisible by two. Poor Harvey.)

"The fourth one is your choice. And Harvey, this is important. No crimes, you hear me. No violence. No jaywalking. Just be seen."

The next night, the Bat-Signal shone over the city. Two-Face was in town, and it escaped no one's attention that he'd been spotted on the 21<sup>st</sup>, undoubtedly casing his targets for a crime spree on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Batman and his operatives were staked out at a number of potential targets in the vicinity of each appearance.

It was time.

Selina went down to the deserted Batcave and sat herself down in Batman's chair. She opened the core system as Tim had done... and found exactly what she expected... there was an additional password sequence on Batman's workstation that not even Alfred or Tim knew of. It took only minutes of trial and error to break the three-tiered password sequence:

*Thomas – Martha – Justice.*

Damn.

Breaking into the most impossible holy of holies should make any thief giddy with triumph. Selina felt ill. It was so easy. But it had to be done. Bruce was easy to read once you understood him. If she was to protect him from that poisonous witch bent on inserting herself into his life, she couldn't be squeamish about using that understanding as ruthlessly as her adversary would.

Just what was in these most private files wasn't really important; it only mattered that she'd found a way in. There was no need to look around.

...Except...

She told herself it wasn't that cats are curious creatures. It was just that, well, he was Batman. It was just possible this was a dummy desktop set up to fool intruders. She'd glance through one or two files, just to make sure... She typed in c-a-t when the helpful operating system threw up a pulldown menu of recently accessed files that began with those letters –

Catvid-museum

Catvid2-pier

The nauseous feeling that hung over her since breaking into the system evaporated into a warm glowing laughter as she saw these were the video surveillance records of her committing various robberies. Video records that had been saved and viewed many times. Of course, the ever-vigilant crimefighter could have been watching them over and over again to study her technique. But looking at the filenames after those first two...

Catvid-newcostume

Catvid-legs

Catvid-wow

Catvid-favorite

...Selina somehow didn't think that was the most likely explanation.

A month later Bruce Wayne threw a barbecue for a number of friends and colleagues, including many Wayne Enterprises employees. Lucius and two other senior executives stayed afterwards for a very unofficial meeting.

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight," Bruce began. "I realize this is a little unorthodox, but I imagine you've heard the rumors that LexCorp has been spying on the Wayne building. The rumors are true, and I want to assure you that we are aware, and we're taking steps to counter it. Over the next 30 minutes, Ms. Kyle is going to brief you on those steps." He looked over at her with pride as he continued. "I suggest you listen up, because none of what's said here will ever appear in a memo or a report or an e-mail. Ms. Kyle, the floor is yours."

"Thanks, Bruce. Gentlemen, we're looking at a two-part defense: the first part counters their ability to track comings and goings from the Wayne building."

Lucius spoke up. "Foster and Forsythe suggested sneaking important contacts into the building through hidden entrances, perhaps underground."

"Well that's fine if you're in a James Bond movie, but there's a much simpler way. You're going to have hundreds of businessmen and hundreds of other people coming in and out of the building every day—the ground level is going to become a shopping arcade—and the 34<sup>th</sup> floor will be home to the next hot upscale restaurant."

Lucius's eyes bulged. It was a brilliant notion. Observers wouldn't be able to tell who was entering the building on Wayne Enterprises business and who was just going to lunch.

"But what about the departments that are housed in those areas now?" he asked suddenly.

Selina beamed. "Glad you asked; that's part two. Three divisions will be moved from the midtown headquarters to a new 'high security' research and development campus across the river. It doesn't matter which ones; it's misdirection. With any luck, the observers will think it's to get them away from the prying eyes at LexCorp, that those divisions are especially important. In reality, it's just to free up space in the Wayne building. And to set a little trap."

"A trap?" Bruce asked. She hadn't mentioned this part before.

"The divisions across the river will still have to stay in contact with the main offices. Just like your branches in other cities, they'll be connected by a company intranet, and when—" Selina bit her tongue in order to reframe her thought "*the conniving bitch*" into less accurate but more businesslike language: "*the Lexcorp execs realize those divisions have been deliberately moved out of the observation zone, their first order of attack will be to hack into your intranet and intercept those communications.*"

Bruce interjected, "Our intranet can't be hacked. I set it up myself." His eyes danced with a private joke that said 'and you know how good I am with computer safeguards.'

She passed him a Post-It note with six words: Catvid-museum, Catvid2-pier, Catvid-newcostume, Catvid-legs, Catvid-wow, Catvid-favorite

Bruce blanched, and Selina finished addressing the meeting.

"They're going to hack your intranet. And we're going to let them. From that point on, we can feed them whatever misinformation we want them to have."



Neither Batman, greatest detective of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, nor anyone else in the past four or five thousand years has had the capacity for observation of self and nature exhibited by the Ancient Greeks. The Greeks didn't just see, they grabbed onto the things they saw and chiseled them into the cornerstones of Western Civilization.

Here were a people that saw a specific ratio in nature. They noticed it occurring over and over again, replicating itself in strangely beautiful ways. They called it the Golden Mean, and once they identified it, they pulled and tore at it until they extracted the founding principles of mathematics, music, architecture and physics. Not content with that, their greater thinkers worked the Golden Mean into a philosophy of beauty, thought, and the meaning of life. Meanwhile across town, other thinkers were mapping out the foundations of democracy, rhetoric, teaching, and theatre.

Theatre, of course, came in two varieties: Comedy and Tragedy

The core of most Greek Tragedy is the principle of hubris: the Pride of the Great. When a mortal man, whether king, general or poet, achieves a certain level of success, he is apt to get a mite full of himself. Inevitably, this honks off the gods. And the gods promptly knock him down to size. What contemporary man often fails to realize is that the mythological gods are just a metaphor. Man is a self-righting creature. He doesn't need a real Zeus or Apollo to keep him in line, the Proud will find ways to destroy themselves.

You'd think someone who actually knew Euripides and Aeschylus, who could have attended the first readings of the Iliad or the opening night of Oedipus Rex, would realize the essential truth of the Greek's observation that Pride goeth before a fall. But Ra's al Ghul had the special kind of arrogance that could fully appreciate the principle of hubris, could recognize it as a useful failing in his enemies, but blithely assume such human folly did not apply to him.

Talia had inherited all of her father's hubris. She believed that Luthor appointed her head of LexCorp for her strategic brilliance. Her mind could not conceive of any other possibility. Just as she couldn't conceive that she'd stepped into a trap in the matter of Wayne Enterprises surveillance, that the information her agents downloaded daily from the WE intranet was exactly what Bruce wanted her to have. It wasn't merely that she *didn't* consider the possibility, she *couldn't*. It was no more possible that her beloved could deceive her than it was that he could love another woman.

It was vexing that he allowed the cat to advise him. Talia was sure moving the divisions had been Selina's idea. Probably too, the restaurant and shopping arcade that flooded her observers' records of the comings and goings at the Wayne Building with so many prominent names and faces that it was useless as an espionage tool. But Selina, so Talia believed, was too full of herself and her cleverness to recognize how well Talia knew her beloved's mind. When the divisions were moved, she'd simply hacked the computer system they'd use to communicate with the main office.

She longed to confront the miserable thief and rub her nose in it: how, because of Selina's own strategy, Talia could now eavesdrop on this important part of Bruce's life. She longed to taunt her beloved with her rival's failure, and impress upon him how she could read him in ways Selina never would. She wanted to go to him with some tale of her father's schemes and make him believe in her again, to demonstrate once and for

all that she could control Batman against his very reason as no other woman every would. But that wouldn't do. To benefit from her victory, she had to keep it a secret.

It was most vexing.

Batman was staked out on a rooftop near the waterfront, waiting for an expected drug shipment. It was a bad time to be an underworld stooge in Gotham City. The Bat had visited no fewer than four seedy bars tonight, and the informants had become desperate (not to mention bruised) trying to figure out what the hell he wanted. He seemed more intent on beating information out of them than in actually hearing the information. As the bottom feeders witnessed one stoolie after another spill their guts and get tossed out the window anyway, they became more complete and creative in the information they supplied. The panicked recital of every criminal enterprise, real or rumored, on the lower east side had given Batman an assortment of leads to follow up. He'd chosen this one: drug-dealing scum were just perfect for his mood. No conflicted impulses there, no murky ambiguities—just pure unadulterated evil. And their jaws would make a very satisfying crack when they hit the concrete.

For some bizarre reason, he had assumed his conflicted feelings about Catwoman were behind him once they'd become a couple. How naïve was that! Sure she'd devised this brilliant system of defense for his company, and even made some equally wily suggestions to improve the Batcave's security, but damnit, she'd violated his private sanctum.

...

No, that wasn't it.

...

She'd betrayed his trust.

...

No...

No! *SHE* hadn't trusted *HIM*. That was what stung. In the past, every time they'd declared a truce and tried to work together, she'd complain, sooner or later, that he didn't trust her. But this time, she'd made it very clear that the only reason she was letting Bruce Wayne know anything at all about her plan was because it was his company and it couldn't be helped. She stated, to his face and in the most unambiguous language, that Batman could not be trusted with information that was to be kept from Talia.

"Wonderful, you and Dick should get together. You can belittle me in stereo."

"Dick is a very bright kid. And you—"

"Can be intensely stupid when it comes to letting bad girls into my life."

It was a vicious and hurtful thing to say, and he regretted it immediately. But the damage was done. He steeled himself for the equally vicious shot she'd take in return. She wasted no time.

"Let's get something straight: What I am, I am by virtue of my talent and personality and the choices they've led me to make. If you think I'm threatened by comparisons to some little twinkie that has *nothing* that wasn't given to her by some big strong man, then you have absolutely no idea who you've been fighting with all these years.

“And speaking of that... Y’know, my opinion of old man Ra’s has always been that he’s a bush league schmuck that gives sociopathic megalomaniacs a bad name. And the only reason anybody on, say, my or the Joker’s level even knows his name is because *you* go to pieces every time he’s mentioned. If you didn’t take everybody to DefCon-4 just because an al Ghul comes to town, he’d be just another bad guy with a bad haircut.”

It stung. It was a speech she’d obviously been saving for the right occasion, because it was far too eloquent to have been composed on the spot. There was no denying Catwoman was as deadly with words as she was with her whip. Much as it killed him to admit it, it wasn’t the violation that was pissing him off; it was the bodyblow to his pride. Selina had beaten him in a fair fight on his home turf. She’d outmaneuvered Talia without breaking a sweat, simply because she didn’t have the exaggerated opinion he did of the Demon-crowd’s abilities.

“Sulking? That’s not like you.”

He didn’t turn.

“I really don’t want to talk to you right now,” he said flatly.

As if he’d said the precise opposite, Catwoman came closer and curled up beside him.

“Lucius is so happy he sent two dozen roses along with my check. A Miss Cleghorn in public relations is so giddy with the reviews the restaurant’s been getting, she’s got cover stories on deck in like seven magazines. And my spies tell me the guys in finance sing songs about me.”

“Is this your idea of not talking?”

“I just figured I’d get a ‘thank you.’ I don’t think that’s so much to ask.”

“This conversation has outlasted my interest in it. Go away.”

“Come to think of it, I’ve NEVER gotten a thank you. I helped you stop a plague, I kicked Prometheus’s ass when he’d taken out the entire JLA, I let you use me as bait to catch the Joker, and I have never gotten so much as a—”

“You didn’t *let* me use you as bait. I had to trick you into it.”

Catwoman bit her lip. That was not how she liked to remember it, but it was a fair description of the event.

“And when you met Prometheus you were at the WatchTower to steal the Storm-Opals. I’m the only one that knew that.”

She shrugged.

“And,” Batman moved in closer, feeling much better now that he’d refreshed his ego with a recitation of *his* victories over *her*, “I did get you a little thank you for this latest thing. But I’ve decided not to tell you what it is or where it’s hidden. When you figure it out, you let me know.”

Dick had changed out of his Nightwing costume, double-checked that the cave was finally secure, and entered Bruce’s study from the hidden panel behind the grandfather clock at the same instant Tim came in from the dining room. They looked at each other for a brief second... and both burst out laughing. After a few minutes, they collected

themselves, glanced at each other, then began again. Dick gasped, wiping a tear from his eye, and fought to avoid any eye-contact with Tim that might set him off again. As a mantra to focus his thoughts and get control of himself, he recited a particular passage memorized in his theatre history class:

*"The Farce is a classic and enduring form of humor, relying as it does on the comedic ramifications of a lie or deception. Comedy of errors is often introduced with multiple characters appearing in the same costume or one character appearing in many guises, attempting to be two or more people at once. It is always presented in a grand house where corridors of identical doors escalate the confusion as characters come and go at an increasingly frenetic pace..."*

Tim gaped unbelievably, and soon both were laughing again as Dick sputtered the footnote: "Bruce has had this coming for a long, long time."

One Hour earlier...

The party was in full swing. Once a year, Wayne Manor hosted a fundraising gala to benefit the Foundation. Because Fate is the only cosmic force with a tragic sense of humor, some costumed villain usually made an appearance and Bruce was forced to vanish from his own party so that Batman could foil the crime.

Tonight's event was no exception. Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn had descended with the apparent intention of doing as much property damage as possible while robbing the house and guests, and spritzing the wealthier men with Ivy's hypnotic pheromones for future subplots best left to the imagination.

Considering the gala's history, it was a depressingly predictable turn of events—with the unfortunate wrinkle that this time, when Bruce ducked into the study to get to the passageway behind the clock, he discovered Vernoica Vreeland making out with that tall sportscaster from Cable Sports.

Bruce backed out of the room and went round to use Alfred's elevator in the butler's pantry, only to find the caterers embroiled in a battle of their own (about the temperature of the crab puffs) that was not to be set aside just because some psychotic plant-women were taking hostages in the dining room.

Though it was risky, Bruce decided his only choice at this point was to go upstairs and climb down the drainpipe outside Dick's old room. Ridiculous as he knew he would feel, the great Dark Knight reduced to shimmying down a drainpipe, he was sure Dick had used this as an unofficial exit for years without ever being caught.

Reaching the bedrooms, he spotted a figure already hanging halfway out one of the windows. It was Catwoman. Selina kept her costume in her room, not in the cave, and she'd obviously snuck up here to change as soon as Ivy and Harley made their appearance. Assuming she'd had the same idea of using the drainpipe to get out of the house, Bruce joined her at the window just as she pulled herself back inside abruptly, clamping a hand over her mouth and pointing down.

The Joker and two henchmen were at the base of the window, hiding in the bushes and looking through the French doors at Harley and Ivy's antics inside. Joker was in a quite a state. For a man with bleached skin he looked positively purple. He kept gesturing excitedly to the henchmen, pointing out some new outrage going on inside.

Amusing as the Joker's jealous rage might be under other circumstances, there were people in danger downstairs and Batman had to save them. Bruce motioned to Selina to go round to the landing and wait for his signal. Then he went out the window and, instead of climbing down, he went up, across the roof, and finally used a tree on the far side of the house to work his way to ground level and the cave.

He shook off his dinner jacket and shirt and began fumbling with the cowl when a pair of slim, cool arms wrapped round his waist. "It's been so long, my Beloved."

This was a nightmare.

Talia was no more than two sentences into her usual story about her father—angered by her betrayal, yadda yadda yadda, sending agents to kill her, yadda yadda, and begging his protection—when a click at the top of the stairs warned that someone had opened the passage behind the grandfather clock.

Good News: Veronica and SportsNight had left the study.

Bad News: If that was Selina coming down the stairs, there's no way this would end good.

He unceremoniously flung Talia into the costume vault, slammed the door shut, and leaned (casually) against the hinge with every ounce of his weight. The foot on the stair was not Selina's, however, but Alfred's.

"Sir, the situation upstairs is becoming critical. The Joker has arrived and, quite apart from the criminal proceedings, the exchanges between he and the harlequin woman have become embarrassingly personal."

"I'm on my way, Alfred, just... hang on as best you can."

Alfred turned with a shrug... just as Tim arrived from the outside entrance Bruce himself had used. Bruce saw to his horror that he was expecting to open the costume vault.

"Tim, I ah, need you to go back upstairs—as yourself, don't change into Robin. I can take care of Ivy... and Harley... and Joker. I need you to, ah, get the caterer out of the butler's pantry."

Tim just blinked as Bruce physically spun him round and propelled him back out the door. The Caterer? Unless there was a new pastry chef criminal he hadn't heard of, this was the worst insult ever. Hell even if it WAS a pastry chef criminal he was being sent after, it still wasn't exactly a compliment.

Of course, the moment Bruce turned back, Talia was letting herself out of the vault prattling "How quick your mind is, Beloved."

A lesser man would have gagged.

Bruce was not a lesser man.

He somehow managed to stifle the words "obsessive stalker from hell" and corralled the clinging female long enough to finish changing into Batman. Returning to the party was another matter. If he left her alone in the cave and Catwoman found her here...

He didn't finish the thought. He'd undoubtedly see what would happen in such a scene the next time Scarecrow nailed him with that fear toxin that made you hallucinate your worst nightmares.

He'd have to get Talia out through the mansion without Selina seeing... and if in the process he could somehow stop Harley, Ivy, and Joker from killing his guests, so much the better.

He dragged Talia roughly by the wrist back towards the clock passageway, but checking the monitor he saw that the study was occupied again: Ivy and Catwoman were both there—with Harley Quinn—conducting what appeared to be an intervention.

“But Red, you don’t understand, he said he *LOVES ME*.”

“Harley, for pity sake, he just tried to KILL YOU—*AGAIN!*”

“Every relationship has its ups and downs.”

“Damn it Quinn,” Catwoman broke in, “you used to be a psychiatrist. You ever hear the AA definition of insanity: It’s doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. How many times are you going to go back ‘cause that psychotic loon says he loves you, only to have him try and kill you all over again.”

The subtext was inescapable.

But Batman had no time to ponder the ironies of Selina speaking these words while he had Talia blowing on his neck talking about her need for his protection from her father... Just how many times *had* Talia betrayed him while all the while proclaiming her love? For that matter, how many times had Catwoman fought along side him—rescued him even—while they were ostensibly still enemies? When the chips were down, the one woman could be counted on to stand by him as surely as the other would betray him.

It was a long discussion for another day. Tonight he needed to extract himself from this Rube Goldberg Machine that was becoming his life. The study wouldn’t be free for some time. He tried Alfred’s elevator next. On reaching the butler’s pantry, he saw Tim had indeed dispatched the caterers, but the room was now occupied with Nightwing pummeling the Joker. That was at least manageable. He waited until Joker’s back was to the elevator door, quickly opened it, and smashed a crock pot into the madman’s temple. Laughing boy would be out at least until the police arrived.

“Leave him,” Batman ordered as Nightwing started to tie him up, “I’ll take care of that; you take care of *this*.” He pulled Talia from the elevator. Whatever Nightwing was thinking, he knew better than to speak it.

He tried marching Talia out the back way, but outside the kitchen door Tim was involved in some kind of heated exchange with two crazed Frenchmen.

That left the front door—but he could hear the sirens of two squadcars pulling into the main drive.

The French doors in the Dining Room!

He peeked in and saw Catwoman, having given up on the intervention, was helping soothe the guests still hysterical from the original Harley and Ivy mess.

He pushed Talia behind the draperies and, catching Catwoman’s eye, mouthed the words “Cops are on the way.”

Desperate not to be involved in the official aftermath of this event, she dashed into a handy closet to change back to Selina’s evening dress. As the closet door closed behind her, Nightwing escorted Talia out the French doors, just as Bruce emerged from the study—tuxedo cuffs smudged with bat guano from the cave—and Officers Montoya and Bullock walked through the front door.

Meanwhile, inside Bruce's head...

Batman had always considered Catwoman "the sane one" among his enemies. She was a thief; she stole for profit. She didn't try to copyright fish, wipe out humanity so the plants could rule, or kill off all her henchmen just because it's Thursday. He had always *thought* she was sane, until she started sleeping over and he heard her talking to her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She claimed it was very therapeutic and he should try it sometime. That it would "loosen him up" and make him "more human."

Bruce Wayne stood at his shaving mirror, stared at it for a minute, then another minute, then another.

This was just too ridiculous. He shaved and brushed his teeth in silence, as always.

Next day as Batman, returning from patrol, he glanced at the rearview mirror for a split-second longer than necessary after cutting the Batmobile engine. What would anybody have to say to their reflection? It made no sense. It must be a girl thing. Or maybe a cat thing. He found himself saying that a lot lately. Despite the playboy persona, Selina was his first true girlfriend: the only woman he'd really let into his life, *all* of his life, in an intimate way. Without any similar relationship for comparison, he was becoming increasingly unsure just what in her behavior was typical girlfriend banter and what was uniquely... *feline*.

Next day in his study that question still bothered him. He hated the idea of talking to someone about it. He hated displaying any uncertainty that could be seen as weakness. Besides, who would he ask?

Alfred was a bachelor.

Dick ?

Christ, he had given Dick such a wonderful role model, hadn't he: feckless playboy/monosyllabic avenger with a thing for bad girls. No wonder the poor kid had such a problem closing the deal with Barbara.

Clark ?

Clark had very limited (admirable but limited) Smallville notions about the relations between men and women.... Besides which, there was no power on earth that would make him repeat Selina's words about loosening up and making him more human. They were the same things Clark himself had said on a number of occasions, and Bruce was too smart not to realize: when CATWOMAN and SUPERMAN triangulate on the same aspect of your personality, you can be pretty damn sure it's really there.

Bruce glanced up from his desk and saw the answer: the person he really needed to talk to, the man he could absolutely trust with the deepest fears in his soul, a man who had enjoyed a happy, loving marriage for 20-plus years... was his father.

The portrait of his parents that hung over the fireplace looked down benevolently—but it was the wrong image. He wanted—insane as it sounded—he wanted to talk to his father alone, outside the presence of his mother. He took an old photo in a silver frame off a side table and set it directly in front of him on the desk. He addressed it more or less the same way he'd heard Selina talking to the mirror:

"I need some advice, Dad. I've got girl trouble."

In his mind's eye, he could see his father reacting as Alfred would: mock concern unable to hide a pleased smile. And in his mind's ear, he could imagine the response:

"Well it's about time, Bruce. Your mother and I were starting to worry that those... 'bimbos' I think you call them, were going to sour you on the benefits of a real, loving relationship with a woman. And incidentally, son, 'bimbo' is *not* a proper way to refer to any young woman. Not everyone has had the advantages you've been given, and certainly not everyone is gifted with the intelligence you have, but you still treat them with respect."

"Yes, sir."

"Alright then. We've been meaning to speak to you about that for a while now. Your mother'd kill me if she thought I had this talk with you and didn't say something."

"She would?"

"Of course she would, where do you think you got that tendency to obsess over injustice night and day until it's corrected? That's your mother. Also your temper. The detective skills, those are mine. Medical diagnosis is mostly about watching and listening and drawing conclusions. Don't tell me you didn't know that..."

"I remember, Dad. You told me that before he became a writer, Arthur Conan Doyle had studied medicine, and that Sherlock Holmes's methods were based on those of his professors in med school."

"Good lad. I didn't know you were paying attention that day. I guess you couldn't be hearing me say any of this if you didn't already know."

"I guess. Look Dad, here's the thing: Selina, she's got a temper too. We seem to set each other off. I don't know, maybe it's force of habit, we were fighting a long time."

"Son. It's passion. It's a good thing, trust me on this. Raising their voices, it means they care. If you can upset her that much, it's a sign that she's wild about you."

"So you think it's not just a cat-thing?"

"A cat-thing?"

"Dad, Selina is *Catwoman*; I'm *Batman*. We were *enemies* for a lot of years. If I had a nickel for every time I said I'd take her down, and she tried to flay me with that whip while I tried to get the cuffs on her..."

Bruce stopped as his imagination caught up with the words he was speaking, and he envisioned his conservative, middle-aged father's reaction to this evocative imagery.

"It's not as kinky as it sounds," Bruce lied.

Wayne Sr. didn't seem to have a response, so Bruce went on talking.

"We were just... on opposite sides for a long time... and we fell for each other anyway. And... I guess maybe she feels that's part of what I like and if she doesn't go off at me regularly, I'll lose interest."

He stopped.

My god, that made sense!

He hadn't really seen the logic of it until he heard the words coming out of his mouth. Selina had seemed so totally on top of things at every turn, he hadn't fully appreciated that she was, after all, human. Subject to all the same insecurities as everybody else.

"Just like you come on like gangbusters in the JLA," his father put in, "overcompensating to mask your humanity in the face of so many meta-humans."

"Dad, I'm such an idiot. Every real blow-up we've had has been about Talia. She said—God, I'm an idiot—I said I'm really stupid *about letting bad girls into my life*. Then she said... she said 'If you think I'm threatened by that little—' I forget now, but she

had it all prepared. She'd been *waiting* for me to make the comparison. Of course she's threatened. Christ, if even the smallest part of her thought it was just about 'bad girls'—how could she not be insecure? Let's face it, morally speaking, Talia makes Catwoman look like Marsha Brady.... I've been a real schmuck, Dad. And I need to make it right."

Wayne Sr. smiled. "There are advantages to being a rich man, Bruce. Not as many as people think, but a few. You owe her a thank you, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You told her you got her something, but you haven't yet, have you?"

Bruce looked ashamed.

"I had to say something to break the ice. So I made it into a challenge. She likes that. And I figured that'd give me time to come up with something... *appropriate*."

"Get her a really spectacular piece of jewelry."

Bruce gave a nobody-understands-my-problems look of mock self-pity.

"It's *Catwoman* that has a thing for jewelry, Dad, I've got to make it up to *Selina*."

"Don't be impertinent, Bruce; I'm an older and wiser man and I'm giving you good advice. They all like jewelry."

Meanwhile inside Selina's Head...

The inevitable aftermath of a wild night of drinking is the hangover. The inevitable aftermath of "the season" of society parties is the letdown when it's over and everyone leaves town for the summer. And the little-known result of being a costumed vigilante is the hollowing lull after a period of excitement concludes. Oh it's great that the baddies are all behind bars for a while and innocent people aren't in danger. But there's no denying that a restlessness sets in when you're used to living in an adrenaline-fog 24/7 and suddenly find yourself at your desk catching up on e-mail. It's tedious. Even heroes without guilt issues wind up feeling bad that they're disappointed by the lack of crime and catastrophe.

Selina didn't know this. As often as Catwoman had worked with the good guys, she didn't consider it her vocation. She'd always picked her battles. She'd always made her own fun. She'd known Desire, Rage, Exultation, Indignation, Disgust, Frustration, and Desperation. But Boredom? That was a new one.

The whole episode with LexCorp and Wayne Enterprises security made an invigorating challenge, but it stirred up complex emotions. Selina just hated dealing with her emotions. Getting into costume and kicking some butt the night Harley, Ivy and the Joker invaded the Foundation Gala made a wonderful release. Then morning came—and afternoon. The letdown was palpable. It was one of those days that looked like rain, but didn't.

Ulgh. Summer humidity was a killer.

She attempted a physical workout, the favored therapy of the mask and spandex crowd that shrug off gunfire, ninjas, and supernatural beasties but avoid introspection like the kiss of death. Intense physical exertion was a great way to force all those complicated doubts and conflicts out of one's mind. It was about reducing yourself to

that primal core of your monkey brain where everything was instinctive and simple... when it worked. But it was so miserably humid, Selina found she couldn't perspire properly. Actually she could perspire just fine, but the sweat wouldn't evaporate in the moisture-heavy air.

Ulgh-squared.

There is no sublime fight-or-flight simplicity in feeling like a sticky mass of cotton candy wadded-up in a smelly sweatsock.

"What a vision you are, Thief," said a hard voice made harder with sarcasm, "I can see why my beloved amuses himself with you until we can be together."

“What a vision you are, Thief. I can see why my beloved amuses himself with you until we can be together.”

I turned, making a mental note to stop spending so much time at Bruce’s and beef up my own security a little. There she was: Talia Al Ghul, looking impossibly arrogant, composed—and cool. Immaculate linen suit, not a hair out of place, and smelling—unless I’m mistaken—of amber incense and Chanel Number 5.

I had so hoped she’d want to avoid a face-off as much as I did. I so hoped she’d be passive-aggressive like her old man and try to pass it off as being a mastermind: *Send an assassin to kill me, Cupcake, or frame me for some cat-crime. But no, you’ve gotta let yourself into my bathroom on the hottest bloody day of the year when I just had a work out and I’m sweaty and my hair is frizzing...*

“Did you hear me, Thief?”

I made no attempt to make conversation. This seemed to piss her off in a very gratifying way. She was there to throw a tantrum. If I hurled barbs back at her, it would have only inflated her importance. Deny her her moment of drama, and...

“CAT!!!”

She slapped me! The miserable little... How old was this demonspawn brat? She wound up again and I grabbed the incoming wrist... then the other... not letting go and not pushing back but redirecting the momentum of her strikes to the side.

Now I’ve been on the other side of that particular move, and I know it’s maddeningly frustrating. The more you put into it, the less able you are to make contact. A part of me truly did empathize with the impotent rage behind the ear-splitting scream she let loose—the rest of me remembered that when Batman grabbed *my* wrists that way, I kept my dignity.

I closed my eyes (and ears) and summoned thoughts of Yo Yo Ma, Bill Conti, and Bobby McFerrin. ...*This too shall pass, and when it does, I’ll get my shower—then a martini, an evening of quiet jazz, and a foot massage...* I opened my eyes.

The tantrum seemed to have exhausted itself and I tried to throw the wrists up and backward hoping she’d follow. It didn’t quite work, but she half-fell/half-sat on the clothes hamper next to the sink.

I noted, with a satisfaction I’m not proud of, that her clothes were now wrinkled and her hair was mussed. It evened the playing field a little.

“This concludes the physical portion of our confrontation,” I thought hopefully—but she had a little more inarticulate cussing to get through before we could get down to business. After the fourth repetition of “lousy bitch” I allowed myself a smirk.

“You dare laugh at me, Thief. Tell me what you find so amusing.”

“You know what I was thinking, Princess? I’m thinking that you’re not very good at this. I guess growing up in your father’s court where nobody’d raise their eyes to an Al Ghul, let alone disagree with you, or god forbid deny you something you wanted—well, let’s just say your creativity with the language of insult leaves a lot to be desired....”

I paused for a split-second, then just to make the point I add:

“As, I expect, your imagination is lacking in a number of other arts.”

I was ready for her to come at me again—but it took her too long to work out what I was saying. By the time she got it, she’d look stupid as well as spoiled if she reacted.

"You may insult me all you like, she-witch," She said finally, "but you can never come between my beloved and me. We are destined for each other. He is chosen above all men to continue the line of my father's glory."

"You're just starring in your own little Euripides play over there, aren't you?"

"You mock matters of great importance..."

"I'll give you one thing, Precious: As pompous as Bruce can be when he's on a roll, you make him look like Nathan Lane in drag."

"...but what are you, Thief, that you flatter yourself that you're dear to him? He is a man, he found you pleasing, so what. Now that he's had you, what can you possibly offer him..."

OK, Now I was getting pissed. I was determined not to let this become one of those hissing-scratching-hairpulling sideshows where overdressed women with big hair knock each other into swimming pools and soggy shoulder pads float up to the surface. That was NOT going to happen—but damnit this posturing little twit needed taken down a peg!

I glanced up and saw she was still at it:

"...You're nothing special. You're just some passing amusement, a conquest for the great crimefighter..."

...

You know, you can say what you want about Joker being a homicidal maniac, but in his insanity he sometimes sees things much clearer than rational people. He told me once that if I ever found myself in one of those standoffs with Ra's al Ghul, when you put on a brave show trading insults but he's got the upper hand and you both know it, that I should look him right in the eye and do what no one, not even "the Detective" had ever done—laugh right in his face.

What was true of the father was doubly true of the daughter: self-importance can't abide silliness. And so I just let go and laughed at this last bitter diatribe. She tried to look superior, like the inability to control this wild mirth was a sad mark of my inferiority. That I actually *did* find funny and that made it all the easier to keep the laughter going.

Finally, I made a great effort to control my breathing enough to sputter out, just a few words at a time: "I guess... I must have... achieved some kind of status... in Bruce's life unless... unless... you break into the bathroom... .. of every woman he dates... and give that same speech!"

I composed myself and concluded, "Let me tell you something. I think it's really sweet that you're so protective of and committed to a relationship that doesn't exist. It says a lot about you. And it's almost hard to choke back the tears while I say ...YOU'RE INSANE! Get out of my bathroom, you crazed nutcase from hell. Lady, you are about five different kinds of crazy, plus -you talk like Theodoric of York!"

Cats are amazing creatures really. They have this wonderful ability to try and jump to the mantle from the end table, miss, spill a vase of water onto the sofa and knock a Faberge egg into the wastebasket as they claw at air on the way down, fall ungracefully

on their furry rumps, and then blithely lick a paw like that's exactly the way they meant it to play out.

So I've decided (despite my continued opinion that women with a conflict involving a man should avoid water whenever they meet) ...I've decided that I actually *meant* to keep harping on Talia's pretentious ranting until she got mad enough to come at me again and knock me into the shower, meant to pull her in with me (by the lapels, mind you, not by the hair!) and throw her back against the knob bringing a stream of ice cold water down on both of us. After all, I was in my own apartment and she had to get herself home through midtown Gotham at rushhour in a soaked white suit.

I snickered as I wondered if she walked, tried to hail a cab, or (giggle) took the subway!

I'd emptied the martini shaker twice. Hard as I tried to make light of the incident with Talia, the aftertaste was standing up to vodka surprising well.

I told myself that she's a spoiled child that can't accept not getting her way. Then I thought that Bruce too is a child in some ways. Perhaps they had that in common.

I told myself she's a humorless, obsessive, borderline psychotic with a skewed and limited view of the world. They had that in common as well.

I told myself he chose me to help fight her off when she attacked his company. And then I remembered how little he minds being attacked under certain circumstances.

I told myself vodka is fattening, and if I made another shaker of martinis I would be too hungover to work it off tomorrow.

I filled the shaker anyway.

I wanted to be numb. I wanted to block it all out of my head.

Well.

There was the catsuit. I never tried to drown my troubles in a bottle before; I just put on the mask and let the way of the cat handle everything.

Cats are independent. Cats are loners. Cats might let you stroke their fur and give them catnip, but they ultimately *don't care* if you also have a dog or a parakeet or a girlfriend that you maybe like better or—ARRRRGGGGHHHHHHHHH!

I threw the martini shaker at the nearest breakable object, and felt like nothing so much as a childish, spoiled undisciplined daughter of a demon that needed a good spanking.

Cats aren't like this. Cats aren't jealous. Cats aren't possessive. Cats are independent. Cats are loners. Cats are... oh hell, who was I kidding.

Whiskers and Nutmeg were peeking out from under the sofa. They sniff my shoes every time I return to the apartment. They crawl into any book or newspaper I try to read instead of paying attention to them. And right now, they cared that their flatmate was too busy throwing things to sit down and make the lap they wanted to be curled up in.

It was time to let the cat out.

Nightwing slid his arm under Barbara's back as she nuzzled his throat while a distant news report droned on about some important race that was being run.

"Oh Dick" *-snick snick-*

"Oh Dick, you shouldn't be shy with me. So what if he got here first. You're almost as good as he is, really."

"Almost ... as ... good ... as who?"

"Why, Azrael of course." *-snick snick-*

*-snick snick- -snick snick-*

Dick's eyes popped open. That was *NOT* the alarm clock. *-snick snick-* Nor the telephone. *-snick snick-* He looked bleerily in the direction of the sound: *-snick snick-* Window—Claws—Gloves—Mask—Catwoman?

He went to the window and opened it.

"Since when do you knock?" He wasn't awake, and it came out sounding more hostile than he'd intended.

Dick tied the belt of his robe with a sharp jerk. Now that he was awake his inner-Alfred reminded him that we do not leave ladies standing on our fire escape at four in the morning in the drizzling wet.

"Would you like to come in and, I don't know, have some coffee?" he offered.

She looked like he'd hit her. What the hell?

Then he saw it: Catty looked awful. Besides the wet, she seemed tired and hurt and bewildered... The light dawned: *Way to go, Bruce.*

"Look I'm sorry, come on in. I'm not awake yet."

She did come in but didn't speak, didn't apologize for waking him... Plenty upset, and not saying a word... God, she and Bruce were perfect for each other.

He sat her down and waited patiently. It came out slowly about her encounter with Talia. From the sounds of it, she gave as good as she got, but it obviously bothered her.

He would tell her his pet analogy, Dick decided. About Bruce and Talia. The analogy meant a lot to Dick. It was funny. It was right. And there were very few people he could share it with, most of whom, like Alfred and Superman, were too straight-laced to see the humor. Selina was not straight-laced. She knew Bruce better than almost anybody; she had no love for Talia. She was sure to see the funny.

"Talia is Lucy," he explained. "Bruce is Charlie Brown. Every time she comes around she swears she'll hold that football in place, and every time he falls for it and believes she'd left Ra's and is ready to start a new life ...WHOOSH...Oh Good Grief!"

Selina looked at him like a kitten that'd been stuck on a fire escape in the rain until four in the morning. She did not see the funny.

*Okay, so much for lightening the mood,* Dick thought.

"You have any pet analogies about me, kiddo?" she asked softly.

*Oh.*

*Man this was awkward.*

He had, in fact, what Tim described as a "killer ten minute standup routine" on the subject of Batman and Catwoman.

Dick was always something of a wiseass. It was the circus kid in him. You grow up touring from town to town with a troupe of performers, you get accustomed to a certain level of banter, and you develop a pretty sharp wit of your own to keep up. It

was a shock when Dick went to live at Wayne Manor to discover that everybody didn't sing at parties! Some people couldn't sing *at all*—some couldn't even tell jokes!

When Bruce and Dick had their falling out, his humor became a defense mechanism, and unintentionally he'd wound up the comedic commentator of the Bat-Family, saying serious things in a funny way because it was just too painful to hit them head on.

There was no point in telling Selina any of this. He thought she was good for Bruce. Why mention that his most frequent observation during his years as Robin was that they should "just do it already and defuse the bomb."

"How about this," he said gently, "I'll just shut up and you take your time and tell me whatever it is you want to talk about."

She opened her hand and held out a pin: a leopard—platinum set with diamonds, its spots picked out in ovals of highly polished onyx, two tiny emerald eyes. He recognized it—it was somewhat famous, made for the Duchess of Windsor.

"I found it in his private safe. It's my thank you for the security thing. There was a card."

Dick smiled. "That's so cute. He locked it in a safe! I didn't think Bruce had it in him."

Selina gave him a look that said *I'm going to start over, 'cause that's how completely you've missed the point*. "Yes, it's a cat and it's beautiful and he locked it in a safe for me to find... Don't you get it? It's for *Catwoman*. The son of a bitch... I just... I thought we were past that. I thought... I thought he liked *ME*. Now it turns out I'm nothing special, I'm just ... the first bad girl that happened to run across his path. A conquest."

Dick shook his head in wonder.

"You're unbelievable. The both of you are absolutely fucking unbelievable. From Bruce, of all people, this is a monumental gesture of affection and acceptance and all you can... unbelievable..."

He turned and walked into the next room muttering aloud: "Do you, Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle promise to forsake all others and reserve your warped, angst-ridden, dysfunctional nincompoopery *for each other*, thereby saving at least two innocent people and providing untold hours of fascinated diversion to the rest of us who might otherwise think *WE* have screwed up relationships!"

He returned and flung an auction catalog into her lap with a cover photo of the cat she held in her palm, and one other exactly like it.

"It's one of a pair, Selina! I remember because when it came up for sale we were keeping an eye on the auction house, and I had a bet with Batgirl whether you or Two-Face would make a try for them!"

She looked up, confused.

"Don't you get it? If he had one locked in a safe for *Catwoman*, he probably has the other in a giftbox to give Selina. My guess is he'll give it to you at dinner as soon as he sees you found its mate. Try to act surprised."



Epilogue:

OK, I've been an idiot.

Talia is a bitter psychopathic witch, I know that. I've said it to Bruce; I've said it to her; I've said it to Whiskers and Nutmeg, my bathroom mirror and my luffa sponge.

And still I let her get under my skin with her insane delusional rantings.

I apologize for nothing I ever did as Catwoman—except for that one night.

After the witch showed up in my bathroom, I gave in to the little formless fears.

I let her make me doubt.

I put on the suit and went to Wayne Manor as Catwoman, that's who he wanted after all. The bad girl. A conquest. Catwoman. Not me, not the real me that lives somewhere between Selina and the Cat. So I broke into Wayne Manor and I opened his private safe because I could. I don't know what I was thinking, and I certainly don't know what I expected to find... but I didn't expect a greeting card.

Yet there it was: One lavender envelope addressed to "Kitten," one perfect dried rose, one exquisite cat pin covered in diamonds and onyx with two emerald eyes.

My Thank You. I'd forgotten completely.

I opened the card, half-expecting something sappy and out of character, but instead found the words:

*Took you long enough.*

*I was beginning to think you'd lost your touch*

-B

Wiseass.

We had a dinner date two days later, so of course I wore the pin. Alfred noticed the minute he opened the door and commented as he took my wrap on the lucky coincidence of its having green eyes. Oddly enough that detail hadn't sunk in, and I blushed a little. That was embarrassing; I haven't blushed since I was 15. But Alfred looked so pleased that he could make a woman blush at his age, I guess it's okay.

I met Bruce in the garden, gave him a special kiss in thanks for the pin and... it's the damndest thing, I don't know if it was Bruce or Batman kissing back. At first it was so easy to tell them apart, but lately.... Maybe I am losing my touch.

Dinner was slightly awkward at first. Intimate table for two in a perfect honeysuckle-scented garden, with candlelight glistening off the crystal and an invisible butler whisking plates and filling wineglasses... terribly romantic. And the regular world's version of romance is not something either of us has ever done well. At least it's something I've never done well. I had thought he was none too good at it either, except tonight he was doing it perfectly. He was so smooth and charming and at home with all these movieset seduction props. This wasn't my Bruce; this wasn't 'the guy inside Batman' and it sure-shit wasn't Batman...

Then I got it: THIS was the playboy routine he gives the bimbos.

I would love to say I played along and took up my role in the scene he'd set up, then realized playing a part on a date—even with him, even for fun—wasn't my style and brought the episode to an end with some magnificent bit of wise & sexy bravado. I would love to say that, and I'm sure that's just what would have happened... if only I could have held back the smile. But the second I realized I was seeing "Wayne, Bruce

Wayne," the startling-endearing-pitiful-adorable-sillifudiness of it all produced this ridiculous grin.

"What?" asked the Dark Knight Dilettante.

All I could do was rearrange the smile and gesture in his general direction, the Caped Catch-of-the-County Crusader.

He got up from the table and walked off a few paces, standing with his back to me. I followed and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Do you know why I love you?" I asked, trying to make my voice tender, but sounding amused instead. "Because you suck at the candlelight and violins as much as I do. And I think it's the most adorable thing in the world that you 'ran home to mamma' putting on that ridiculous playboy character just to give me a romantic evening."

I put a hand on his chin and turned his head to face me, intending to give his cheek a light kiss. I expected the seeking, vulnerable eyes from that first night in the vault. What I saw instead was the steel intensity of Batman. They were so interconnected. This was my Bruce.

He walked me back to the table and we finished dinner, but now he acknowledged Alfred's presence and playfully chided him for setting up the romantic staging.

"He says having a house like this to entertain in is a privilege and I don't do it justice."

"Well, maybe if you did it more often, you wouldn't suck at it so very, very badly," I teased.

"Before tonight, I haven't had any complaints," he answered in a parody of the playboy lothario.

I smiled.

"Before tonight you've been playing to bimbos."

For the first time since my encounter with the demonspawn, I was feeling myself again. Cat and Woman teasing my favorite bat.... Enjoying the way he eyed my figure when he thought I wasn't looking. Except he wasn't eying my figure; he was focused a few inches higher.

"That's not quite right, is it?"

"What isn't?"

"The pin, it should be higher and more to the side."

I looked down—the pin was positioned perfectly—and what do men, particularly men who dress as bats, know about ladies' couture?

"Move it up, please."

I started to suspect where this was going, did as he asked, then gave a perplexed half-smile like I was humoring a deranged dressmaker.

"Better," he grunted, reaching into his jacket. He pulled out a small red leather box and slid it across the table. "Now there's room for this."

If it weren't for years spent curling my arm through alarm system lightbeams, my hand may have trembled as I opened the box. Dick's advice to "act surprised" was unnecessary. Even knowing there was a second pin made for the Duchess of Windsor, even seeing that Bruce had set up this elaborate (if somewhat hokey) romantic dinner, even seeing the box as he slid it across the table, it didn't seem real. But there it was.

Bruce was saying something about buying these years ago—diamond leopards with green eyes—telling himself they'd make excellent bait for Catwoman one day and never dreaming...

The words didn't matter; the gift spoke for itself. Two pins: one for Catwoman, one for Selina.

Oh Bruce... ...I've been such an idiot.

OK, I've been an idiot.

I knew when I got involved with Selina Kyle there was going to be a certain amount of... strangeness from the Catwoman part of her life.

I knew she must have contacts and, yes, friendships with some of my enemies. I can't claim to be surprised that any relationships existed. So what's my problem, that these particular ones are so off-the-scale bizarre? They're not. Harvey Dent was once my friend. Edward Nigma is harder to figure out. He wouldn't be my choice for a drinking buddy, but considering the alternatives... From the sounds of their conversation, he's more of a regular guy outside of Riddler-mode than the other psychos.

Besides, it's not like he was involving her in anything criminal. They were just talking. They were talking like friends do.

It's an opportunity, really. Even Matches Malone would never see the star-players interact that way. This could be a watershed in my war on crime. My enemies let their guard down in the presence of my girlfriend in ways that could expose any number of secrets and weaknesses...

She called him Eddie. Not Riddler, not Nigma, Not even Edward. Eddie.

They seem to have little nicknames for everybody. Azrael was "The Choirboy"; Huntress was "Bony Ass." Ra's al Ghul was "The Cadaver." It was like listening to the cast of Seinfeld.

It's part of who she is. It's part of what I ...love. Selina is wonderful, but she's not the whole package.... Could anyone but Catwoman have looked into Batman's eyes that way without blanching for even a second? She hurt my feelings last night, and I shut down and I glared at her... and she just... looked up at me with those impossibly green eyes that see so much and so little... and everything was fine.

Well, I don't get to pick her friends.

Eddie. Harvey. Fine. I can deal. I don't like it, but I can deal. Who else? Penguin? Croc? If Joker so much as has her phone number I swear to god I'll break him into...

Listen to yourself.

...I've been such an idiot.



## SUCH AN IDIOT

---

I'm human. As a man of science I can say that as a statement of fact, free of passion, prejudice, or subtext. The Batman is human. I admit it every time I put on a Kevlar chest plate.

That bit from Shakespeare:

*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,  
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?*

That's how we got here, isn't it Selina? Batman has the same organs, the same senses, and the same passions as any man. You understood that when no one else did. You understood before I knew it myself.

*If you prick us, do we not bleed?*

Batman is human. I admit it every time I put on the Kevlar. I hate that you know those people. I hate that you're on friendly terms with Riddler and Penguin and Two-Face. I hate that you called him "Eddie." I hate that you have in-jokes and pet names for Dick and Helena and Jean Paul. I hate that those people are a part of your life and I hate the part of your life they're a part of. Most of all, I hate myself for feeling this way. I've tried, Batman has tried, to make this a moral issue: they are criminals and it's wrong to have anything to do with them. Period.

But deceiving myself is not a luxury I can afford. I've only done it once, in denying my feelings for you all those years, and even that was idiotic and dangerous. I was lucky. You felt the same way. You found it 'cute.' Another type of woman would've taken advantage and... So you see I *can't afford* to delude myself the way others can.

It's not a moral judgment; it's not that they're criminals. I just don't like them. And I don't want them to have this part of you, this secret part of you, that's intimate and carefree with people that try to kill me on a regular basis. This can't be. It has to stop. It stops tonight.

"I thought we'd order in tonight instead of facing the Saturday night hoard at d'Annunzio's"

She raised an eyebrow as though it were a scandalous suggestion ... I suppose it was a transparent excuse: Bruce Wayne never waits for a table at d'Annunzio's or anywhere else... but I wanted us to be alone to talk seriously and she jumped to another conclusion entirely.

"And after I got all dressed up," she sighed prettily. "Okay, menus are on the desk over there. Have a look while I get comfortable."

She disappeared into the bedroom while I started rehearsing in my own mind: *I'm human. As a man of science I can say that as a statement of fact. I admit it every time I put on the Kevlar...*

“Unless of course you want to undress me yourself,” came a playful chant from the next room. The tone set off a familiar quiver... I wanted to talk seriously and she wanted to play. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

She returned a few minutes later, tank top, simple cotton skirt, looking cool and casual and sweet. One of those moments when I almost forget she’s Catwoman.

“The sesame noodles from Little Saigon are good, or if you still want Italian, Antonio’s delivers.” She stopped with a self-conscious half-laugh. “What? You’re staring.”

*I can't keep doing this, Selina. I'm human. I can't stand it that you're friends with those people.*

“I... was wondering if you’d come with me to the Watchtower later. I’ve got monitor duty. If it’s a slow night, it can be pretty boring. I could use the company.”

Not exactly a lie. Monitor duty makes me crazy. Being away from my city, missing patrol to babysit equipment... I could easily rig something up to relay anomalies to the cave or Batmobile terminals—but for Clark and his 400 objections.

“What if it’s not a slow night?” she asked. “If something happens while I’m there and the others show up. Will we tell people we’re ‘just enemies?’”

She knew there was something else going on. How many times had we played that scene, she and I, voices saying one thing, eyes saying another?

“C’mon, you’ve helped the League before, more than once, nobody’d bat an eye.”

“Sure, I can tag along on your JLA jaunt, if that’s what you want.”

It was a cue to change the subject. Which was fine with me since the Watchtower wasn’t what I meant to be talking about in the first place.

“Sesame noodles, you said?” She nodded and I reached back to the desk to get the menu. In doing so, I bumped her computer mouse and the screen flickered to life. My peripheral vision picked up her instant messenger flashing in the lower corner. I handed her the menu and while she called in the order, I asked if I could check my e-mail. She nodded absently. It was so natural. It was so casual... It was one of the shittiest things Batman has ever done. She once broke into my desktop because it was necessary for the job I asked her to do. I was invading her privacy because I was... I don’t even know. Suspicious? Jealous? Possessive?

I didn’t read her mail or hunt through her address book. I’m sure I would have stopped myself anyway, even if it wasn’t for *that infernal sound*.

“HAHAHAHAHA”

As soon as the computer logged on, the messenger launched itself. And there they were—my enemies, in a neat color-coded scrolling list: Clayface, Croc, Freeze, Harley, Hatter, Ivy...it was amazing. One name, labeled “J,” was flashing—the backlogged messages, obviously—and the speaker made a sickening cackle: “HAHAHAHAHA”

Selina hung up the phone, walked over to the desk, and (politely under the circumstances) slapped my hand away from her mouse and keyboard. Knowing the only decent thing to do was turn away, I stood my ground and read over her shoulder as she opened the message:

:) *Catty, babe, Harley walked out again. Remind me how to set the VCR.*

:) *Catty, you there? Emergency! No Harley. And I need to tape Who's Line is it Anyway?*

Selina rolled her eyes and typed:

^^ *Serves you right. Go away, I'm busy.*

:) Good, you're there. Remind me how to set the VCR ?

^^ Sigh. TV to 3, VCR to 3, Cable to 66. Enter twice—set the time. Power down.

:) Thank you Catty.

:) You know, Harley's left me again. You could come be my sidekick.

^^ I've told you before, Jack, it's not going to happen. Catwoman is nobody's sidekick. And I don't like your habit of smacking the girlfriend around either.

Jack? JACK? I read the next line through a blur of escalating rage.

:) But just think how ol' Batsy would freak out. HAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

She started to answer ^^ Give it up J when I pushed her aside and typed: FUCK OFF, JOKER. MENTION IT AGAIN AND THEY WON'T FIND ENOUGH OF YOU TO ID THE BODY then swiftly yanked the modem cord from the wall and turned to Selina with icy calm:

"Can we have dinner now that the psychopath can tape his favorite show?"

Most often, she'd have answered that tone with white hot temper or else brazen sexiness, but tonight was a controlled calm that matched my own.

"That was really stupid, y'know that. That is a dangerous man whose nose you just tweaked using my name, which would be bad enough if I had asked you to stick your oar in or if it served any purpose at all except some macho—"

"I'm human, Selina. I'm flesh and blood, and I hate that those people are a part of your life."

She considered this, as if it never occurred to her I might object to her palling around with my worst enemies. When she spoke, however, it was clear that she only paused to work out how to explain this to my limited male intellect.

"And I hate that they're a part of *your life*, Bruce. They don't generally try to end mine."

"I'd almost rather they did," I muttered. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded, I just... really *hate* that you're friends with them."

"The Joker is not my friend. He's a homicidal maniac. Scarecrow is a homicidal maniac. Ivy is a homicidal maniac that dyes her hair. I avoid them. When I can't do that, I humor them... and I handle them. But they're not my friends."

"Riddler is your friend. Two-Face is your friend."

"Harvey is my friend... and yours if I'm not mistaken."

"I suppose. Once."

"Between you and me, I find the other half pretty annoying, what with all the two-references. But it goes with the territory."

"The 'other half' is a lot more than annoying. He's a dangerous killer."

"He's sick. You don't write off a friend because he's sick—at least I don't."

I had no answer for that. This wasn't where I expected the conversation to lead. The doorbell rang—it was the dinner we'd ordered. We ate and talked of other things, then abruptly found ourselves back on the original topic:

"You called him 'Jack,'" I began.

She answered with the naughty grin I hadn't seen in months.

"Darlin' I'm a 38 double-D with 3-inch heels and a leather whip, I get to call anybody anything I want."

It's a valid point.

“Well,” I tried to make the best of it, “at least after all this time I finally learned his real name.”

“That’s not his name. Nobody knows his name.”

“Then why—”

“‘cause it pisses him off. You should see him froth at the mouth whenever I do it. It’s beautiful.”

Sometimes I truly love that girl.

It's getting harder to tell where Batman stops and Bruce begins. Or maybe it's the other way around.

The others tell me I'm naïve about Batman. That he's sneakier and more manipulative than I give him credit for. I've always chalked this up to my fellow rogues being idiots. I mean, at the time I could always read his thoughts like a book: His mouth said "You're a thief and I'm taking you down" his eyes said "Run away now or I can't stop myself from kissing you."

It turns out not all his thoughts are as easy to read as that particular one. He was hurting last night; I could see that. But that's all I could see.

The Watchtower was awkward. He only asked me there to avoid coming clean about the other thing—when it finally came out what was really bothering him, my supposed friendship with the other rogues, it set up a weird point/counterpoint: I had my ties to the rogues just like he had ties to the JLA.

I thought it made a good parallel and I said so. "Just because you work with these people doesn't mean you're all friends, does it?" I knew damn well it didn't. I'd seen enough of the JLA to realize he scares the crap out of them. His mind games with the Joker are nothing compared to the number he's doing on Green Lantern.

I knew they weren't all friends. But I didn't know how vicious it had gotten. I can't say I was surprised to hear about the protocols. Batman is hell on wheels when he thinks he's right and you're wrong—which would be all of the time. And personal considerations will buy you exactly nothing (well, almost nothing) in those situations. Nobody knows that better than I do.

If one of the heroes turned, no friendships, no years spent on the same team, would make a bit of difference. He'd do what he had to. Rather than wrestle with it in the middle of a crisis, he planned ahead. Perfectly in character. Perfectly understandable to anybody that knows him. How odd that these people who thought they had such a bond, didn't grasp something so *obvious*.

He says I understand because we're alike in that respect.... After all, he was my enemy as much as I was his, and Catwoman never let her feelings for him stop her from doing whatever I pleased.

They tell me I'm naïve about Batman. He's manipulative, unprincipled, and untrustworthy....

It's amazing, the dayshift we relieved at the Watchtower pulled me aside and said there's something I should know if I'd be working with Batman. What would they say, these self-important pinnacles of justice and heroism, if they knew they were telling me exactly the same things the rogues say about him: I'm naïve; he's manipulative, unprincipled, and untrustworthy.

It's possible I'm being played.

It's possible he planned the whole scene at my apartment to set up the rogues/JLA parallel in my mind, then told me about the history with the protocols and planted the suggestion of how alike we were... all to get to that one moment—just to ask that half-joking question:

"Do you have any protocols, Kitten?"

It was so light and off-hand, the voice and manner that charms every socialite on the Upper East Side.... But he wasn't gossiping about Bunny Wigglesworth's fourth divorce; he was asking if I'd hand him plans to take down the rogues.

"Okay, not *protocols*," he went on, "but you know, inside information that might help take one of them down?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"No."

"You're serious?"

"Does it strike you as something I would joke about?"

"No."

"See."

"But you're not generally inclined to joke about anything at all."

"But if I were, this wouldn't be it."

"Right."

"So do you or don't you have protocols? 'Cause if you do, I'm just saying I'd really like to see them."

...It's really getting harder to tell where Bruce stops and Batman begins.

A silent puff of air came from between the Batman's lips. He opened his eyes as the 30 minutes finally elapsed. He placed his hands on the steel cable in which his ankles had been supporting him, and flipped himself around and downward. An acrobatic triple followed, with a tumble raising him into fighting stance as he struck at the dummy in front of him... shearing the head clean off. He stood motionless for a moment. Then calmly spoke out loud to the recording device near his practice area.

"Exercise failed. Excessive damage to dummy indicates either a loss of equilibrium after protracted inversion, or a deteriorated mental faculty due to inactivity. Daily regimen must be increased."

He stopped speaking and walked toward the car. "Sloppy." The word echoed in his head. "You've grown sloppy."

In the past, periodic lulls in criminal activity made him restless, and he'd channeled the restlessness into longer and more vigorous workouts. This time, what had he done with the precious boon? Played footsie with Catwoman.

No, that wasn't fair. Romancing Selina was the first non-Batman decision he'd made in a long time that worked out okay. If his concentration was off—and it most certainly was—it didn't take the World's Greatest Detective to work out why: As the Batmobile cruised downtown the day's headlines scrolled over a lighted marquee in Gotham Plaza: FOUR DAYS SINCE ARKHAM ESCAPE! CRIME WAVE CONTINUES! POLICE STYMIED...

Batman stymied.

Other than Catwoman, the only criminal he ever felt conflicted going up against was Two-Face. Harvey Dent had been a friend and an ally. Dent, Gordon and Batman had taken an oath, like some medieval brotherhood, to draw a line against the evil and drive it from Gotham for good. Where would they all be now if the acid hadn't scarred Harvey's face and shattered his mind before they could even begin the task.

It was never pleasant taking down a friend. Batman dealt with it by telling himself that this monster wasn't his friend—Two-Face was the thing that killed his friend.

Except Harvey Dent wasn't dead. Harvey, it turned out, was Selina's friend. He dragged her to karaoke bars the way he had once done his colleagues from the DA's office. He'd told her the same stories: the time his fraternity rigged the dance marathon and how he took the bar exam with a hangover. He extorted the same hopeless wagers from the rogues on the eve of the Harvard-Yale game as he had once done from Bruce Wayne.

Harvey Dent was very much alive inside Two-Face, and both Bruce and Batman had written him off completely.

Now Two-Face had escaped—yet again. What the hell were they running at Arkham anyway, a Bed and Breakfast for the criminally insane? It was less than a month since Dent was captured.

Now he was free again, and almost immediately he'd embarked on a crime-spree—but not a typical Two-Face crime spree. There was no Gemini or Janus tie-ins at any of his targets, no 2s in the addresses or dates.

It wasn't possible. Obsessive psychotics don't wake up one morning and simply drop the core symbol of their psychosis. Something very bad was happening, and

Batman knew if he didn't figure out what, there was going to be a double-digit body count.

What was even stranger than Two-Face's break from his theme was the peculiar silence of the witnesses. There were police and lawyers at some of the locations, people who normally remain calm and observant in a crisis, but their recollections were just as vague as the civilians who were too terrified to notice much of anything.

Batman's reverie was cut off by the appearance of the signal.

Damn.

Probably another useless status-report. Gordon would've known not to bother him with trivia Batman could get from news reports. The replacement hadn't learned yet.

As always, Batman neared the roof of Police HQ to observe before making his presence known. This began as a simple precaution: in the early days, his alliance with the police was uncertain and strained. He had to be prepared for a double-cross. In the years that followed, it became his trademark. He knew Gordon wasn't planning anything underhanded, but he watched and waited anyway, picking his moment to materialize without warning, like a spirit of the night.

As he watched now, Batman couldn't quite believe his eyes.

There *was* a figure from the past waiting for him, but it wasn't Gordon... It was Harvey Dent.

Fifteen minutes later, Batman understood why none of the law-enforcement witnesses volunteered any details: They weren't random by-standers. Two-Face was deliberately seeking out Harvey's old friends, allies and colleagues, forcing them to witness his transformation—not into Two-Face, but into a personification of raw rage and pain.

Before Batman could make his presence known on the rooftop, a hapless patrolman arrived on the scene. Gordon's mutton-headed replacement couldn't be bothered to check on the unauthorized use of the signal himself and had sent this rookie. Idiot.

Two-Face leveled a gun at the rookie's head, produced his coin to give the condemned man the customary 50-50 chance for a reprieve—but instead of tossing the coin, he railed against the night sky like King Lear, screaming with a passion seldom seen outside of grand opera.

He denounced the hypocrisy of law, grounding tenets of freedom in a legacy of slavery...

He damned lawmakers, insulating their own power rather than any upholding any concept of right and wrong...

He cursed lawyers that care more about winning than punishing the guilty or freeing the innocent...

He denounced a police force mired in racism and corruption...

And then he looked directly at the blackness where Batman lurked and condemned the hypocrisy of vigilantes, claiming to be instruments of justice while violating every principle of due process and constitutional protections...

It might have been an eloquent argument if he was addressing the Supreme Court, or perhaps making the nominating speech at a political convention, but it was a horrifying display delivered only to the moon and stars by a madman.

It was a horrifying display, even to those (especially to those) hardened to the dementia and violence of costumed criminals. No one who felt any sense of commonality with the one-time district attorney could escape the haunting idea that, but for a wrong move or a quirk of fate, *they* could become *that*.

With a trembling hand, Two-Face held out his coin and screamed that chance was a faithless bitch. Good side up, he would shoot the patrolman, scarred side up he would shoot himself. Then he hurled the coin off the roof, and with a lightning move sent the patrolman after it. Batman acted quickly, firing his grappling line in time to save the patrolman. Unable to prejudge the arc of descent or the effect of the patrolman's added weight, the landing on an adjacent rooftop was rough and painful. By the time Batman recovered himself, Two-Face was long gone.



This was going to be tricky. Selina hadn't been herself since I asked her about protocols. I played it badly. I may have awakened the cat.

I didn't think it through beforehand. It was impulsive: *if she knows them so well and isn't friends with them, let's make the best of it.* Idiot. Now I really need her insight, and I may have poisoned the well.

The cats inside alerted her to my presence the moment I landed on the terrace. Too late, I thought that Batman might be the wrong face to put on this. Bruce Wayne should have brought a bottle of wine...

"Yes?" Not exactly hostile, but I couldn't help but notice she had joined me on the balcony rather than inviting me in.

"I need your help with something."

"Monitor Duty again?"

Her tone was cold and mocking. If she was in costume, I would have been bracing myself for the claws.

"I'm serious. There's a situation brewing—a bad one—and I need your help before people get hurt."

"This must be the 'tude Nightwing complains about. You just take it for granted that everybody will be at your beck 'n call 24/7 and do anything you ask—"

"Damn it, Catwoman, this is important!"

Cold steel slammed down behind her eyes. Calling her Catwoman was definitely a mistake. And asking for her help so soon after the protocols debacle ... Damn it what was wrong with me. I used to be able to handle this woman and her tempers and her impossible unfathomable ideas of ethics....

Yeah, right.

I used to handle her.

And Green Lantern wears yellow skivvies.

Selina returned to her apartment without a word. She didn't try to throw me off the balcony or anything, but I sensed that she might if I tried to follow her in. It was completely unacceptable. Why did she have to make everything so difficult? I couldn't get bogged down in this right now.

I flipped open my phone and dialed her private line. Miraculously she answered. Before she could start with the objections I blurted out "It's Harvey. Two-Face. That's why I need your help, okay? It's Harvey."

Without warning, the bedroom window shot open and there she was—changed into her Catwoman costumed except, I noted with amusement, for the gloves, whip, and one boot which she carried in her hand as she poured onto the balcony.

"You manipulative son of a—" *—zipped up the boot—*

"...How dare you think that just because I give you a tumble now and again—" *—left glove—*

"...He is my best friend." *—pulling at the other boot—*

"...He's more than a friend; he's a brother." *—claw caught on the boot, glove came back off—*

"...He's a nice guy who's very isolated." *—reboot—*

"...has nothing in common with the likes of Joker or Penguin or those lowlife thugs—" *—zip—*

“...just cause we have sex now doesn’t mean everything’s changed.” *–left glove redux–*

“...cold-hearted bastard to think you can just use me to get to...”

“Selina, stop. Please. Harvey, *your friend* Harvey, is in real trouble. He’s having, I don’t know, some kind of breakdown. I don’t understand what’s going on with him, and that’s why I want your help. Understand? I am *asking* for your *help*. I’m not trying to use you, not trying to take advantage of our relationship. I am simply asking you to calm down and listen to me for five blessed minutes.”

I didn’t add that while having sex may not change everything, watching her clumsily pull on the costume while chewing me out was unquestionable the most adorable sixty seconds I would ever spend with any criminal and definitely a point of no return.

She did stop. She looked up at me with those gorgeous green eyes and listened. She said she’d talk to Harvey, as a friend, and find out what was wrong. She agreed to help me.

That’s what should’ve happened.

Except I didn’t say *Please Stop your friend Harvey is in trouble*. I asked why she was protecting those people. I asked if she had no concept of right and wrong. I said all evil needs to thrive is for good people to do nothing.

She said I insulted her intelligence. That I was using her to get at those I couldn’t beat in a fair fight. She said I was sneaky and manipulative, trying to play her...

*She* called *Me* sneaky and manipulative... *SHE* called *ME*.... Well it takes one to know one, Lover!

Then I said... I said ... I said unforgivable, hateful things. I brought up the past. I reminded her of all the times that... I implied, I knew it wasn’t true, but I implied that she just played up to me—sexually—to keep me off balance, that the whole affair was “just business.”

It wasn’t heated after that. We both got so eerily calm it scares me. A high school debate has more passion. We could never and would never agree on the deep moral issues. White is white and black is black. We were kidding ourselves. It was over.

Bruce did a backflip off the hanging rings, somersaulted in mid air and landed hands-first on the sidehorse, then flipped again to land on his feet while swatting the practice dummy—which blocked his punch—causing him to overbalance on the landing.

The figure that stood in the practice dummy’s spot gave a mischievous grin.

“You would’ve grounded me for life if I’d fallen for that.”

“Put the dummy back on its mark before you go.”

“Aw shucks, boss man, I was just havin’ some fun.”

“You here for some purpose other than sabotaging my workout, Dick?”

“Yeah, matter of fact, I am.”

“Well?”

“You and Selina have a fight?”

Bruce turned with a scowl that could reduce entire planets to ash.

“What possible business is that of yours?”

Rather than answer, Dick sat, put his feet up at one of the several computer workstations, and leaned the chair backwards until it balanced precariously on the rear wheels. Then he reached over his head to take a bottle of water from the mini-fridge behind him. Bruce found the performance annoying. Dick was making a point of his easy familiarity with the cave.

"I got an interesting e-mail the other day: seems you've been running Tim ragged with extra training—including big bad Zogger"

"Strategic self-mutating defensive regimen 4," Bruce corrected automatically. Why Dick had to make up silly nicknames for the various training programs was beyond him.

"And Barbara tells me Cassie's practicing twice as long too. So I ask myself: Self, what was the one occurrence that always brought on double-time training sessions with big bad Zogger? Yes, it was a run-in with Catwoman!"

Bruce gave an exasperated sigh. This was none of Dick's business—but it was simpler and faster to just tell him and make him go away.

"We broke up, okay."

"Pah. You'll be back together by the end of the week."

"We broke up, Dick. There are... differences... we can never get around."

"The differences are what make it fun, Bruce! That gobbledygook about couples that are two halves of the same person is all bullshit. I know women that are just like me—I can't stand 'em. You and Selina click off your differences, you always have."

"It's over, Dick."

"Do you still love her?"

"Yes."

"That was a mighty fast answer."

Bruce said nothing.

"You still love her. You had a fight. You'll make it up."

"We never fought like this before."

"You never fought before."

"Dick, this is Selina we're talking about. We've been fighting since—"

"That wasn't fighting. Whatever the hell that was that you used to do with Catwoman was a turn-on for both of you. That was foreplay. This was a fight. Now you know what one is. You fought, you make up. It's not the end of the world."

Bruce considered this for a long moment. Dick was his junior by ten years. He had no business doling out advice in this condescending manner. But, he had slightly more experience with "normal" relationships than Bruce—slightly. It was just possible he might be right.



In his ravings, Harvey Dent said Fate was a faithless bitch. He'd accepted her as the only thing that was holy—men lived or died, countries rose and fell at her whim. A shake of her head and a message goes awry, the lover swallows poison and his bride impales herself on his sword. A smile from her lips, a song on the radio reminds a quarreling couple of their first dance. Harvey had accepted Fate as the one force that shaped men's lives—and she betrayed him.

She mocked him now –from the television– two people on a sitcom were arguing about a musket:

*Dana:*

*Guns kill people, Sam. They're macho and they're redneck. And they're disgusting, and frankly, despite all your faults –*

*Sam:*

*The world isn't really like that, Dana. It's a more interesting place than that.*

*Dana:*

*Than what?*

*Sam:*

*Black and white. Here.*

*Dana:*

*You're a member of the anti-handgun coalition?*

*Sam:*

*Francis Marion was a farmer from South Carolina, Unschooled, unsophisticated, but when the king sent his army to terrorize the colonists, who wanted nothing more glamorous than their birthright, Marion and 100 other farmers fought them off with this. They stood up to the British Empire. With that crappy piece of tin. You've got to learn to separate the stuff ...From the stuff.*

Harvey had accepted that life was duality, male and female, 1s and 0s, night and day, life and death, and yes BLACK and WHITE. Everything was 50-50 and it took only a flip of the coin, an exercise of faith in Fate, to decide. She betrayed him.

Life was not black and white. And if it wasn't black and white, it couldn't be decided by the coin. And as he sat at the mirror trying to decide whether to shoot his reflection or himself, the television mocked him. He could shoot himself or his reflection—he did the impossible and opted for the third choice. He shot the television.

This time it was Alfred who interrupted Bruce's workout—with a soft cough rather than hazardous pranks with the practice dummy. He informed Master Bruce there was a visitor waiting upstairs. Entering the study, Bruce was surprised to discover the visitor was Selina.

"I talked to Harvey," she began without pleasantries. "He's in nine kinds of pain. You should've told me."

"I didn't really get the chance, did I?"

"No," she admitted, "I flew off the handle." There was a pause where the words *I apologize* were notably absent. "I'd been getting angrier and angrier since—"

"The protocols."

"Yes. I felt used."

"You're not alone, Tim and Dick have both taken heat from Young Justice and the Titans. The assumption seems to be that I have everybody I know spending their spare time figuring out how to sandbag their teammates."

Selina smiled in spite of her determination to remain angry.

"Young Justice? Wouldn't the merest hint of the senior heroes taking them out to the woodshed put a stop to any shenanigans?"

Bruce produced the Batman twitch-smile.

"That's what Tim said—adding that of all the senior counterparts by whom one wouldn't want to be taken out to the woodshed, he had it worse than anybody."

Neither actually laughed, but the tension eased somewhat. Then Selina spoke seriously:

"Harvey is... really cracking up, isn't he?"

"Looked that way to me. Any idea why?"

"When I saw him, he said he was 'drowning in the gray.' He said Francis Marion beat Redcoat with Brown Bess, and Leonard Berlander was dead. Any of that make any sense to you?"

"Berlander, Berlander—C'mon."

Ten minutes later they were in the cave, hunched over a monitor displaying a casefile.

"Leonard Berlander was one of Harvey's first successful prosecutions as DA," Bruce noted, skimming the file. "Low level racketeering, numbers, protection. Sentenced to 12 years, paroled in '96, busted on possession in '98, 1 year suspended, busted again—this guy isn't a very good crook is he?—this time as muscle for Penguin. Just got out in March. You said he's dead?"

Selina nodded, and with a few swift keystrokes Bruce switched from the courthouse records to the newspaper obituaries:

"Suicide off the Longbend Bridge. No spouse, no next of kin."

"Not enlightening."

"No. What was the other name?"

"Francis Marion."

More typing and then:

"Nothing."

"How about Redcoat, wasn't there somebody in Star City with that handle a few years ago?"

"Not that I remember... No, nothing. What about 'drowning in gray?'"

"That one's pretty obvious, isn't it," Selina asked with an un-amused smile.

"It is?"

"Gray. That'd be, you know, that stuff between black and white."

"What do you want from me, anyway?"

"I'm just saying, Harvey Dent is very big on black and white. Duality—yin and yang—polar opposites."

"Yes, he is. So how does gray enter into it?"

"I don't know."

The next morning Alfred brought a sleeping Bruce Wayne the telephone on a silver tray.

"What time is it?" he asked bearily.

"It's just after six, sir."

"In the morning?"

"You have a call, sir."

"You couldn't take a message?"

"It's Miss Selina, sir."

Oh. Alfred wouldn't want to get into the middle of that. They were back in limbo—not exactly done with the fight, but done fighting.... More or less working together on Two-Face, unless that was just for that one visit.... Yep, he had no idea where Bruce or Batman stood with Selina or Catwoman—back in limbo.

"Hello?" Bruce managed groggily.

...:*It's the Redcoats*::... squawked the earpiece.

"What?"

...:*The Redcoats, the actual Redcoats—Lobsterbacks—the British Army—the Revolution*::...

They were all like this—Ra's, Scarecrow, Freeze—he could be knocked out, gassed, beaten half-senseless, and the moment he came to, they started babbling incomprehensible nonsense.... Bruce didn't cover the receiver as he asked:

"Alfred, could you bring me a pot of very strong coffee, please."

...:*Hey, Sherlock, you listening? It's the actual Redcoats—Francis Marion drove the British out of Charleston during the American Revolution, his men carried something called a Brown Bess Second Model Muskatoon*::...

"The American Revolution?"

...:*Yep*::...

"What does that have to do with Two-Face or Gray or Leonard Berlander?"

...:*I have no idea—but I can't wait to find out*. ::...

"How do you suggest we do that?"

...:*Your way? You sit in an overstuffed chair in the Diogenes Club and ponder the puzzles left you by the bad guys. My way- I GO ASK HIM! This is fun, you know that!* ::...

She hung up. Now she was having fun. Incomprehensible woman.



"Selina, this isn't a game. Couldn't you just tell me where to find him and wait here?"

The argument resumed as soon as they hit the rooftops.

"I am not about to abandon my friend to your medieval black-and-white notions of..."

"Justice is not an abstract notion to me, Selina. I'm not some mystery novel detective that only cares about winning a war of wits with an adversary and the victims are incidental. There are REAL, INNOCENT PEOPLE I am trying to protect, people who are going to get hurt or killed if that mad dog isn't brought down. I can't reduce those people to some philosophical discussion about shades of gray."

"So you're free to do anything you want and use anybody you can because the ends justify the means, is that it?"

"Maybe you'd feel the same way if your own ends were a little more defensible."

"Oh, that's just cold, Sport."

The voice was Two-Face's. He stood before them with wild eyes and a double-barreled shotgun.

"Harvey?" Catwoman asked tentatively. Two-Face continued to address Batman.

"Don't get me wrong, there was a time we would've sung Amen, Halleluiah—Black and White! Right and Wrong! Good and Evil!"

He swung around to Catwoman and gestured wildly with the shotgun.

"That's the way it is, pet, all your equivocating is just—talk. Cheap lawyers tricks. Heh Heh—"

He swung back to Batman.

"But it's not so. Turns out Good isn't Good. How s'pose to make EVIL the opposite of GOOD if GOOD ISN'T GOOD ANYMORE, HUH?!?"

"Harvey," Catwoman repeated, firmly this time, trying to get through the delirious ranting. She failed.

"HYPOCRITE! HARVEY WAS A HYPOCRITE! Law and Order, it was the FAST TRACK to the GOVERNOR'S MANSION! WAS NEVER ABOUT RIGHT AND WRONG! Just Politics. Leonard Berlander is dead. He didn't do it. The racketeering charges, chief witness was sister of some old girlfriend he knocked up, frame up. I found out later... kept quiet. Was onto a big case—important victory—couldn't be bothered fixing past mistakes... Leonard Berlander. Now he's dead. Couldn't've got legitimate work after prison, could he? Back in jail, back out, now he's dead.... Harvey wasn't such a good guy. No hero in a white hat. Gray. In between. How can we be the opposite of that? Huh? How can we?"

Catwoman didn't know what to say. There was no answer for what had happened to him. He'd built his life around Two-Face being Harvey's opposite. Harvey said Right so Two-Face said Left and the coin told them which it would be. Berlander's suicide forced him to remember that Harvey wasn't a flawless embodiment of good, just a man.... He'd been doing it all wrong. Two-Face no longer knew how to be Harvey's opposite, and the coin couldn't tell him what to do.

It was Batman who finally spoke.

"It isn't gray that's between black and white, Harvey. That's just in old movies. In life, what's between black and white is color... Reds and Blues and Purples..."

Wouldn't the world be a sad place without them. You want to know something interesting? In painting, black is the presence of all colors, the more pigments you add, the closer you get to pure black. In lighting, black is the *absence* of all colors—total opposite—you mix all colors together you get pure white light. Isn't that something?"

"The opposite?" Harvey croaked. It was a plea, Oliver Twist asking for more gruel.

"Total opposite," Batman nodded. "You want to put the gun down?"

He did. Before Batman could blow his advantage with a clumsy move for the batcuffs, Selina chimed in:

"You need help, Harvey. I know Arkham isn't anybody's idea of a success story..."

"But you think they can get us back to only as crazy as we were before?"

She gave a radiant first-date laugh, then added, like it was a private joke:

"I'd give it a 50-50 chance."

Two-Face nodded sadly.

Tim sat on a cot in the Batcave medical facility as Alfred bandaged the outcome of the latest training session with “big bad Zogger.”

“You’re telling me the two of them worked together on Two-Face, talked him down without throwing a single punch, that the crux of Two-Face’s whole problem was the very Black & White thing Bruce and Selina were fighting about, and they’re still not making it up?”

“I wouldn’t like to be put into the position of gossiping about the Master’s private affairs, young sir,” Alfred answered cautiously. “I can only confirm that the Two-Face situation has been resolved, mercifully, for once, without violence. And that when I asked the master about his plans for your father’s birthday party next week, he replied that, ahem, ‘Bruce Wayne’ would be going stag.”

“Oh hell, if he’s calling himself ‘Bruce Wayne’ like that, that means it’s Bruce the Buffoon that’ll be coming.”

“It is the role he’s most apt to play in Society, Master Timothy.”

“My family’s not ‘Society,’ Alfred, my dad’s self-made. The people he knows are all industrialists and businessmen, not those inbred social register types. He could’ve come as Bruce Wayne, the CEO. My Dad could respect that. Instead he’s going to wonder why I bother knowing a dilettante fop.”

Alfred frowned. He too found this perceived need to sully Bruce Wayne’s reputation at every opportunity to be one of the most distressing aspects of Batman’s activities, but he didn’t like hearing the sentiment from Tim.

“Master Bruce has been living this kind of life a good deal longer than you, young man. You must trust that he knows what’s best.”

The snort of disgust Tim made in reply was more disturbing than the fop remark.

“Like telling Spoiler who I was? Christ, if anybody interfered with his relationships the way he tampered with mine...” Tim stopped and grinned in a way Alfred would have found more disturbing still if he had seen it. But he’d turned away to put the bandages back into the first aid kit.

It was indeed Bruce “the fop” Wayne that entered Jack Drake’s birthday party. It was the fop who bypassed the receiving line and made straight for the bar. It was the fop that leered shamelessly at Bunny Wigglesworth and told the bartender—in a too audible stage whisper—that he’d been waiting out that fourth marriage for years. It was the fop that finally sauntered up to his host and, rather than shaking hands, handed him his scotch—then his handkerchief, cel phone, and wallet while he fished a wrapped gift from his jacket pocket ...but it was Bruce, the real Bruce, who felt Batman’s sixth sense stir the hairs on the back of his neck... his performance was being watched too closely.

Jack Drake was saying something about “another friend of my son’s” escorting his brother tonight. Drake’s brother, Tim’s Uncle Derek, was a well-known travel writer who dabbled in breeding very fast horses and racing very fast cars. He was a glamorous figure; certainly he didn’t need fixed up with some friend of...

Tim materialized, Alfred-like, next to his father’s wheelchair and deftly helped him juggle the contents of Bruce’s jacket pocket. While Tim tried to hand back the items,

Bruce managed to dislodge and drop the battery off the cel phone. Then bending to pick it up, he spilled the drink on his shoe and, startled by the spill, dropped the phone and the wallet.

The sixth sense quivered again, and Bruce turned.

Across the room, entering on Derek Drake's arm, was Selina Kyle. She was breathtaking in a plunging evening gown of intense purple that set off her dark features. And she was looking at him like he was the world's biggest idiot. Tim handed him his wallet and the boy's eyes said it all: Spoiler. Zogger. Payback.

Bruce "the inbred idiot Fop" had a difficult evening after that.

During cocktails, his peripheral vision caught a glimpse of intense purple... and he missed a chance to confuse Paris, the character from Greek mythology, with Paris, the capital of France.

Later he heard a familiar silvery laugh—and understood Ingmar Bergman to be the famous Swedish director and not the blonde actress from Casablanca.

Taking Bunny Wigglesworth in to dinner, he caught a whiff of Selina's perfume—she and Derek were walking directly behind them. Rather than the tasteless joke he'd prepared about Bunny's rumored divorce, he heard himself saying "I'm so sorry about you and Chester. Don't give up hope, sometimes these things aren't as permanent as they seem."

At dinner, he sat across from her and saw she was wearing one of the cat pins he'd given her. What did that mean? Could it be a sign she was willing to make up, or did it mean she's there as Catwoman? Maybe it meant nothing at all; she might not have even known he'd be there. She might consider it just another piece of jewelry.

So preoccupied was he with these questions, he absentmindedly made several intelligent comments about the NASDAQ, the first hundred days of the Luthor Presidency, and the new conductor at the Philharmonic.

When the band arrived, instead of loudly requesting a medley of Abba's greatest hits, he glanced in Selina's direction, discreetly slipped the leader a fifty and whispered: "I believe the lady likes Cole Porter."

Bruce the Fop was a playboy and a rake. Selina was the most stunningly beautiful woman in the room, and there was nothing to stop him from brazenly cutting in on another man's date. But it was still an awkward moment as he took her hand...

*"Do you know why I love you?" she once said, "Because you suck at the candlelight and violins as much as I do.... It's the most adorable thing in the world that you put on that ridiculous playboy character just to give me a romantic evening."*

"Kitten," he thought, "how did we ever get here from there?"

*"Sneaky and manipulative,"* came the answer, *"using me... medieval notions of right and wrong."*

Ah yes, that was it, wasn't it.

*"You had a fight,"* Dick had said. *"Now you know what one is. You fought, you make up. It's not the end of the world"*

What did Dick know anyway?

"I went to see Harvey the other day," Selina whispered while they danced.

"How's he doing?"

"Surprisingly well. It turns out this new doctor at Arkham actually knows something about Asian philosophy. Showed him the Yin-Yang symbol—pointing out that inside the white half there's a circle of black and inside the black..."

"...there's a dot of white. I'll be damned, there is, isn't there?"

"So he's happy now, he has a neat two-sided image to view life through again."

They danced in silence for a moment before she asked:

"Did you mean what you told him, about color & light?"

"What I told him is true, if that's what you mean. Physical science isn't something you believe in or not, it just is."

"Hm. I just wondered because—for someone who takes it so personally, for whom right and wrong aren't abstract philosophical concepts—the analogy seemed very... philosophical and abstract."

More silence before she went on.

"Tim says that if we were really fighting about the black and white thing, we should've made it up after the Two-Face episode. He says the fact that we haven't means we were fighting for another reason. He thinks we were bored after the first pent up passion died down and had a fight because, well, we were never bored in those days."

"Tim said that?"

"Mhm."

"Tim is an idiot."

Selina laughed at this pronouncement and they danced for another moment. This time it was Bruce who broke the silence.

"Dick says, you'll love this: we don't know how to behave like a couple and took a perfectly normal squabble and prodded & pulled at it until it became Batman and Catwoman on a rooftop."

"Dick said that?"

"Yep."

"Dick is an idiot."

"Dick is right," Bruce pronounced. "He's right. I don't have the luxury of deceiving myself about my actions the way ordinary people can. Dick is right. There was a moment that night, I could have been a guy whose girlfriend was giving him a bad time. And I could have calmly and rationally said that I wasn't trying to use you, I was asking for your help. And instead I spouted platitudes about right and wrong that didn't really have anything to do with—"

"And I could've given you a knowing smile and said 'don't try to handle me' or 'you're so cute when you're stupid' instead of 'cold-hearted bastard.'"

"It was 'sneaky and manipulative' that hurt."

"You *are* sneaky and manipulative. You'll do whatever's necessary to accomplish your ends, and go straight for the jugular if anyone challenges you. That's what's kept you alive. It makes you *You*. It makes you dangerous."

The last word was hungry. And it was spoken by Catwoman.

Bruce pulled back to look into her eyes... he saw desire, affection, acceptance, and invitation...

"Did we just make up?"

“Well,” the voice too was full of desire and invitation, “maybe we could keep the feud going for just a few more hours... There’s an emerald in Tiffany’s window I wouldn’t mind having a go at.”

## DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

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I was in the mood to celebrate.

Lexcorp was pulling out of Gotham City! As soon as I saw the headline, I headed over to a popular coffee shop in the financial district to eavesdrop on the brokers. The rumor mill was saying Lex Luthor got wind of the enormous sums Talia was spending on the war with Wayne Enterprises and ordered her to knock it off. Meow—Purr—and Hot Damn, Yippie KaiYay!

‘Course Luthor had no idea why she was in Gotham in the first place, probably assumed she was just following his lead during No Man’s Land. If he knew she was focused on Wayne Enterprises because of a personal obsession with Bruce, or that she was spending so much because she was chasing bogus research and products we deliberately planted for her to uncover, he’d have fired her worthless ass. But we can’t have everything. The important thing was: she was gone—at least until she makes it up with Daddy (and she will, let’s not kid ourselves about that).

So anyway, I was in the mood to celebrate. Picked up a bottle of champagne and headed out to the manor. Now Alfred answers by the third ring, always. So after five rings and six knocks, I was quite sure he’d taken the day off. If Bruce was home, he was probably in the cave and didn’t want to take the time to change into civvies to answer the bell. I went round to the side of the house, deliberately tripped the alarm on the French doors to get his attention and waved at the security camera, then let myself in and headed for the cave. Before I got to the clock, I heard a soft “in here” from the library. Bruce was there all right, slumped in an easy chair. He did not look in the mood to party.

“If you say I look like something the cat dragged in, I will have to throw this at you.” he growled flatly.

It wasn’t clear what “this” was, but it was clear he was in no shape to play.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Chloroformed. Twice. Hangover.”

“Oh, poor baby” I soothed.

He winced. “For heaven’s sake, don’t shout.”

I smiled. I’ve been there. Those drug hangovers rank up there with seasickness and kidney stones on the list of things you don’t want to experience more than once in a lifetime.

“Where’s Alfred?”

“Alfred’s got himself involved in amateur dramatics—rehearsals this afternoon and tonight. He offered to stay, but I told him go. Nothing he could do but bring aspirin. I’ve already taken nine.”

“He could’ve cooked,” I said, pointing at the end table next to him. I realized the “this” Bruce threatened to throw was... ulgh... what appeared to be a bowl of egg drop

soup that had grown cold and—ulgh—gelatinous. I was not hungover and the sight of it made *me* gag.

“Tell me you didn’t try to eat that,” I said, forcing down the gag.

The thing with the condition Bruce found himself in is that no matter how long you postpone it, you eventually have to face the prospect of eating. Those of us who have to cope with the problem on a regular basis, discover through trial and hideous error the sometimes-weird chemistry of our own best cure. I’ve heard everything from malted milk shakes (the idea being to “line the stomach”) to steak tartar.

Bruce looked at the muck in the bowl and nodded sadly.

“I couldn’t face marinara sauce or kung pao. The only places that deliver out here are pizza and chinese.”

Poor guy... I decided to baby him a little, just this once.

“Okay then,” I announced. “We’ll postpone my news and champagne for another time. Come to the kitchen and keep me company while I make you something nice.”

One eye opened a sliver.

“You can cook?”

I laughed. I figured he must be in bad shape if he didn’t realize I wasn’t the one that was hungover. I threw together a cold yogurt soup that always soothes me in that condition, added a drop of vanilla, a little honey and some minced mint leaves. The idea, psychologically if not physiologically is to please the mind as well as the stomach and seduce you back to the land of the living. While Bruce ate, I prepared a piece of plain chicken and a poached pear. During this process, Bruce observed twice more that I can cook.

“I’m putting these in the refrigerator for later, they should chill for a few hours, then you’ve got dinner, okay?”

“You can cook.”

“For the fourth time, yes. Is there any point in my suggesting you don’t patrol tonight?”

“How do you know how to cook?”

“Look, I think what’s happened is when they knocked you out, you hit your head on something hard. If you just take the night off and get a good night’s sleep, in the morning you’ll see there’s nothing miraculous about cooking a piece of chicken.”

“I can’t do it.”

“Right now I don’t think you can recite the alphabet, but come morning—”

“No, love, I can’t cook. Under any circumstances.”

“You mean—*at all*?”

“I made a sandwich once....”

I admit it. I started to giggle. By the time he finished I was wiping tears from my eyes. I don’t care who you are, if somebody tells you their butler banned them from the kitchen, it’s pretty funny. If halfway through the story you realize it’s Batman, professional badass, most dangerous man alive, telling you how he put the lunchmeat and the lettuce back in the wrong place (“it seems they have special drawers”) and scarred the counter because he failed to use a cutting board, take my word for it, you too would be doubled over laughing.

Nobody likes admitting they screwed up. Nobody likes admitting they need help. And nobody liked it less than Dick Grayson. But some screwups were too conspicuous to ignore.

His couch was puce.

He had bought a puce-colored couch. He remembered a little square of maroon fabric with bits of yellow, but this was more of a brownish purple with streaks of yellowish green. It looked like a bruise. A bruise with throw pillows.

Tim had politely neglected to mention it. Either that or he'd been struck with hysterical blindness on seeing it. Dick offered him a soda and they talked briefly about Tim's returning to school and recent happenings in the Gotham underworld. Finally Dick got around to what he wanted to ask:

Tim's seemingly malicious prank the night of Jack Drake's birthday party brought Bruce and Selina together at a time when that was all they needed to reconcile after their first fight. Did he have that in mind the whole time? Or was it just dumb luck?

Tim admitted that he hadn't really intended to play matchmaker; he only wanted to unnerve Bruce a little.

"Oh."

"Not looking for a matchmaker, are ya Bro?"

"Nah, not really. Well. You know Babs and I have been dicey since the Helena thing."

Tim roared. "You are! You're looking for a matchmaker to patch up you and Barbara."

Dick and Barbara's on-again/off-again wasn't the stuff of legend like Bruce and Selina, but they were a cute couple and those that knew them knew, since the days when he was Robin and she was Batgirl, they complimented and completed each other.

"Dr. Tim Drake, practicing yenta: Advice to the lovelorn, broken hearts mended, hamburgers and quick lube. The doctor is in."

"Give me a break, will ya. I'm in trouble. Can we, y'know, 'be men?'"

"Dick, wasn't it you that told Bruce, 'you fight and you make it up?'"

"Yes, and doesn't it occur to anybody that I said that 'cause that's, y'know, what I need to believe is going to happen for me?"

"Well I'm just spitballing here, but all Bruce and Selina needed was an excuse to come together. Can't you, I dunno, concoct some reason to spend some time with Barbara?"

"Like a case?"

"No, not a case. Jeez, you're worse than Bruce. Nothing remotely connected to bats or belfries or crime and punishment. A real life reason to get together.

Dick stared into space.

"You could ask her to help you pick a new couch," Tim suggested.

"You don't like my couch?"

"It's the most butt-ugly piece of furniture I've ever seen in my life—and that includes the lime green futon in the Riddler's lair that's covered in question marks."

"You think if I tell her I screwed up she'd help me... repair the damage."

"I think if you word it just that way, you've got a good shot."

**OraCom: Channel 1—Nightwing**

...: *Wing, there are five subway platforms on that route, our boy could've stashed the goods at any one of them. Anyway, if you buy furniture in Gotham, you're going to pay twice as much in delivery charges as you pay for the sofa itself. ...*

::But this way, I get your help. You have good taste. Give me the platforms in order of least-populated areas.::

**OraCom: Channel 3—Robin**

::Give the poor guy a break, O. You should see the couch he got. It's hideous.::

...: *What happened with the shots fired at the docks? Was it Scarecrow? How hideous? ...*

:: Was a driveby. Cops had it locked down by the time I got there. It's hideous, an ugly brown.::

**OraCom: Channel 1—Nightwing**

...: *Start with the 11th Street Lot, it's nearest the river. Why brown ? ...*

:: 11th Street, check. Salesgirl said it wouldn't stain. ::

...: *But it's brown ...*

:: It's more like puce. I said least populated first. There are apartments here got a clear view of the trains. He wouldn't risk being seen stashing the stuff. ::

...: *In that neighborhood, if they see anything, they keep quiet. PUCE? ...*

:: I thought it'd look good with the carpet. Hey there's something here, tied underneath—PAYDIRT! Good idea starting near the river. ::

...: *Told ya. What color is your carpet that you thought PUCE would be—oh never mind, pick me up Friday noon. I'll expect a nice lunch before, a good dinner after, and a declaration of your eternal gratitude... ...*

**OraCom: Channel 2—Batman**

:: *Make it Saturday. Alfred's opening night. You WILL ALL be attending.::*

Nightwing was pretty sure this wasn't the worst idea he'd ever had. It might be a mistake but, if so, it wasn't a letting Harley-Quinn-nail-you-with-a-squirtgun screwup. More of a what-was-I-thinking-I-bought-a-puce-sofa mistake.

He sat on Selina Kyle's terrace, waiting patiently for Catwoman to return from her evening prowl. The way he saw it, she owed him. He'd listened patiently when Bruce had ticked her off. It was her turn to lend a sympathetic ear.

Of course he would be going to Alfred's opening night. It wasn't necessary for Bruce to declare: "If you're not there, you better be dead." He loved Alfred. Nothing would make him miss the old man's return to the stage, even if it was for some dinky community theatre. And yes, if he was coming in to Gotham to see the show, and he was coming into Gotham to do furniture shopping with Babs, it made sense to combine it into one trip—*except* he had wanted to use the time together shopping to ask her to the show as his date and now he *couldn't* because it looked like they were both roped into going as a group thing.

After fifteen minutes it occurred to him: Selina might already be home and perhaps he should knock. He approached the sliding doors then froze when he heard voices inside. First a silky purr, "That's it, nice and easy, it needs a very light touch..." Then a male voice chuckled, "I'd heard of people doing this in the kitchen, I just never thought I'd be one of them..."

Oh dear, clearly it was not a good time to drop by unannounced.

It had been nearly forty years since Alfred Pennyworth stood on the apron of a stage and took a bow before a cheering audience. He never regretted the pledge to his dying father to continue the family tradition of service. And he certainly never regretted his years spent serving Dr. & Mrs Wayne, and then their son Bruce. But bowing again to acknowledge applause, he did heartily regret that it took him so long to realize: quitting professional theatre did not mean he couldn't still act now and then. Those skills—modulating the voice, timing lines and movements for effect—unused for so many years, had come back to him within days. And the rush of hearing an audience react to a well-delivered line—it was a magic he had forgotten existed.

After the show, a small party assembled at Wayne Manor to congratulate him: Bruce and Selina, Dick and Barbara, Tim, Stephanie and Cassie. This was the core, the Bat family, those who had been told if they weren't there they better be dead.

As others began to arrive, the cast of *HOW'S YOUR FATHER?* and their friends and hangers on, Alfred instinctively headed for the kitchen. There were guests in the manor and that meant he had to go to work—but Bruce insisted he was the guest of honor and wasn't to lift a finger. Alfred sat uneasily in the drawing room, as Dick handed him a glass of champagne and Tim directed the others where to leave their coats...

What happened next would be debated, deconstructed and whispered about for the remainder of the party.

Certainly someone who appeared to be Bruce Wayne came out of the dining room with a tray of mushrooms stuffed with crabmeat. A short while later, a second tray with cheese puffs was being passed around.

Tim drifted casually over to Dick who was eying a mushroom suspiciously.

"What does it mean?" Tim whispered.

"I don't know."

"What do we do?"

"I don't know."

Barbara joined them:

"He couldn't have made this; there's a caterer, right?"

"Are you kidding! While we were all at the show—he'd never let strangers in the house alone. Never."

"So who made the food?"

"Maybe a portal opened from another dimension and this is a Bruce Wayne from an alternate universe where he can cook?"

"Then this is food from an alternate reality that's totally opposite from ours, it might be poisonous to us!"

Dick sniffed the suspicious alternate-reality mushroom.

Stephanie sidled up with a plate of scrambled eggs.

"Hey guys, what's up?"

The trio looked aghast.

"You're not eating that?" Tim asked in horror.

"There's a covered dish through there."

"But you're EATING it. You don't know where it came from?"

"Bruce made 'em. He said so."

Dick, Tim and Barbara looked at each other in terror. The worst-case scenario was confirmed. Okay, he'd told Selina his real identity, fine. And okay, he sometimes talked now, smiled occasionally, and even behaved like a person at Jack Drake's birthday party. They could accept all that... But *COOKING!?! That was too much to swallow as one of life's little fastballs. Something was WRONG. Their Batman had been replaced by a look-alike. And if this one could cook, there was no telling what else... he could kill, he could be a robot, or a shape shifter, he could be...*

"Raspberry Meringue anyone?"

The imposter stood before them with a tray of desserts and a twisted grin.

After Bruce showed the last non-family guest to the door, he returned to the drawing room to find a reception committee that was not at all friendly. They wanted answers and they wanted them now: Stuffed Mushrooms. Cheese Puffs. Raspberry Meringues. Explain.

"You start with a four cups of mushrooms and a pound of fresh crab... Looks like it'll have to wait."

In the window behind Dick and Tim, the Bat-Signal shone over the night sky.

Great, now they had to suit up and go into battle with Bizarroworld Batman at their side.

The next day, Dick Grayson bought Selina Kyle lunch.

"I thought Barbara was helping you pick out furniture," she asked casually.

"She is—was. Actually that didn't go too well. No, this is about... last night."

Selina smiled inwardly. She knew what the lunch was about. Bruce had briefed her on Dick, Tim and Barbara's total overreaction to his debut as chef, and had given strict instructions that, if anybody asked her, no explanation was to be given. He hadn't planned this as a stunt, but since they had made such a drama out of it, and since Tim HAD set him up at the party, since Dick HAD played the prank with the workout dummy, and since Barbara had undoubtedly cheered them on, they all deserved a little payback.

"What does Alfred say?" Selina asked innocently to avoid volunteering any information herself.

"Not much," Dick admitted. "He's preoccupied. That director, (did you meet her?) she's got some project taking Shakespeare to the schools."

Ah, that explained it. Bruce had predicted the big reaction from Alfred, not Dick and Tim. He was curious why the butler hadn't so much as raised an eyebrow.

"Look, the point is," Dick began.

Selina deftly changed the subject.

"Tell me about the furniture shopping. What went wrong?"

Dick was out of his league. It took a Batman to corner Catwoman. After a few more tries, he admitted defeat and threw out the hidden agenda. They would talk about what she wanted to talk about:

Shopping with Barbara had been a disaster. Dick liked bright hues ("Easter Egg colors," declared Babs) and bold patterns ("Groovy, it's 1974 all over again"). Barbara was pointing him to pieces best described as institutional. When he voiced this opinion, she declared that anybody that would mix green with red and yellow (a pointed reference at his old Robin outfit) required a keeper.

"Now tell me, please, what is the point in having the largest thing in your living room, this thing you'll be looking at every day, decked out in fourteen supremely subtle shades of taupe?"

"If you don't like her taste, why did you ask her to help you?" Selina asked, suppressing a giggle. The batboys uniform cluelessness in domestic matters was becoming a source of endless amusement.

"The master plan was that shopping gave me an opening to ask her out. Bruce went and torpedoed that idea though. He has to stick his oar in, doesn't he? Has to tell everybody what to do. I tell ya, Selina, it makes me want to scream sometimes."

"Can I ask you a delicate question, kiddo?"

"If you don't call me kiddo ever again, yeah, sure, why not."

"How old were you when you lost your parents? Under 13?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because this is the ninth or tenth round of you and Bruce bitching about each other that I've sat through, and I've gotta say—He's not well adjusted enough to hear this, but you are—*this is what fathers and sons do*. They drive each other crazy. You both lost your parents before adolescence, you never got to the point where you realize they're not perfect. You insist Bruce won't let you be your own man, doesn't know when to let go, yadda yadda yadda—and you've blown it up into this monstrous character flaw. Richard, no father in history has *EVER* let go in the way you seem to be expecting. It doesn't happen."

Dick's response was delayed by his need to chew, and by the time he swallowed Selina went on.

"He says you never listen, by the way, meaning you plan to make the decisions affecting your life yourself and not do it his way. That's normal, too. He might know that if his Dad had lived, 'cause they would've gone through this same thing about the time he turned twenty. My guess, it would've be about Bruce going to med school or not. Y'know what though, if he had been through it, he'd still turn around and do the same thing to you. Only difference is maybe he wouldn't feel like it's a big failing on his part."

"You think he blames himself?"

Selina looked at him like he'd asked if the sky was blue.

"Richard, you have *MET* Bruce, haven't you?"

"Yeah, okay, it was a stupid question, but I mean—"

"He has a hyper-idealized view of everything to do with his parents. His father was a perfect father. Since he's not perfect, his relationship with you isn't perfect, he undoubtedly feels he doesn't measure up."

"But that's ludicrous—"

"No shit. What I'm saying is this: what he feels, what you feel... this *great estrangement*, as you all seem to think of it it, this isn't some profound conflict out of Greek tragedy. This is what drives sales of Maalox in every town in America every Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's what families do. Ask around."

**OraCom: Channel 1—Nightwing to Robin**

<ENCRYPT THROUGH BABS.NET - LOCK-OUT CHANNEL 2>

::Robin, it's 'Wing. ::

::Did you talk to her? What did she say? Shape-shifter or Robot? ::

::We didn't get into that. ::

::That was the whole point of the lunch. ::

::Forget that, let me ask you something. Does your dad drive you crazy? ::

*::You mean about grades, girls, tattoos, politics, the internet, using the car, the music I listen to, the movies I see, the length of my hair, the cost of good sneakers, and the Celtics' chances of making the playoffs—yeah, my dad drives makes me crazy. ::*

**OraCom: Channel 1—Nightwing to Oracle**

**<ENCRYPT THROUGH BABS.NET - LOCK-OUT CHANNEL 2>**

*::Barbara, it's Dick. ::*

*...: What did she say? Mind-control nanites or evil doppelganger? ...*

*::We didn't get into that—let me ask you something: Does your dad drive you crazy? ::*

*...: Are you kidding? Since he retired that's what he does with his time! Just this morning he sent me this article from Cosmo—COSMO mind you—'Safety tips for the city gal living alone.' Forget I was raised a policeman's daughter, forget I have better security than the NSYNC Compound—he's sending me clippings from COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE! ...*

Sheesh, Dick thought, possibly Selina had a point. Barbara continued without a pause.

*...: AND he agrees with you about the sofa, can you believe that? What does he know about—you've seen those curtains he has in his study, right—and he's telling me it's your apartment and after all we should adjust to each others' tastes because—GET THIS!—it's just a matter of time... ...*

Alright Papa Gordon! Dick beamed as the implications sunk in: She had told her father about their argument, just as he had told Selina. He was, at least, still important enough to rank in the day's headlines. And Gordon had not only taken his side, he implied it was only a matter of time 'til the two of them set up housekeeping together.

What did it matter if Bruce had been replaced by an evil doppelganger shape-shifting killer robot from an alternate universe? He and Babs were back on track, and all was well with the world.



The night of the party, Alfred was thoroughly preoccupied with the visiting director, the rest of the cast, and the excitement of performing again. He didn't pay much attention to "The Case of the Mysterious Mushroom Caps," but he did consider the question the next morning as he cleaned up the breakfast things.

It was quite a puzzle. The food served was certainly not prepared by a caterer. They were all dishes from his own recipe book, the one his father passed down when he agreed to go into service. Alfred examined the stove and utensils and found no sign that anything in the kitchen had been disturbed—until he looked for the recipe book itself and found it wasn't in its accustomed place.

At that moment, it ceased to be a mere puzzle and became a full-blown quest: Someone or something had tampered with his kitchen and his recipe book—and may the lord above have mercy on their souls.

A systematic search commenced of the manor's endless cupboards, closets, and shelves. It turned up Master Dick's 6<sup>th</sup> grade report card, the remnants of a balloon reading "Happy New Year 1966," a ticket stub from the opening night of *Oklahoma*, and the discharge papers of one Colonel E. B. Wayne after World War I—but no recipe book.

Admitting defeat, Alfred resumed his regular chores—until he got to the Batcave. There, on Master Bruce's worktable, between a Bunsen burner and a radar tube, was the Pennyworth recipe book, opened to Meringues—with several sheets of handwritten notes. There was a diagram of a cracked egg, with the notation: *Whites: 90% H<sub>2</sub>O /10% protein. Create a colloid with granulated sucrose, solidify by exposing to heat.*

Alfred blinked.

He turned to the page on cheese puffs and saw this notation for preparing pastry: *small amounts of H<sub>2</sub>O with unbleached flour to create a strong elastic gluten. Maillard reaction, in which sugars react with proteins.*

Under scrambled eggs it said: *Heating an egg causes compact proteins to unfold into long, spaghetti-like strands. These release amino acids, which form bonds with other protein strands, causing coagulation. Overcooking creates too many bonds between proteins, leading to a rapid loss of liquid.*

At that moment, there was a series of tones that indicated one of the many automated systems was receiving instructions from the Batmobile relay. Alfred jumped as one of the beakers poured a yellow liquid into a oblong pan suspended over the burner, which simultaneously sprouted a four inch flame.

As the liquid began giving off the smell of clarified butter, the Batmobile pulled into the cave and Batman got out, walking immediately to the burner.

"Hi Alfred," was the only comment as he uncorked a test-tube and added a pinch of green spice to the butter, then took a pre-made sandwich from the cave cooler and dropped it into the pan.

As it grilled, he looked up to see that Alfred wore the very model for his own nonsense *We can do this the easy way or the hard way but you will give me answers and you'll do it now* bat-glare. A facetious answer ("start with a four cups of mushrooms") like he'd given Dick and Tim was out of the question.

"I, uh, it was pointed out to me that if I can radiate ionized mercury trisulfate, I should be able to toast bread."

"And was it Miss Selina who made this observation, sir?"

"Well..." Batman looked at his feet.

The preposterous notion that he'd been taking cooking lessons from CATWOMAN would never have occurred to the alternate-universe/killer-robot theorists, and if it had it certainly wouldn't have calmed their fears. But Alfred's speculations weren't quite so outlandish, and he accepted Bruce's sheepish non-denial with paternal affection.

It came out then, the whole story: Bruce hadn't consciously assumed that all non-butlers were incompetents in the kitchen, but, at some point, he did dissociate such regular life-skills with "spandex-wearers." It came as a nasty shock when he discovered Catwoman, who he considered more of an equal and certainly more of a contemporary than Dick or Barbara, was quite an accomplished cook. It pricked pride that she could do something he couldn't.

The first attempt to remedy the situation was not productive. He'd presented himself at the public library as the most exaggerated caricature on an aristo-idiot, and asked for a book—or preferably a video—on "exactly what you have to do to dead animals and plants to make them fit for human beings to eat." The librarian gave him a copy of COOKING FOR DUMMIES. The book's patronizing tone reinforced his mental block that cooking was something he simply couldn't do. It couldn't find words small enough or analogies simple enough to communicate with someone so stupid as to be reading its pages.

It was Selina who put an end to this nonsense with the remark about mercury trisulfate. He wasn't really a dummy, and dumbing it down was not the solution. They tried the opposite approach: he watched her prepare a simple dish and translated each step into the terminology of the laboratory. He analyzed each ingredient, put each under a microscope in its cooked and uncooked states, mapping out in his mind the precise reactions they underwent...

Alfred's eyes glazed slightly as Bruce enthusiastically listed a number of these: the denaturation of proteins, sodium bicarbonate reacting with acid to make carbon dioxide, yeast cells digesting sugars and starches and releasing Co<sub>2</sub> and water...

"As you say, sir," Alfred attempted to derail the train so he could go to bed. But there's no slowing an active mind when it's latched onto a new idea, or, in this case, a new world of ideas to explore. Once he was past the initial hurdle, Bruce's natural love of learning had kicked in. He would pour all his intellectual energies into the new discipline until he had mastered it as completely as any other.

As he flipped over his sandwich, Bruce continued his lecture about the chemical properties of various foodstuffs.

"Chocolate has some interesting properties. Heated to 85 degrees F, it liquefies..."

"Or 'melts,'" thought Alfred, despairingly.

"But if the temperature goes above 90, the cocoa butter molecules separate from the cocoa solids. If they break up completely the chocolate will never completely harden again."

"As you say, sir."

## FUN AND GAMES

---

Bruce Wayne took a deep whiff of cognac and closed his eyes as the lonely tones of Schubert's Impromptu #90 wafted through the air. Relaxing in the sitting room adjacent to his bedroom, with a roaring fire, handmade silk kimono, Waterford snifter, and classical music playing on the costly ultra-sleek stereo, he was the picture of the billionaire bachelor at home alone.

He didn't hear the first distant click, nor the second. The third he attributed to Alfred, though it was more than an hour since the old man said he'd be retiring for the night. The meow he couldn't dismiss so easily and he rose to investigate...

His eyes went square as he stood in the doorway to his bedroom, observing a dark silhouette flicker before the open safe. Catwoman?

"Meow," began the intruder, as an appraising eye scanned him up and down. "You're a lot younger than the average fossil one finds home alone in these big houses."

He was beginning to regret that second cognac; he needed a clear head... Bruce Wayne shouldn't be too confident or confrontational with this woman. He had to find another way. As the figure swayed enticingly into the light, he remembered he was a known womanizer. He allowed a fascinated leer to overtake his features.

"Can I, ah, help you with anything?" he managed as she touched a single claw to the center of his chest and stepped forward, backing him slowly but firmly into the sitting room and the chair he'd occupied before. She stood over him now, twirling his great grandmother's ruby necklace.

"Not any more. I have what I came for... more or less."

She leaned over the chair, hovering tantalizingly above him, more deliberately voluptuous than she ever was with Batman... Bruce felt his hand reaching round her waist and moving gently up her back as she continued, "What's a handsome, rich, athletic guy like you doing all alone at midnight anyway?"

As Catwoman lowered her mouth onto his, he returned the kiss instinctively; never stopping to think of the times he'd kissed her as Batman...

He didn't see her hand move silently to the pouch in her belt and finger the bulb of knockout gas... then pause and change course, coming to rest instead on the belt of his kimono and slashing it with a swift stroke of her claws.

He didn't hear the necklace hit the floor as she freed the other hand to explore his abs, chest, shoulder and back.

He did feel when her body tensed suddenly, but she allowed him to twist her round and underneath him, as he groped for the clasp that undid her costume.

As the purple leather fell away, Bruce broke the kiss finally to work down her neck and those luscious, extraordinary...

Their eyes met then, and he saw it.

She knew....

... Or did she?

Impossible to tell and, at the moment, impossible to care. After all these years, after all the teasing, after all the games, he would finally have her.

“Well, that was fun,” Selina purred. “You got any other fantasies you want to take out for a spin?”

Bruce Wayne, the character of the night before, might have blushed or stammered. The Bruce of this morning stroked her leg as he whispered ominously, “You don’t think Batman’s going to simply ignore your breaking into Wayne Manor, do you?”

She considered this, then said, “But I didn’t leave with anything. And I don’t think Bruce Wayne is going to be pressing charges for breaking and entering.”

“You can’t exactly tell Batman that part, can you?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Bet me.”

Bruce couldn’t quite believe how slow he’d been to take advantage of the situation—of exactly who his girlfriend was now. Protocols! He’d asked her about protocols, but never so much as hinted—okay, the idea had tanked when he’d floated it past previous lovers; truth be told, that’s what really broke up him and Silver St. Cloud—but Selina was not Silver. She was Catwoman. She was really Catwoman. She didn’t think having fantasies about costumed night dwellers was remotely odd; she undoubtedly had a few of her own. She was downright pleased to learn he thought about her that way, and she was excited (she was quite SPECTACULARLY excited) to try out his Catwoman-breaking-into-the-manor scenario.

And he owed it all to Giovanni D’Annunzio being a snob, the Velkstad Ballet being a bore, and the Joker being insane.

D’Annunzio’s was everything a trendy Gotham restaurant should be: the menu was creative, the food superb, the décor was chic and colorful, the prices were more colorful still, and reservations were at the whim of the proprietor. Descended from an aristocratic Italian poet, Giovanni D’Annunzio employed a strict hierarchy that made the Hollywood star system look Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. Bruce Wayne ranked high on this complicated assessment of wealth, fame and social position, and Giovanni was always glad to seat him and his eye-candy companions at the most prominent table.

Giovanni was, in fact, the only Gotham City snob to notice Bruce Wayne dating Selina Kyle. Though the romance had been going on for months, they hadn’t been out much in public and even less “in society.” On the few occasions they had, well, Bruce and some new brunette hardly rated as news. But Giovanni had an Italian’s eye for the female form, and Selina had very memorable curves. He recognized her from her one-woman show, CAT-TALES. Normally some flash in the pan actress from off-Broadway would not receive a coveted position in his dining room, but a stunner like Selina who only might be an actress or might be the notorious Catwoman herself, that was another matter entirely. So it was that, after the first visit, whenever Alfred called in a reservation for Wayne, Giovanni would ask “And will Signorina Kyle be his

companion this evening?" If the answer was yes, the very best table would be held for them and Giovanni would spend the day hoping it would be tonight—at his establishment—that Gotham Society finally noticed Bruce Wayne's latest flame.

And so he was heartily disappointed when Alfred made tonight's reservation for six o'clock. Six o'clock! At so early an hour, there would be no one of importance to see them! What kind of plebeians dined at six?

At 6:10, Bruce Wayne walked into the reception area, a man at one with his world, who breathed the rarified air of Gotham's high life as ordinary men breathe oxygen. Despite his disappointment, Giovanni greeted the billionaire playboy with all his accustomed charm. But instead of leading him to the usual table, he smilingly informed Mr. Wayne that Miss Kyle was waiting in the lounge.

"I think we're being punished," Selina whispered as Bruce joined her at a low, cramped bistro table in the darkest corner of the lounge. "Giovanni said a table wouldn't be ready for an hour and a half, and when I said we needed to make an eight o'clock curtain, he sat me in here."

Bruce wasn't one whose self-image could be threatened by little slights from people like Giovanni. He shrugged off the incident and ordered an expensive single-malt scotch (which he wouldn't actually drink) and Scottish spring water to back it (which he would drink).

They talked briefly about his day at Wayne Enterprises, then about Dick's quasi-reconciliation with Barbara, which was apparently short-lived. The serious rift about Helena and Jean Paul was forgotten but had been replaced by a series of small, more playful quarrels about decorating or some such nonsense.

"It's been going on like that since they were kids," Bruce concluded, unaware of the irony, "'though how it's possible for two people so perfect for one another to go on like that for years and never notice they're in love...."

"Oh shit," Selina interrupted, suddenly shrinking behind her handbag, a cocktail napkin and a bowl of mixed nuts. "Don't look now," she hissed, dipping her head strangely as though trying to shield it behind the bulk of his frame, "but Harl—I said don't look now. Is that your idea of not looking? Oh god, she's with...."

Bruce had turned nonchalantly and sucked in his breath as he saw Harley Quinzelle seating herself at a nearby table, followed by a tall, thin man whose well-applied makeup concealed from casual observers—but not from Bruce who knew his features well—that the skin underneath was a pasty white.

Joker, he thought grimly.

Batman-mentality was always quick to kick in, and Bruce's very first thought was that this was his first opportunity to see Joker's makeup work in person. The madman occasionally assumed this look to make televised threats to the populace, but never on a crime when he might encounter Batman.

Bruce turned back to Selina, who now held an upside-down cocktail menu before her face. He took it from her, turned it right-side up and spoke softly.

"You have a better view. Does that look like a wig, or do you think he dyes it?"

Selina's eyes bulged, positively bulged, as she realized he was trying to determine why the Joker's hair did not appear its usual green.

"Who the hell cares?" she whispered back. "Don't you realize if they SEE me, they'll COME OVER."

It wasn't a pleasant thought. The idea of Joker and Harley Quinn coming over to say hi, of Selina introducing him as her date... of (horror of horrors!) the harlequins from hell sitting down to join them... of Bruce having to pick up the check! The nightmare series of thoughts jolted him right out of Bat-mode.

He joined Selina behind a menu, as he strained to pick out Harley's voice from the low buzz in the room.

"If you want to get back together, Puddin', there are a few things I'm gonna insist on. And remembering our anniversary is one of them."

"This is not our anniversary," her companion insisted. "Our anniversary is in June; this is September. I'm going to kill that waiter."

"You can't kill anybody tonight, Puddin', you didn't recite Lord Alfred Tennyson's epic poem Ulysses before we left home."

Selina's menu bobbed up and down feverishly. She was laughing.

Joker could be heard grumbling. "June 4th. We broke into the fishery on June 4th."

Mercifully, Joker and Harley were soon shown to a table. It was too dangerous for Bruce Wayne to not be seen leaving the restaurant and going to the ballet as announced, but he ducked out of the theatre as soon as the lights dimmed. Within minutes, Batman was staked out across from D'Annunzio's canopy, and when the couple emerged, he followed them. He heard Harley cooing about a hansom cab through the park and Joker muttering "\$14 for a shrimp cocktail, \$45 for a dish of pasta..."

They did get into a hansom cab and, for the briefest moment, Batman almost felt sorry for the lunatic: Harley was singing snippets of My Heart Will Go On in his ear, while Joker repeated yet again that their anniversary was in June.

After the park, they went on to a nightclub. The Iceberg Lounge... Of course, Penguin's place.

Before he could decide on a course of action, the air was cut with a familiar cracking sound—Catwoman's whip. She wasn't attacking, just thrashing the air the way a cat thumps its tail to express annoyance.

"You ditched me at the ballet," she hissed.

"It's the Joker. I had to follow up."

"Well YEAH, but what am I, some bimbo you have to disappear on? Didn't it occur to you that I would prefer this to the mind-numbing bore that is the Velkstad Ballet?"

"Force of habit," Batman mumbled weakly. It hadn't occurred to him, but then he had never quite figured out her unique idea of fun.

"So, what've I missed?" she asked, blithely accepting this as a natural continuation of their date, as if it was a planned entertainment, like going dancing.

"Not much. They haven't hurt anybody or committed any crime."

"Of course not, weren't you listening? It's their anniversary."

"Well, first, Joker swears it isn't their anniversary, and second, it's Joker, he doesn't care."

"But Harley does. She wants a big night out. And she's got him firmly under her thumb. Don't you remember, he didn't recite Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses*," she ended with a chuckle.

"I didn't quite get what that was about."

Catwoman smiled broadly. "Know what your problem is? You're too big and strong for your own good. If you'd ever had to fight somebody twice your size (he had), you'd know something about using an opponent's strength against them."

Batman looked totally confused. He was an accomplished martial artist and had mastered the techniques of redirecting an attacker's momentum as well as any man alive. What ANY OF THIS had to do with Lord Alfred Tennyson...

"What's the Joker's definitive characteristic?" Catwoman was asking.

"He's insane."

She nodded. "And being insane, I would imagine much of the time he doesn't see things the way the rest of the world does. I would guess from tonight's performance that he's pretty well aware of that. So if Harley throws him a wild enough assertion—like that he can't kill people tonight because he hasn't whistled the score to HMS *Pinafore*—he'll accept it as logical precisely because it makes no sense to him."

"That's insane."

"What's your point?"

The first time she saw him smile, Catwoman described it as "the creepiest thing I've ever seen." The demented grin she saw now would have terrified the Scarecrow himself.

At 11:10, Batman walked into the Iceberg Lounge, a man at one with his world, who fed on the fearful malevolence of the criminal clientele as Bruce Wayne fed on the rarified atmosphere at D'Annunzio's.

Catwoman was on his arm, and in the other he carried a small bouquet of flowers. They made a beeline for the Joker's table, and before anybody could react, Catwoman had kissed Harley's cheek while Batman handed her the flowers and clapped Joker on the back, calling him a lucky dog.

The patrons of the Iceberg Lounge thought it odd, to say the least, when Bat and Cat sat themselves at Joker's table amid cries of Congratulations and How many years has it been. But it didn't do to interfere in the Joker's private business, let alone Batman's. Not if you wanted to see tomorrow.

Harley thought it was odd too, but odd wasn't an unusual state of affairs around her Puddin'. Besides, the newcomers confirmed today was, in fact, their anniversary.

Joker thought it was a good deal more than odd. Batman seemed to think they were old pals. He and Catwoman were acting like they were invited, like it was perfectly natural that they be here to help celebrate his anniversary (WHICH IS IN JUNE!). This wasn't the way things were supposed to be. He hated the Bat; the Bat hated him. He wanted to kill the Bat but he couldn't kill anybody tonight because he hadn't recited Lord Alfred Tennyson's epic poem *Ulysses* before he left the house. And now Catwoman and Harley were going to the ladies' room together, giggling like schoolgirls, and that left him alone at the table with Bats and THIS WAS NOT RIGHT!

"Heh heh," Joker laughed tentatively.

Batman smiled agreeably, and Joker nearly choked on his tongue.

After a few moments, he asked, "You're, ah, not going to beat me up?"

"No, I whistled the score to HMS Pinafore before I left the house."

Joker said nothing for a few seconds.

Then tried again.

"Not going to arrest me?"

"Ich würde dich sofort verhaften, wenn du ein Verbrechen begangen hättest. Aber das hast du nicht, weil du Lord Alfred Tennysons Ulysses nicht rezitiert hast, bevor du das Haus verlassen hast," replied Batman in flawless German.

Again, Joker said nothing.

One last try:

"Catwoman's quite a babe."

"Oh yeah."

The women returned and after a few more minutes of mind bending socializing, Batman paid the check, Catwoman said we must do this again sometime, Harley said she was organizing another karaoke night, and Joker hailed a cab and checked himself into Arkham.

Back on a rooftop across from the Iceberg, Bat and Cat were splitting a bottle of champagne Catwoman had appropriated from the nightclub.

Selina had drunk most of it and was still giggling at the account of what happened when she and Harley were in the powder room. Giggling. This was a very different side of her from the Catwoman who hissed and scratched—and, for that matter, the Catwoman who spun his crimefighting bluster into innuendo. Maybe it was all the talk of anniversaries, but he couldn't help contrasting this Catwoman with the one that very first night, who actually answered the trademark question about "the easy way or the hard way" with a shameless "Why, Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"

How many times did he lie in bed replaying that moment, scripting himself a better response than the wide-eyed tongue-tied gulp he'd produced in the original encounter?

And here she was now... giggling over the scheme to gaslight the Joker.

"So was it their anniversary or not?" she asked finally.

"I hate to say it. Joker's right. Their first job together was at the Dini Fishery, June 4th."

"He's going by their first CRIME? Well that's the mix-up, 'cause she's going by something that happened when she was on staff at Arkham. He brought her flowers at therapy session, kissed her or something." Catwoman gave a slight shudder at the thought. "She considers it their first date."

Batman allowed himself a twitch-smile as he drained his glass. So that's what they talked about in the powder room. He'd given Catwoman a full account of the scene at the table with Joker, but she hadn't mentioned what transpired between her and Harley.

"That would make our anniversary..." Batman began.

"December 18th," Catwoman answered just as he said, "October 10th."

“Cartier’s,” she insisted, just as Batman countered, “Top of the train station—still got the scar.”

“All bluster and batarangs, that doesn’t count! I could’ve been anybody, I could’ve been Hugo Strange, I could’ve been Killer Croc!”

“How hard do you want it to get?” Batman quoted, “Can you begin to fathom how NOT SUCCESSFUL Hugo Strange would be asking ‘how hard do you want it to get?’”

She laughed delightedly.

“Are you telling me, you’ve been thinking of me as ‘not just another rogue’ from the very first night?”

“Well I don’t fantasize about Killer Croc breaking into the manor in the middle of the night,” came the thought.

Then he glanced up—a look of lusty amusement greeted him...

He looked down at the empty champagne bottle then back at Catwoman.

“Did I say that out loud?”



## PLAN 9 FROM THE DEMON'S HEAD

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"Mr Drake, prep stands for preparatory. Brentwood Academy is a preparatory institution. It is our function to prepare our students for the rigors of collegiate academia..."

Tim Drake couldn't help thinking if Ra's Al Ghul was somehow crossbred with the Penguin and Hugo Strange, the result still wouldn't be as pompous and affected as Mr. Offred.

"...As such, you are required to complete no fewer than six advanced placement credits your junior year, and nine your senior year, effectively allowing you to matriculate into any institution of higher learning as sophomores. I am not unaware that many of our young scholars view this process as an opportunity to 'party hardy' during their freshman year, however those of serious purpose take full measure of..."

It went on and on. Not twelve hours ago, Tim was in danger of being drawn and quartered by coils of mutated ivy—this was worse.

"...Now then, about your essay..."

Finally.

"Mr Offred, all I meant was that 'Groupthink' has come up in all three of my advanced placement courses—History, Speech Communications, and Political Science—and I just thought..."

"If it has only happened once in 10,000 years of recorded history," Mr. Offred read from Tim's paper, "it doesn't belong in a textbook, and if it has they should find a new example."

"I just meant—"

"Mr Drake, Groupthink is a phenomenon when a team of highly accomplished and successful people dedicated to some high purpose, by the very virtue of their abilities and successes, create an atmosphere where no one will speak of perceived weaknesses in a planned course of action—or quite possibly, no one even recognizes those weaknesses. They will not see collectively what any one of them would see individually: that the plan is so ridiculously flawed as to be doomed from the beginning. The textbook example of this is the Bay of Pigs—"

"Yes sir, that's my point. It IS a textbook example. It's in all three of my textbooks, and I just thought it might be helpful if someone would give a different example—"

"The Kennedy administration saw itself as..."

It went on and on.

Mr. Offred repeated the facts of the Bay of Pigs invasion just as the textbooks had. Tim resigned himself to shutting off his brain and parroting these facts back, the gospel according to Harcourt-Brace and Mr. Offred, at the first opportunity to show he now understood. Until then, he'd console himself with thoughts of Ivy's mutant shrubbery

climbing through the window, wrapping round Mr. Offred's throat, and pulling him out the window by his necktie.

Selina stood in front of the 49th Street Newsstand with true sympathy in her heart: The Gotham Post, gutter tabloid extraordinaire, had found a new target. After her one-woman show exposed the outrageous lies they'd written about Catwoman, they moved on to this smear campaign against Black Canary. She was allegedly smitten with the Demon Head himself, Ra's Al Ghul. Today's cover pictured "the Cadaver" - as Selina always thought of him- carrying Canary off into the desert, like a Snidely Whiplash version of Valentino's Sheik.

The Post pretended to be a great advocate of female heroes: even running editorials and sidebars about *replacing* male heroes like Robin with female counterparts like Batgirl or Spoiler! But for all their politically correct posturing, the paper didn't really like the women of the superhero trade. They liked having tits on their front page, Selina reflected, but they missed no opportunity to humiliate and degrade these women whose stories they claimed to tell.

"Black Canary *IN LOVE* with Ra's Al Ghul. Oh please! Nobody's that blonde."

Then news vendor looked up at her comment, and Selina picked up a Vogue.

The only kernel of truth in the stories about her, she thought as she slid the magazine into her handbag, was that there actually was a thief called Catwoman operating in Gotham City. She couldn't help but wonder what, if anything, was the kernel of truth this preposterous Black Canary story.

Ra's al Ghul was having a bad day. "After a few centuries," he considered, "you develop a perspective mortals who live but a single lifetime can never know. You recognize a bad day when it's happening to you, and **THIS** is a BAD DAY."

He was in the Detective's city, he had been forced to submit himself to the tender mercies of a Gotham press agent, he had endured those horrible women and their papier-mâché window boxes, he had endured "BeBe" (a miniature poodle of foul disposition who sat on the room service cart eating his lunch), and he now had to endure this picture.

He sat at the desk in the Royal Suite at the Gotham Imperial Hotel, surveying the same cover of the Gotham Post with the same look of distaste that Selina had—though for vastly different reasons. *THIS* was why the Fair One, his flaxen-haired goddess, refused his love: he was being portrayed as a monster, a diabolical villain! Look at that picture! He looked like the antagonists from the early moving pictures. How could anyone as fair and able as Black Canary not be repulsed by this impudent propaganda?

It was this image and the dozens that preceded it that caused him to hire the press agent, Ramona DeSlice... Ramona DeSlice. "Surely," Ra's thought, "even by the standards of American nomenclature, that cannot be a real name. No sentient being would name another living thing Ramona DeSlice.... Then again..." he looked at the poodle with disgust. His own darling daughter had wanted to call this canine curse "Brucie boy" and when he flatly refused, she tried "Beloved." When that was rejected, she began sneaking it treats and calling it "BeBe" until it refused to answer to any other

name. Perhaps it was fortunate she never succeeded seducing the Detective, or the mighty Ra's al Ghul might be saddled with an heir called the Belovelette.

Her mother was like that. Cloying. That's why he had to kill her.

But this new passion was another matter, it would not pale in a mere century. Invigorated by his last dip in the Lazarus Pit, he had the raging hormones of a 19-year old. His lieutenants claimed he was not thinking clearly, but they didn't understand—his mind was not clouded, it was exceptionally focused: Black Canary! Whatever it took, he would win her.

And if that meant he must come to the Detective's city and be photographed with a dog and appear on talk shows at the behest of a press agent, so be it. He would repair his demonic image and he would win the lady fair.

She had come into his life the very day he last emerged from the Pit. She was in his territory, asking questions of the peasants. He had her brought before him, and learned that her investigation had nothing to do with his operations. She was on the trail of Lin Phat, an Asian racketeer of no consequence. As her interests did not conflict with his, he invited her to stay and enjoy his hospitality, to at least dine with him before she left. This was the way of civilized beings, but the heroes never understood that. She bristled, as they all do, as if he'd insulted her. It was quite—*stirring*.

It had been decades since he'd felt this way. She was so unattainable, so disdainful. He tried all of his best bits, wrote her sonnets, promised her the world. Literally. Catherine the Great really went for that. But the Fair Canary, alas, called him...

*...: a creepy megalomaniacal slime bucket :...*

The words scrolled up on the OraCom's text screen. It was a relatively new channel, created for Batgirl's limited spoken vocabulary, but used more and more by the other heroines as a private IM where they could silently comment on, among other things, the men on the 'Com without their knowing. Barbara typed back:

*...:ROFL, c'mon dinah, let it out, what do you really think of him?::..*

The only response was the emoticon of a smiley face sticking out it's tongue. Barbara continued her teasing.

*...:you saw him on The View today didn't you? hocking his book?::..*

*...: My Previous Lives and Loves—Gag Me! :...*

*...:Introduction by Shirley McLane::..*

*...: What was the thing making flowerboxes? :...*

*...:They always do that, make the guests do some craft or cooking thing. Seriuosly Dinah, don't you feel just a LITTLE different now that you've seen him up to his elbows in papier-mâché?::..*

Nightwing read over Barbara's shoulder as she chatted with Black Canary, oblivious to his presence. He'd been taught to approach unseen and unheard, taught by the very best. Tonight he was going to put that skill to good use surprising Babs with a bouquet of roses, an order from her favorite takeout, and a small gold locket which Alfred recommended, Bruce confirmed, and Selina helped pick out, as an appropriate gift to

signal his intention to propose at some later date. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak... when a new line of text appeared on the screen:

...: No, I still pretty much feel repulsed—you know he's not even talking roll in the hay, he wants MARRIAGE can you believe it, 'til death do us part with a guy that's 800 years old if he's a day and shows no sign of slowing down. :... .

...:It's that strict 12<sup>th</sup> century upbringing I expect.:... .

...: I think it's because the heir needs to be legitimate—WHY AM I DISCUSSING THIS? :... .

...:'cause he looked so adorable with that dog licking paste off his beard:...

...: BARBARA THIS ISN'T FUNNY—WHY ARE YOU TURNING THIS INTO A JOKE:...

...: Dinah! Chill! What ELSE am I supposed to do with it? It's too silly to take seriously—You and Ra's! It's a punch line. Besides, what with everybody assuming Dickey-the-Dick and I are a foregone conclusion, I've got to get my jollies from other people's love lives.:... .

Nighting silently gathered up his flowers, takeout, and the jewelry box containing the locket, and left the apartment in crushed silence.

Every evening between one and two in the morning the Batcave computers downloaded massive amounts of information from police blotters, newspapers, corporate and government networks, and then ran the data through a complex series of filtering and sorting routines designed to tag the information Batman might require.

It immediately alerted Bruce when a foreign dignitary reserved the top four floors of the Gotham Imperial Hotel. It took very little investigation to determine that the dignitary was Ra's Al Ghul. Despite Selina's assertion that the demon was a "flyweight, a hairdo, and a bush league schmuck" who owed his stature as a world-class villain to Batman "taking everybody to DefCon4 just because an Al Ghul comes to town," Batman did, essentially, take everybody to DefCon4.

He could not deduce what his nemesis was doing here in person. He had his agents, he had his daughter—he didn't need to give up the home field advantage leaving his compound this way. So why did he do it?

One aspect of "DefCon4" was a subroutine that monitored the closed-captioning on every television station and alerted him if a broadcast contained certain keywords. At 10:15 in the morning, the subroutine went haywire, it was almost as if dozens of keywords were being flagged at the same time.

Punching in a code directing the computer to display the broadcast on the largest view screen, Batman gasped as the larger than life face of Ra's Al Ghul loomed over the cave.

He was...

He was...

...on a talk show?

Ra's was on a talk show. He was talking about some book he was writing—about past lives? He was... This was... This wasn't right.

Batman couldn't help but wonder if some cosmic justice wasn't avenging Joker for the episode at the Iceberg Lounge.

Ra's Al Ghul was IN GOTHAM CITY, appearing on a WOMEN'S TALK SHOW, promoting A BOOK?

The theories Dick and Tim had put forth about his cooking raced through Bruce's mind:

**alternate universe!**

*"Here's a sonnet I was able to recall, under regression hypnosis of course, from a previous incarnation in 15<sup>th</sup> Century Florence, when I was a humble soldier enamored of a noblewoman. It is entitled simply: To Canary..."*

**shape shifter!**

*"Oh, Star, isn't that beautiful? I wish men today wrote things like that."*

*"Girlfriend, most men wouldn't even admit to writin' that in a previous life if you ask me,"*

*"I can't help wondering if she said yes."*

**robot!**

*"You stick around, Rozzie, 'cause after this commercial break we're going to make flower boxes to bright up those windows!"*

*(under playoff music) "It's pronounced 'RAYsh.'"*

"The old man's brain is caught in his zipper."

Ubu would never have said such a thing. Ra's Al Ghul's former lieutenant-cum-bodyguard had been indoctrinated from birth, raised to serve his master without question or comment.

Draco, the new man, was a disappointment. He was respectful enough in Ra's presence, but spoke in an unseemly way with the captain of the guard, whose room was, of course, bugged.

Making a mental note to have Draco dispatched when they returned to the compound (for it would not do to dispose of bodies in the Detective's city), Ra's switched on the television and searched for the appearance he'd taped the previous day with Regis and some other woman. He could never remember all their names.

Not realizing the 36 in the television listing corresponded to channel 8 on the actual set, Ra's naively turned the dial to 36. He watched the first three hours of SoapNet's marathon of classic soap opera storylines, the greatest criminal mind of this or any generation sitting resolutely through highlights of "Luke and Laura's Summer on the Run" as he waited patiently for his segment with Regis. As the hours passed, he was able to deduce that a secret agent, a ne'er-do-well thief, and a blonde were all searching for a man-made diamond called Ice Princess. The thief and the blonde were obviously lovers, and the whole thing was a disgusting example of decadent Western culture... until the appearance of an enigmatic Greek. The fellow had some kind of secret underground installation from whence he planned—this was intriguing—from whence he planned to build a massive weather machine capable of producing "carbonic snow" that could freeze the entire world!

Ra's watched in fascinated awe as Mikkos Cassadine, with a psychopathic gleam in his eye, told how he would "force global leaders to yield to my will! The entire world will live by my rule. I will be in supreme command!"

It was brilliant! It was inspired!

Why was he wasting his time with press agents, publishers, and dogs? His lieutenants were right! He had lost focus! He had to escalate his plan to take over the world and FORCE Black Canary to love him...

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GROUPTHINK: or WHEN SMART PEOPLE DO DUMB THINGS

by Timothy Drake

*When an honors student is forced to forego independent thought and mindlessly regurgitate paragraphs from a textbook... <DELETE>*

*When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a student to rewrite a damn fine paper to humor a moron in order to get a passing grade... <DELETE>*

Sigh.

*The Kenedy Administration saw itself as...*

"Two Ns in Kennedy, Bro."

Tim jumped at the interruption, but was glad for it.

"Dick, hey, you shouldn't sneak up like that. You're spending more time in Gotham than in Bludhaven these days, aren't you?"

Dick smiled uncomfortably.

"Yeah, I guess. Been seeing a lot of Barb- well anyway, that's about to change."

"Not complaining. It's better when you're around. What's up, you look like your dog died?"

Dick said nothing.

"Di-ick, what's wrong, Bro?"

Dick said nothing.

"That's a fine impersonation of Bruce. Now what's happening?"

"Never mind. It's nothing. Things with Barbara took a turn, I guess."

Tim laughed uncharitably. "Like sands through the hour glass."

"It's not funny, Tim." Dick sounded unusually upset, considering 'things with Barbara' were always taking one turn or another. "If you must know I went over to propose, well not *propose* exactly, but to lay the groundwork. Sort of set things in motion for her to encourage or—"

"And she didn't encourage."

"Never even got that far. She... ..Babs has got a real nasty streak, you ever notice that?"

Tim thought all of the bat family had a bit of a nasty streak, but he didn't say so. Instead, he tried to look sympathetic to make up for the soap opera crack.

"And I didn't do anything to bring it on, either," Dick went on petulantly. "Just standing there, and she flattened me for no reason."

"You talk to Bruce?"

Tim didn't want to be rude, but he had a paper to write. And he didn't have any advice to offer anyway.

"He's preoccupied. Ra's Al Ghul,"

Tim sniggered.

"You catch him on The View? 'A Sonnet: To Canary. *Tweet Tweet sings the songbird...*'"

Dick smiled sadly. Funny as it was, he didn't feel like poking fun at another aching heart, even Ra's Al Ghul's. But he played along.

"My favorite part was, *Speak fair my fair one, oh flaxen-haired goddess of song.*"

Tim roared at this. Quotations from the putrid bilge the Demon crowd considered love poetry would clearly be an in-joke among the bat-clan for some time.

"It's like I said, man, Days of Our Lives. Gotham's become a soap opera."

"No, for that we'd need spies from the World Security Bureau running around with plans for weather machines and diamonds hiding secret formulas."

It was Tim's turn to say nothing.

"I watched a little in college." Dick explained sheepishly.

"Weather machines? With Secret formulas?"

"That was before my time actually, but it's a very famous story—girl in the student union told me about it—see there was this big diamond called the Ice Princess that one of the Quartermains used in a sculpture, and in the base was a secret formula to make this artificial snow..."

"ANYWAY," Tim cut him off with some asperity, "if Bruce is busy, how about taking your Barbara problems to Selina. She's a woman."

"You noticed that too, huh."

“Go away, let me write my paper. Bother other people.”

As Tim turned back to his computer, the news alert pinged, and he saw a headline that meteorologist Dan Waynard was missing.

“How about that,” Tim thought as he continued with his paper, “a missing weatherman. Speak of the devil...”

The poodle BeBe began licking paste from Ra's Al Ghul's goatee for the 63rd time when the image on the great cluster of monitors froze and began moving backwards.

"I don't care what you say, Bat-o-my-heart, you have not watched that tape 63 times out of professional dedication."

"I have to find out what it means."

*It means that ratty little dog doesn't know better than to kiss up to a cadaver, Selina thought but didn't say. Or maybe he got dipped one time too many and the pit finally ate his brain.*

DefCon4 meant their date was cancelled again, and Selina had come to the manor to spend some time together. She accepted that, just as there were hours of less-than-glamorous footwork planning a robbery that might lead to an intense three minute confrontation with Batman, there was a great deal of busywork on this side of the crime game as well. Nevertheless, it didn't take a strategic genius to realize—rewinding and replaying that videotape over and over—the demon, the hosts and the dog were going to do exactly what they'd done the last 62 times.

He was enjoying this. He would never admit it, but the sight of his great enemy—the mighty, the inscrutable, the unspeakably full-of-himself Ra's Al Ghul—being asked inane questions by silly women, harassed by an idiot dog, and grinning like a morning show dolt who enjoyed it, was being replayed over and over for entertainment value, not for crimefighting insight.

"It's 'cause of Black Canary."

Both Bruce and Selina tried to hide their surprise as Dick spoke. When did he sneak in anyway?

"You're spending more time here than in Bludhaven these days," Bruce growled. As always, he made it sound like an accusation.

"I overheard her and Barbara talking," Dick said as if Bruce hadn't spoken. "Ra's is trying to impress Black Canary."

Bruce considered this possibility, then dismissed it.

"Ra's is obsessive, he's consumed with his quest to take over the world. Guy like that doesn't compromise the mission for love."

Selina had one foot up on the worktable, using a batarang to scrape dried cave-slime off her heel.

"Yes, Dear," she purred.

"Selina, have you got a minute," Dick asked pointedly, "I need a woman's perspective on something."

She looked up quizzically and Bruce put in, "Barbara again."

Dick hadn't thought Bruce was paying attention during his previous visit. When would he learn: Bruce/Batman was always paying attention.

"Yes," Dick answered defensively "Me and Barbara *again*. And I want a woman's opinion because you and Tim are both useless, okay."

Dick told his story for a third time and on this last repetition, he began to see he was overreacting. What had Babs actually done? He didn't like being referred to as "Dickey-the-Dick," but it was probably said affectionately... The bit about the two of them being a "foregone conclusion" was unfortunate when he was effectively there to propose, but she didn't know he was there to propose—she didn't know he was there at all! He concluded his story with a conciliatory:

"I realize I'm being hypersensitive, but I don't know, maybe... maybe it's cause I'm not really ready for this. It's a big step. Don't you guys think it's a big step? I mean, Barbara and I have been... in a certain *place*, doing things a certain *way*, for a long time now. It's familiar. It's comfortable."

"Familiar and comfortable," Selina remarked, "There's a description that's always a turn on, romantically speaking."

"Oh come on, you know what I mean. The relationship's about to change, and I'm wiggin'."

Dick looked at Selina—Selina looked at Dick.

Dick looked at Bruce—Bruce looked at Dick.

"COME ON, GUYS, if *you two* don't get it then what's the point?—Don't tell me you don't miss those times—"

Dick looked at Selina—Selina looked at Dick.

Dick looked at Bruce—Bruce looked at Dick.

Bruce and Selina looked at each other. Then Bruce spoke, in a deadpan monotone:

"That's not your necklace."

"Great detective," came the instantaneous, but equally bored reply.

"You've gone to far this time; I'm taking you down."

"Ooh, you're so HOT when you say that."

Dick turned to leave as the bored dialogue turned to bored narration.

"Here comes the whip."

"Here comes the batarang."

"Grab the whip."

"Reel me in."

On the way out he glanced at the desk and there was another news item: An R & D lab was reporting the theft of manmade industrial diamonds, and satellite equipment. Weather + Diamond + Satellite = ...Ice Princess. It couldn't be.

"Don't let go of the handle."

"I don't mind getting close."

"Grab the wrists."

"Flare the claws."

It couldn't be.

"Kiss me."

"Act surprised."

It was a soap opera.

"Slip in the tongue."

"Pull away."

"Judgmental jackass."

"Amoral bitch."

"HEY, if you two are done with Masterpiece Theatre," Dick called over his shoulder, "come look at this. I know what Ra's Al Ghul is up to, and you're absolutely not going to believe it."

An assault on Ra's Al Ghul's headquarters, even if it was a luxury hotel in the heart of Gotham instead of a high-security compound in the middle of the desert, was not a

casual undertaking. The whole of "Team Bat" were on-site, except for Catwoman. She had provided some additional information about the Gotham Imperial not noted on the blueprints. She set out with the rest. But a few blocks before reaching the target, she told them to go on without her, she would meet up with them inside. She waited for the party to continue east and disappear on the horizon before she turned and headed south.

Meanwhile, Barbara was brewing her first pot of tea for the evening, a ritual she often observed before logging on as Oracle. Her mind was full of possibilities for monitoring the battle ahead with Ra's—she had the frequencies of the Imperial's private security, and all the area precincts and—CAT! The sight was so incongruous it stopped her in her tracks. She nearly tossed the tray—teapot, cup and all. Catwoman was seated at her workstation with her feet perched neatly on the monitor.

"You knew he was here."

It wasn't a question or an accusation; it was a statement.

"No comment," Barbara said crisply.

"The batboys aren't as silent and invisible as they like to think—not with us at least."

"No comment."

"Barbara. If I can tell, you can."

"OKAY, ALRIGHT, I KNEW... I ... smelled the flowers."

"Richard thinks he overreacted because he's nervous as hell about the relationship changing," the use of the proper name instead of the nickname was conspicuous and it startled Barbara into considering the words more fully. "What do you think?" Catwoman asked. This time it was a challenge, and Barbara felt compelled to come up with some sort of reply.

"I think... I think change can be a scary thing."

Catwoman nodded. She could relate. Her own behavior had been none too courageous when the situation with Batman began to develop beyond what it had been forever. But Batman was, well, he was Batman—this was Dick they were talking about.

"Change can be scary," Barbara repeated.

"But Dick isn't scary."

Barbara smiled at that, then giggled, then laughed openly.

"No, Dickey's a teddy bear."

Catwoman gave a pleased "my work is done here" smile, took a cookie off the tea tray, and prepared to leave and rejoin the others. But Barbara went on:

"I guess I just panicked at the thought of becoming stale and predictable."

*What a pair!* Selina thought. It wasn't two hours since Dick called their current rut comfortable and familiar, and now the other half of the sketch was fretting that moving on would make them dull and boring. She asked Barbara to fetch a second cup for the tea—this was going to take a while.

Draco, 120<sup>th</sup> Demon guard to be dispatched, hit the floor with rather more force than the previous 119. Batman was exasperated, and making a point. He addressed his

nemesis across the room as he smashed heads and kicked butts, moving ever closer to his target.

“Ra’s,” <crack>

“Man-to-Man,” <crunch>

“This isn’t going to work.” <kick, block, punch>

“It didn’t work for Mikkos Cassadine and it’s not going to work for you! Let the captives go home! Get out of my town! And I WON’T tell Black Canary you got your diabolical master plan from General Hospital!”

“So that was it? He caved?” Selina was wrapping Bruce’s broken ribs as, in an adjacent niche of the cave medical facility, Alfred tended to Dick and Tim’s minor injuries.

“He caved,” Bruce pronounced with satisfaction—and then saw to his surprise, he was expected to say more. Alfred never wanted to hear this stuff. He swabbed, disinfected, bandaged and taped in disapproving silence. Selina was disappointed to have missed all the action and wanted to know every detail.

“He couldn’t lose face in front of his ‘most radiant paragon of transcendent inamorata,’” Bruce explained.

Then he winced as attempts to stifle her laughter caused Selina to tug the end of the bandage.

“Let me get this straight, he doesn’t want her to know he’s getting ideas from Luke & Laura, because that would be *embarrassing*—but he’ll say ‘radiant paragon of...’ how did it go?”

Bruce refused to smile but he allowed his mouth a half-twitch as he said “I’m grateful now to have gotten off with a simple ‘beloved.’ Time was I didn’t think it could get worse than that, but evidently it can.”

The jerk Selina gave the bandage on ‘beloved’ might or might not have been another attempt to suppress laughter. To be safe, Bruce touched her cheek and said:

“Just promise me you’ll never refer to me as your ‘cherished vessel of rapturous bliss.’”

“Pumpkin, I swear, to me you’ll always be ‘judgmental jackass.’”

# SATORI

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**Gotham Times, October 12<sup>th</sup>**

LIFESTYLES *Hermoine's Society Chit-Chat*

*Tongues are wagging that the new brunette on Bruce Wayne's arm is none other than Is-She-or-Isn't-She Cat-Tales star Selina Kyle. Naughty-Naughty Bruce, you've been hiding this one. The couple was spotted enjoying a late-night supper at D'Annunzio's and are expected to cut the ribbon at the gala opening of the new Gotham Mythology Museum underwritten by the Wayne Foundation....*

Harvey Dent read the blurb twice more. He couldn't quite believe it was still going on. It was four months since Selina mentioned a pair of cat pins were a gift from Bruce Wayne. Four months! In the years when they were friends, Bruce never stuck with a relationship for four weeks, let alone four months.

Pussycat's stringing him along good and proper, the Two-Face side of his personality sneered.

Not her style, the Harvey side defended his friend. Selina can steal for herself anything Bruce could buy her. If she's seeing him, must be 'cause she wants to.

No accounting for taste.

Two-Face was bitter. He wasn't capable of affectionate or romantic feelings, but it hadn't escaped his attention that Catwoman operated on both sides of the law and could play both sides against the middle. Duality. It would have made her a very suitable object for his attention, except that Harvey seemed to think of her as some kind of kid sister. He wouldn't let the thought form clearly enough to even propose a flip of the coin.

Harvey, the canker of goodness that blocked his every idea and impulse. The goody-goody was now defending his other friend:

Bruce isn't so bad.

Wayne's a wuss. Should be fun when he screws up and the fur starts to fly.

Harvey considered this.

It was a valid point. Selina was a lot to handle as a friend, let alone (god forbid) as a girlfriend. And Bruce was used to bimbos that would put up with anything from a billionaire playboy...

He had a thought.

NO!

It was a good thought.

NO FUCKING WAY!

Bruce was a friend of his, after all, and so was Selina. It'd be nice if they made each other happy.

HARVEY, I SAID NO. ARE YOU LISTENING YOU INSUFFERABLE DO-GOODER SACK OF SH-

-flip-

Good side up.

Harvey smiled and Two-Face smashed the table into the wall.

Though he was dressed casually as Bruce Wayne, it was really Batman who sat at the workstation in the core of the Batcave, typing his final comments into the file on Ra's Al Ghul's unprecedented visit to Gotham City. His great enemy had left his seat of power and come onto the Batman's own turf, without a plan, without a hope, totally befuddled by his infatuation with Black Canary.

Analysis: Possibly Ra's status as my ultimate adversary derives more from his ambitions than his abilities.

With that, he saved and sealed the file, then punched in a code to pull up a list of criminals currently at large.

"Sir," Alfred began impassively. (How long had he been standing there, Bruce wondered, waiting for him to reach a stopping point? ) "There is a party of gentlemen wishing to see you upstairs."

"Thank you, Alfred."

"I had them wait in the study."

"Thank you, Alfred."

"I believe, sir, you should not keep them waiting long."

Bruce turned with some annoyance, and Alfred continued.

"A Mr. Tetch, A Mr. Nigma and a Mr. Dent, sir."

Bruce looked back at the monitor:

...: At Large :...

Mad Hatter

Riddler

Two-Face

He looked back at Alfred, who offered no further comment.

Bruce Wayne entered the study without, for once, feeling the need to perform the role of Bruce Wayne in any way. He was perplexed as to why this committee of rogues should pay a call on him, and saw no reason to conceal it.

Harvey Dent, apparently elected spokesman of the group, smiled and shook his hand as if it had been days, rather than years, since they'd last spoken as friends.

"Hey Bruce, good to see you. This is Jervis and Eddie."

As they sat, Bruce acknowledged the introduction with a quasi-smile that showed he was no less perplexed than before.

"We, uh, saw this bit in the paper about you seeing Selina Kyle. Been going on for a while now, hasn't it."

Oh. My. God. Bruce thought, freezing his features as rigidly as if he was wearing the cowl. Then realizing that was perhaps an unwise face to present in this company, he

relaxed it into the softer but equally uncommunicative expression he put on at business meetings.

Harvey continued. "We've all known Selina for quite some time and, well, since you and I are such old friends, we thought we'd come by and just, you know, fill you in on some things you should know."

"Harvey, I already know she's Catwoman."

"Oh, that, yeah, we figured she'd told you that, she sort of told the whole city... No, ah, we wanted to make sure you understood what all that means."

"Never mention that book," Nigma began.

"That unauthorized biography a few years ago, F. Miller, said she started out a hooker," Jervis Tetch explained.

"Right," Harvey completed the thought, "Don't make even a passing reference to that, even in fun. No matter how trivial the remark, or how obvious you think it is that you're joking or that everybody knows it's a pack of lies. Don't ever mention it."

"I learned that one the hard way," said Jervis, wincing at the memory.

"No pussy jokes," Harvey went on to the next item on the list.

"If she ever uses a phrase like 'Do that again and I'll set you on fire'—not an idle threat."

The trio chuckled among themselves at some private joke.

"Scarecrow learned that the hard way," Jervis explained.

"2nd of the month through the 6th is, ah, nature's special time. If you're going to cross her—which I wouldn't suggest under any circumstances—don't do it then unless you've got your affairs in order and your insurance paid up."

Batman would have to admit to a new respect dawning for the niche Catwoman had carved for herself in the Rogues Gallery. These were vicious, violent men. They each had more than a hundred pounds on her, they were not adverse to killing as she was. And yet she was not only accepted as an equal among them, she had established (and evidently enforced) ground rules for her acquaintance and friendship that they ignored at their peril. They accepted this, though god knows they wouldn't tolerate this treatment from any man, because she was... well, she was Catwoman. She'd somehow leveraged the supposed weakness of her gender into a very palpable advantage.

Edward Nigma was the only one to notice a wistful look flicker in Bruce's eyes, but he misread it as fear. This was, after all, a candy-ass rich boy and here they were giving him a list of DOs & DON'ts to avoid catastrophic injuries with his new girlfriend. He offered a word of comfort.

"Anyway, she's a darling girl, a real sweetie. And next time you go out, you bring her to the Iceberg, that's Penguin's club downtown. I know it's not the sort of place a lot of respectable folks feel safe, but you're with Selina, you're part of the family now. Stop by the Iceberg, you won't have any trouble."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Dent, Nigma and Tetch were all thinking of the last time Catwoman was seen at the Iceberg and with whom. It introduced a delicate subject, one they had discussed in the car, but hadn't reached a consensus about mentioning to Bruce.

Bruce was silent for a different reason. His mind froze up utterly on the phrase "you're part of the family now."

The silence went on as the trio of rogues looked at each other.

It went on too long to ignore.

They had to explain now what it was about. To simply stop talking for four solid minutes and never say why was worse than speaking the dreaded name...

"There is one more thing," Harvey began, looking to the others for last-minute inspiration. "About—"

"Don't ever ask about—"

"Don't ask what the deal is with her and—"

"-Batman," the three said in unison.

It's doubtful if even an actor of Bruce's skill would have been able to greet these words with the look of guileless confusion he now wore. But his brain was still firing on only one cylinder. He only heard the speculation (and meticulous deconstruction) of Batman's are-they-or-aren't-they relationship with Catwoman through a stunned haze of "You're part of the family now."

"She just plays with his head."

"I don't think so, Jervis, you've never seen it up close and personal. It's weird, they bicker like married people."

"You're part of the family now."

"He just wants to save her."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?"

"You're part of the family now."

"I'm not saying he doesn't want some, I'm saying he's not getting any."

"If you had an excuse to fight with her, you saying you wouldn't cop a feel or two?"

"With those claws—I'm a bleeder, man!"

"You're part of the family now."

THIS is what comes of lightening up, Batman's inner voice berated him. You smiled at her once. And THIS is what comes. Pretty soon you're slipping notes into picnic baskets, stopping by for coffee, talking to your reflection, cooking, and gaslighting the Joker instead of pummeling him—and THIS IS WHERE IT LEADS: Mad Hatter, Riddler and Two-Face sitting in your house, debating your chances of getting to second base.

The image of Ra's Al Ghul humiliating himself on a morning talk show came unbidden into Bruce's mind. This is what love could do to a formidable man's image. His own comments—dismissing Ra's as his ultimate adversary—because of his performance in the throes of a romantic infatuation.

"You're part of the family now... part of the family now... part of the family now..."

"If I go patrol with Robin and come back in, say, two hours, is there any chance of my seeing something other than the back of your head then?"

...

"Babs?"

...

"Barbara Louise"

"I'm sorry, 'Wing, Did you say something?" Oracle's eyes never left the computer screen and she continued to type through their conversation.

"I just wondered if I left and went on patrol, if you'd even notice before I blipped on your little tracking setup."

"Mhm. Setup. Should've seen that was a trap going in."

Dick paused and tried again.

"Helped a girl scout troupe change a tire, and they gave me a box of cookies."

"Cookies? On the counter next to the 'fridge. And bring me a glass of milk."

"So then I threw Poison Ivy down on the bed and made passionate love to her right in front of the flytrap."

"WHAT!"

"Oh hi, Barbara, hope I'm not interrupting. I just thought I'd drop in and say hi before going on patrol."

Barbara sighed.

"I'm sorry, Dick. This is time-critical. Do you mind coming back later."

"Whacha doin' anyway." He looked over her shoulder at the cluster of monitors. She had four chat windows open on one screen, a bulletin board on another and several websites on a third.

"Cloudmakers."

For a second Dick thought she was answering his nonsense-speak about girl scouts and flytraps with a bit of her own, but then he saw the bulletin board, the chatrooms and one of the websites were all labeled Cloudmakers.

"It's a game, or it was, a promotion for the movie AI. Dozens of websites, hundreds of puzzles, that led you bit by bit through this very elaborate murder mystery set in the world of the movie."

"You're using roughly half a million dollars in computer equipment to play an Internet game."

"I'm not, you basketcase, the Cloudmakers are—or they were. See, this game and the puzzles were incredibly complex: There were clues hidden in chemical formulas, dead languages, the html code on the websites—live events in different cities going on at the same time. No one person could begin to solve it alone. This group, they formed a collective—called Cloudmakers—named for the boat of the guy who's murdered in the story. That was the point of the game: 'distributed biological processing,' a group of people working together, linked up like this over the internet, could outperform any artificial intelligence."

"Interesting, in an insanely geeky beam-me-up-Scotty way, but what's it got to do with you."

"The game's ended. And these people—these amazingly creative, number-crunching, puzzle-solving, hackers—are still linked up, have all their communication lines in place, their bulletin boards and websites. Their brains all charged up and no more puzzles to solve." Barbara's eyes glowed with inspiration as she said "I want to put them to work for me."

Dick's mouth fell open: It was a fantastically clever idea.

"And that's why I've gotta move now—get them onboard before they find something else to do or break up their little network."

Dick couldn't help it. He reached down and kissed her full on the mouth. He had the most fiendishly brilliant girl on planet earth and wanted every one in the universe

to know it. But that had to wait because she had no time for him now and had already turned back to her monitors and there was the back of that brilliant, brilliant, wonderful, inspired head.

"Oh, before I go. Where's Bruce patrolling tonight?"

He was going to show off. He was to find Bruce and make it clear that Selina wasn't the only significant other with two brain cells to rub together.

It was a darker bat that entered the cave than had been seen there in many months.

*I am the night...* Bruce thought as he opened the costume vault.

*I owe nothing to anyone or anything but their memory...* he took off his belt.

*I am the right hand of justice...* He pulled off his sweater.

*I am vengeance...* he put on the chest plate.

*I am the mission...* he reached for the cowl.

*I am... ..in desperate need of a personality transplant...* in his mind's ear, Catwoman's voice sounded from the stage of the Hijinx Playhouse nearly a year before.

Bruce looked down at the cowl in his hand as he said "And that's exactly what's you gave me, isn't it, Kitten."

"And is it so terrible," he imagined her asking, "having a personality?"

"That's not the point."

"Let's make it the point," the imaginary Selina insisted. "Is it so terrible being a real person when you're not wearing that mask."

Bruce sat the mask on the table and looked at it—reminded of a painting at Gotham Museum—Aristotle contemplating the Bust of Homer, one great mind deconstructing another.

Bruce was reacting emotionally to the scene in the study with the rogues. Changing into Batman meant putting emotion on hold and thinking it through rationally.

*Emotions are a natural part of being human.*

*It's only a fool who pretends he doesn't have them. And only a fool who pretends they don't matter.*

*I am not a fool.*

*Excessive Emotion, on the other hand, is counterproductive.*

*Let emotions take over completely, mistakes follow.*

*Make an opponent angry, make them afraid, make them need to prove something, and the battle is won.*

*Emotions are a tool. Theirs and mine too.*

*I use the anger and the guilt and the pain and the fear.*

*I channel them through the mind and soul of Bruce Wayne and they come out the other side as Batman.*

That was the answer! He needed his emotions to do what he did.

Bruce was so focused on this sudden insight, he didn't notice there was a part of him thinking of both Bruce Wayne and Batman simultaneously as "I."

*I need my emotions to do what I do and that means I don't get to squander them in a tantrum before leaving the house.*

*I do not get to indulge in being Psychobat.*

*We're going to do this calmly and rationally, let the feelings have their say, let intellect respond, then make the choice.*

Like a hypnotist regressing a subject, he allowed his subconscious to introduce, little by little, his emotional reaction to the scene in the study.

***They don't fear me, I've become a joke.***

*Do you really think the things they said about Batman and Catwoman are something new? That talk's been going on for years. It has nothing to do with loosening up. Next.*

***They don't fear me.***

*But they do. It's whistling in the cemetery. They make light of what they fear. That's how impotent little trolls express terror and dread. Next?*

***They***

*This isn't about them. It's about me. I'm not about to give Riddler, Mad Hatter and Two-Face a vote on how I live my life.*

***But the changes...***

*...haven't harmed Gotham. In the past months, I've brought down Two-Face, Joker, and Ra's in record time, with less damage to life and property than usual. I haven't lost the edge.*

***But Psychobat...***

*No. Batman.*

***I don't understand.***

*Bat-Man.*

***I don't understand.***

*You DO understand.*

*You're too smart to be Psychobat for a sustained period. Too centered to be buffeted by things you're not aware of.*

***I still want to unleash holy hell on them.***

*That's fine. So consciously and deliberately, with malice aforethought even, unleash holy hell on Two-Face, Mad Hatter and Riddler.*

***They're going down tonight.***

*They're going down tonight.*

***Riddler first—extra kick in the ribs for “part of the family now.”***

*Fair enough. But that's as far as it goes. Anything else?*

***It still hurts.***

*Yes.*

Outside the Stonybrook Warehouse, Nightwing caught up with Batman -or rather with the ragged, singed, bruised and bloodied mass of Ouch formerly known as Batman. His cowl was missing an ear, there were scorch marks on the chest plate, he limped, and the costume was torn and oozing blood in a way that could only mean the flesh beneath was torn and oozing blood.

No one but the former Robin could have beheld this sight and realized: this was a happy man.

He had unleashed holy hell, first against Riddler, then against Two-Face, and he had won.

Nightwing greeted his former partner in a way that would have been unthinkable six months before.

"Big-B! You started without me. Looks like I missed all the action."

"Tough."

Whoa, thought Dick, it's been a while since Bruce was monosyllabic.

"Looks like you'll have to completely replace the costume."

"Yes."

"Okeydokey... I was over at Oracle's just now and she's got this great idea to—"

"Anybody watching over your city while you're chasing Barbara's skirts?"

Dick reacted as though to a physical slap. What the hell? He started to reply that he didn't answer to Batman, that Bruce wouldn't let him be his own man, etc. etc. ...when one of those sudden flashes of insight that strike between the eyes, struck between the eyes. He remembered, a few days earlier, Bruce and Selina playfully reenacting the exchanges they'd had a hundred times as Batman and Catwoman—and he realized, just like them, he had been a hamster on a wheel. He wasn't going to have this same fight again. He wasn't going to wail about Bruce being a dictatorial bully. He wasn't going to storm off yet again because Bruce wouldn't let him be his own man.

It wasn't like Bruce was completely wrong. He was in Gotham instead of Bludhaven. He was in Gotham yet again, because of Barbara. And Barbara was busy—doing her job. He had a job too. He should go home and do it.

"You're right," he said frankly, "And I have to be getting back."

Batman didn't react visibly to the unprecedented maturity of this response, but he noted it. In a year that saw Batman smile, Bruce Wayne cook, and Ra's Al Ghul appear on morning talk shows with his dog, what was one more miracle?

"Well. Okay then," Batman grunted.

"Can I borrow the Cessna?"

"No."

"Aw, c'mon, Dad, I'll fill the tank and wash it before I bring it back."

Batman watched from the roof of Selina Kyle's apartment as a sleek plane rose on the horizon near Wayne Manor, followed the river south, then veered east towards Bludhaven. If Dick was finally growing beyond the adolescent notion that manhood means you don't answer to anyone, he deserved the gesture.

He glanced down at Selina's terrace. Speaking of gestures... it was a long time since Catwoman had faced him in dark and dangerous mode... a very long time. It might be interesting to see how she'd react if...

"My god, you look like hell!"

Batman spun around, unused to be the one who's snuck up on. Catwoman surveyed him from head to toe, taking in the bloodied lip, the burn marks, the tears in the arms and legs of his costume.

He attempted to turn on the intense, brooding Psychobat.

She cocked her head quizzically then pronounced: "And you're missing an ear."

She walked up to examine the peak of the cowl that was severed off.

He looked down at her, pouring on more brooding intensity.

She purred in his ear.

Then he remembered, this is why Psychobat never worked with her. All of a sudden, the silence isn't a dangerous silence. It's an I don't know what to say cause there's a Catwoman purring in my ear silence, and that's just not intimidating. Needing to say something, anything, he did what he'd always done: murmured the first thing that came into his head. "What time do I pick you up for the ribbon cutting tomorrow night?"



This won't be like the protocols. I won't permit it. This time, I'll do it right. Bottle of wine, a little jazz on the CD, rub her neck, get everything just right, nice and relaxed. Then...

*"Selina, you've changed my life, do you know that? Sometimes I'm actually happy now. Not every dream I remember is a nightmare. Not every waking moment is consumed by the mission. You did that... Can I ask you something, Kitten?"*

No. Call her Kitten it's as good as wearing the cape.

*Can I ask you ... Darling?*

I'll never get that out without resorting to the playboy.

*Can I ask you something ... Selina*

There. Good. Perfect. Then she says:

*"You can ask, I don't guarantee I'll answer..."*

*"Are you still stealing?"*

And then she scratches my eyes out.

Damn.

*"Can I ask you..." "Don't guarantee I'll answer..."*

*"Catwoman still prowls at night, right?"*

*"Sure, of course. You know that, Bruce, don't be silly."*

*"Well yes, I was just wondering what you did on those prowls now that you're not stealing anymore."*

*"What makes you think I'm not stealing any more, you presumptuous jackass!"*

No.

Wine/Jazz/neckrub. "You changed my life" "Can I ask a question..." "Maybe."

*"Promise you won't get mad."*

*"Why would I get mad?"*

*"You're going to think it's Batman asking for one reason and it's really me asking for another reason entirely."*

And then she'll throw a drink in my face.

Shit.

It's going to be the protocols all over again.

I've never understood what it is about the Wayne Foundation that's a crime-magnet. I didn't get it before finding out about Bruce's night job, and I don't get it now. This is to be a ribbon-cutting for a *folklore museum*: no ancient artifacts, no Rembrandts, no priceless relics. Just dioramas and tableaus of mythology and literature, what would be the point of hitting an event like this? Yet Bruce stored his costume in a hidden compartment in the Daimler and suggested (rather emphatically) that I do the same. I asked if he was expecting trouble, and he looked at me very strangely and said he hoped so. First time in forever I didn't have a clue what he meant.

We made our entrance and did the social thing for about half an hour before the actual ceremony. Waiters circulated through the lobby with champagne and hors d'oeuvres. They were dressed, for reasons surpassing understanding, as Mercury. Bare-chested (in Gotham, in October, in an atrium lobby), abbreviated white shorts, wings on their shoes, gold helmets with more wings on the sides above the ears.

I whispered to Bruce that it looks like an FTD commercial by Fellini.

No reaction, not even a twitch-smile.

We mingled a little: Lucius Fox and his wife, Jack Drake and Tim's stepmother, a few others... I repeated my Fellini joke—they all laughed—and this time Bruce gave a weird half-smile, like he didn't really get it. That's when the penny dropped. He needed to be "Bruce the idiot" tonight. The opening remarks he had prepared for the ribbon-cutting were quite *astonishingly brilliant*, and he wanted to make sure everyone would assume the rich pinhead hired someone to write his speech for him.

*Why* he thought that was necessary is another question entirely.

I know Batman better than most people, certainly better than anyone at that party. I certainly have as high an opinion of his intellect as the next person. If he's not the smartest man alive, he's in the top three. But that hardly means -and I'm speaking as Catwoman now- that hardly means I'd suspect Bruce Wayne, or any other random thirty-something Gothamite, is Batman because he makes a few savvy comments about the significance of outcast in Greek mythology. It's ridiculous!

As I wandered through the exhibits, I was forced to realize that what Bruce does isn't new. Zorro, The Scarlet Pimpernel, Claudius, even Hamlet ... literature is full of heroes playing the fool to mask their abilities. I just didn't see why he had to take it so far. It was embarrassing being with a guy you'd have to be...

There was a faint rustling in the exhibit behind me. When I turned to look, I felt a funny tingling in my temple that shot down the back of my neck. "*Come with me,*" the tingle said... and then everything went white until...

"Selina!" Robin was shaking me. I was outdoors—on some side street—near the park?

"Selina, look at me..." He was holding some kind of headband with the same wings the waiters had at the party.

"...you okay?" I nodded—which turned out to be a mistake—was so lightheaded I nearly passed out. I heard Robin saying "I've got her, she's alright," and through radio static "Good."

Bruce? No wait—this was Robin so the radio voice was Batman, not Bruce. I figured I better not open my mouth 'til my head cleared.

Robin got me home, sat me down with a cup of soup like I was an invalid, and finally filled in the details. The broad brush strokes I could guess: Mad Hatter, obviously. Seems he took offense at Alice in Wonderland not being included in the museum, so he staged a little armed robbery. The waiters were all under his control, thanks to the winged headgear. When he saw me, being Hatter, he thought "Cheshire Cat." While the waitstaff held everyone at bay with submachine guns, Hatter used me to gather the jewelry and valuables from the guests.

"Must've been hell on Bruce," I said.

Tim nodded, then he chuckled and I wondered how much I could scratch him up without my claws.

"Sorry," he apologized with this obnoxious twinkle in his eye. "It's just that... if you'd told me a year ago that Catwoman's next crime would a) not be your idea and b) your very first thought afterwards would be how *he* reacted to seeing you commit it... Well, I would have said Arkham is lovely this time of year and tell Joker I said hello."

I could see he meant it in a nice way, and I tried to hold on to that—but I was so pissed off I could barely speak. I feigned a headache, a not unreasonable claim considering, and asked him to leave. Closing the door behind him, I tried to get a handle on what was making me so angry.

I hate introspection. Hate it. Bad things happen when I do it. And quite apart from that, it means going into places inside yourself that just aren't meant to see daylight—ugh, I *hate* it. 'Nuff said. I'd rather face a hail of gunfire or pits of molten lava rather than— stop.

Just stop it.

It was less than two hours ago that I'd had Mad Hatter running around my head. This wasn't the time to think rationally. I was blowing things out of proportion, that's all.

*How did this happen?* I wondered. I let him kiss me once and before I knew where I was, we were taking vacations together, he had me revamping Wayne Enterprises security, playing little Catwoman in the manor sex games. I had to get my head back in the game. This was just nuts.

*Is it?* For some reason the annoying devil's advocate voice in my head sounded exactly like Batman.

Yes, I answered. It really was *nuts*. I had the freakin' Boy Wonder taking me home after a Mad Hatter incident—bringing me chicken soup for chrissakes! If that wasn't nuts...

*Tim is very considerate. He wanted to make sure you were okay,* overly rational head voice pointed out.

*Yes, I can see that.* I answered. *Tim's a doll. That's not really the point.*

*If it's not, maybe it should be. You've got some good people caring about you. By what bizarre twist of feline logic do you make that a bad thing?*

*It's not exactly; it's just that—*

*And surprise, they care about you, you care about them. Natural law—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.*

*But Tim was right. My first thought was for Bruce, isn't that a little...*

*Don't look now, Kitten, but you're being introspective, and it's not painful.*

*Yeah, why is that?*

*You're happier with who you are now. So it doesn't hurt to look inside.*

*That's a creepy thought.*

**Why?**

*It just is.*

*I need to get back in the game.*

*I need to get Catwoman back in the game.*

*I need to steal something and fast.*

**Why?**

*I don't know.*

*I didn't know.*

There was a knock at the door. I was both surprised and not to see it was Bruce.

Of course he'd be coming over as soon as he finished with Hatter, that was to be expected. It was a little surprising he changed back to Bruce first. It was quite astonishing that he knocked. In either identity, he doesn't knock much.

He hugged me first thing stepping through the door—hugged me tight—and I could feel how hard this was for him... he caressed my cheek, chin, looked into my eyes...

"Last time I saw you, you weren't in there," he whispered.

It was unnerving. I could almost convince myself I half-remembered him handing me his wallet, watch, and then grabbing my wrist—touching a pressure point or something—that same hoarse whisper—"Get out of here, go home—first chance you get, go home."

I kissed the hand at my cheek—and tasted blood. His knuckles were bloodied and badly bruised...

"I can just guess how that happened," I smiled.

"He'll live."

"Good, my turn next."

"Oh, before I forget. Here, I got these back from the recovered loot. There's still plenty of evidence left for the trial."

He held out the cat pins—diamond and onyx, set in platinum, emerald eyes—but a lot more than diamonds and platinum if you know what I mean. I hadn't realized they were missing. I swallowed hard. So this was what it's like to be stolen from. Not exactly pleasant. Not at all pleasant. I felt the urge to claw Jervis Tetch's throat out.

"You left me a piece of him that can still feel pain, right," I growled as I took the pins back.

Twitch-smile.

"Yes, Kitten. We discussed that, actually, between punches. How you don't kill—but before you're finished, he'll probably wish you did."

I smiled at that. Quite apart from our history and heat, it's nice having a fella who understands me so well.

An hour later, it was like none of it ever happened. I was purring happily while Bruce massaged my feet, saying the sweetest things about my changing his life.

"Can I ask you something, Selina?"

"Sure."

"Does Catwoman still steal?"

"No. Not any more... Move up to the ankles, would you, Love?"

Selina and Barbara arrived at Wayne Manor hours before they were expected for dinner. Since Selina decided officially that Catwoman had stopped stealing, Barbara extended a few invitations: lunch, lectures, shopping, movie-dates. She didn't think they would ever be friends exactly, but she empathized. She'd had to completely reinvent herself and her role in the super-community, and do so alone—no confidantes, no role-models, no precedents. It was harder than it had to be. If Selina was facing the same thing... So she called and proposed that first lunch. She was amazed to learn that Selina didn't feel she was reinventing anything.

"What, you think Catwoman is just about theft? Or liking cats? Or mooning over Batman? You haven't been paying attention. *I am Catwoman, Barbara. Me. Whatever I choose to do with my life, that's what Catwoman is. Hell, girl, making our own choices—and not defining ourselves by somebody else's idea of what we should be—that's what being modern liberated women is about.*" She paused to take a strawberry garnish from Barbara's aperitif as she admonished, "You should have had this in class."

Barbara was speechless. Fortunately Russ, their waiter, was not.

"Welcome to Café Satori, ladies. May I recommend the swordfish."

While Barbara tried to process the full implication of her companion's comments, Selina asked about the name of the restaurant.

"Satori is a Japanese word for a moment of intense revelation," Russ began, reciting from the plaque in the entrance, then he deviated abruptly from the formal explanation. "It's a kick in the head—a burst of insight that changes everything, or causes you to look at everything differently."

"And that relates to the swordfish, how?" Selina teased.

"It's served over Risotto Florentine," Russ answered bravely.

"Sold. What do you think, Barbara, up for having your life turned around by swordfish, Italian rice and spinach?"

Barbara gave an absent nod, then as the waiter left, she picked up where she'd left off: the subject of Selina's career change.

"But Steph and Cassie thought you'd be worried that you'd be weakened by this, that you're so much stronger on your own."

Selina smiled patiently.

"They're very young, aren't they. 'Me' as the source and center of all things, that's how infants think. Well, they'll grow up—one hopes. Come on, Barbara, you know better than this. How old are you?"

While she ducked that and the next six probing questions, Barbara realized the addition of another mature woman in the bat-family would not be at all amiss.

Stephanie and Cassie were indeed 'very young,' that much was evident by the ease with which Selina mocked their presumptuous analysis of her career change. "Growing weak," began the eerie parody of Superman struck by kryptonite, "Men in vicinity... can't... raise... hand... in... algebra... class."

Barbara smiled, making a mental note not to honk off the wit behind Cat-Tales.

Yes, Steph and Cassie *were* young. Huntress was not (and never would be) 'Bat-Family' if Barbara had anything to say about it. And Dinah... Well, Dinah wasn't exactly Bat-Family either. She was a free agent. Besides they'd long ago made a tacit

agreement to keep their banter light: Playing *Men of the JLA: Boxers or Briefs*—yes; meaningful discussion of the role of women in the super-community—no.

Then again, a year ago Barbara never would have pegged Selina as one to give serious thought to such matters. But then, being smeared by the Gotham Post and having to create an off-Broadway show to set the record straight is probably apt to raise one's consciousness. Barbara was astonished, sitting in the refined and rarified atmosphere of Cafe Satori, to hear Selina openly allude to a topic that Bruce said was strictly *verboten*.

"Like that Miller book that said I'm a whore."

"Ex-cuse me?"

"F. Miller. *Catwoman: An Unauthorized Biography*. Don't tell me you never heard of it; it was on the best-seller list for six of the longest weeks of my life. Wish I'd had the Cat-Tales idea back then, damnit."

"But, but, Bruce said if we mentioned that for any reason you'd, like, go supernova or something."

Selina gave an odd, amused look.

"Really? Did he now. Interesting... Well anyway, *you* didn't bring it up; *I* did. And my point is this: I've been called a whore, orphan daughter of a drunken father, an abused wife, even an abused secretary once—always the product of male-oppression, you notice that? *They* have to have made Catwoman. Only way they can deal with the concept of a truly free woman—isn't it a hoot?"

"You know what I'm *really* the product of? Selina Kyle. The whole package is MY creation, not theirs. My choice. I choose to steal, I choose not to steal. I choose to help the JLA... I choose Bruce. A truly free woman, and THEY CAN'T STAND IT—scares the living SHIT out of 'em. Why do you think they keep putting out all these demeaning stories? I'm a whore, I'm stupid, I'm weak-willed, I'm common, I'm in jail, I'm crazy. All 'cause they're scared out of their minds that a woman like me could exist naturally. Scarecrow's got it right. Fear, it's a real bitch."

An hour after Selina and Barbara arrived at the manor after their lunch date, Dick arrived from Bludhaven. It had taken six weeks to hammer out the new arrangement in which he'd come into Gotham one night a week for a 'family dinner' with Bruce, Barbara, & Selina and then patrol with Tim (determined as he was that this Robin would never feel cut loose as Jason Todd had been). And after that one night, the next six days belonged to Bludhaven, unequivocally, without any guilt, hassles or thoughts of divided loyalties.

It occurred to none of them that it took over a month of signals, stares, glares and mishaps to work out the details of this new arrangement—which any normal circle of people would have settled in minutes by simply talking to each other. Nevertheless, it was progress, of a sort, and Bruce was so proud he didn't even grunt (audibly) when Dick parked his Mazda too close to the Daimler.

30 minutes after Dick's arrival, Bruce returned from Wayne Enterprises. Both men were as confused as Alfred had been by Selina and Barbara's giddy behavior. They seemed to be talking in code and laughing at some private joke. When Selina rose to

powder her nose, Barbara followed, leaving Bruce, Dick, and Alfred looking from one to the other. It was Dick who finally spoke the collective thought.

"Man, that was weird."

Bruce nodded. Alfred raised a discreet eyebrow.

"So what does it mean?" Dick asked.

"You're asking me?"

"You're the detective."

"That means I speak Womanese? No. You're the generation where your girl tells you what the hell's going on."

"If I may," Alfred interjected while clearing the table, "Ask them."

When the women returned, after an awkward minute during which Dick gave the old "after you" signal (four times) which Bruce pretended (four times) not to see, Barbara, who'd been sending similar (and similarly ignored) signals to Selina, finally spoke.

"The most exciting thing happened at lunch today."

Both women burst out laughing. Then Selina picked up the story.

"We met the sexiest man in Gotham City."

More laughter between the women. More bewildered stares between the men, who each thought they held that title in their respective lady's view.

"Ur," Dick began, just as Bruce said "Ehrm."

A round of indulgent smiles, then Selina said, "Sorry boys, you're second and third."

"A *distant* second and third," Barbara added viciously.

A long silence, until Bruce, or rather Batman, growled, "Well?"

"Woody Allen!" the women chimed in unison.

"The movie director?" Dick demanded, "Short, neurotic, middle-aged, balding, nasal, glasses, nerdy, hypochondriac?"

The auteur film-maker was the quintessential Gothamite, and his string of films about a short, brilliant, funny, Jewish, hyper-intellectual hypochondriacal Gothamite celebrated the City and its landmarks—as well as celebrating being a short, brilliant, Jewish, funny, hyper-intellectual, hypochondriacal Gothamite. Why women found him sexy was a mystery, but they did. Selina and Barbara were no exceptions.

With girlish excitement, they jointly told the story: how he had recognized Selina from *Cat-Tales*, introduced himself and offered Catwoman a cameo in his next picture. Of course he'd mentioned Batman and company in passing in his earlier movies—he even included a shot of the Bat-Signal shining over the night sky as an icon of the city—but that's all he could ever do because the hero wasn't exactly accessible for guest appearances. But now that Selina had outted herself, he couldn't resist. Could she possibly, possibly, please ask Batman if he would consider...

Selina and Barbara again burst into peals of laughter, and this time Dick joined in.

Later that night, the story of Woody Allen's attempt to secure a Batman cameo in his next movie would be told again. On the roof of the Engineering Building at Hudson University, Dick Grayson's alma mater and the Scarecrow's favorite target, Nightwing

told Robin as they kept watch over the still campus. Robin did not find the story funny. It was unthinkable that Batman would consider appearing in a movie; that went without saying. But Robin still wished aloud that he would do it: “It would put an end to that Urban Legend crap once and for all, wouldn’t it?”

He referred to the theory of one particularly strange newspaper, **The Post Herald**, that Batman was a myth created by the Police Department. The Joker was real, the Riddler, Clayface, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Scarecrow. All the costumed criminals were known to be real—but the costumed hero who caught them—that was urban legend. The signal, the car, the supposed capture of all those Rogues—it was all an invention of the city to bamboozle the public at large—and maybe bring in some tourist dollars.

A few equally strange academics took up this idea, not as conspiracy theory, but on the simple principle that anything the great unwashed masses believe in must be wrong. If Batman was something the ignorant rabble knew to be true, then they, the toffee-nosed elite, knew better.

“Robin, you’re talking about, like two dozen people, nationwide. You can’t think Bruce gives a shit? Do you think anybody gives a shit?”

Robin gave a melodramatic sigh.

“I do, okay. Because one of those two-dozen people is my headmaster. Do you have any idea how many times in the last month I’ve been treated to snippets from that grand master treatise: *Fugue Mythos of the Post-Millennium Metroscape: The Batman as Totemist Jessel of a Modern Myth?*”

“The WHAT of the WHAT in the Wha?”

Tim repeated the title slowly and distinctly. His headmaster’s treatise, printed first as an academic paper and then as an article in that loathsome newspaper, was an endless source of grief. Oscar Offred, or “Double-Zero” as his students referred to him, often reminded the young scholars of Brentwood Academy that the prep school was a feed into the country’s top universities. He never added that he hoped it would open the same doors for him as it did its graduates. He hated teaching high school, even at an upper crust institution like Brentwood. He yearned for the prestige of a full professorship, tenure, and teaching assistants.

The paper, he was sure, was the key.

Nightwing rolled his eyes but before he could respond, his OraCom link beeped.

“Wing, Robin—Batman’s down. North Campus on the Mall—sounds like fear toxin”

By morning the worst was over. Bruce awoke from the nightmare delirium to a haggard-looking Selina stroking his hair.

The first time someone is exposed to the Scarecrow’s toxin, they invariably hallucinate their greatest fear. While monumentally unpleasant, the experience can be cathartic, and after repeated exposures, exactly what an individual might hallucinate becomes more random.

The first time Batman was exposed, he saw Crime Alley. The second time, he saw Crime Alley. The third time: Dick shot by the Joker. Innocents slaughtered while he

was powerless to help. Jason's tombstone. Ever since then the nightmare world was less ... predictable.

The evening's earlier conversations had planted a seed in his mind: "It was awful," he murmured. "We were in a movie... Batman and Robin. There were these silly rubber suits... with nipples... and the city ... my city was this dayglow Vegas acid trip... one-liners about my car... Oh, it was awful." His head slammed back against the pillow in disgust.

Selina patted his hand and soothed, "It's okay, Dorothy, you're back in Kansas now."

Bruce looked at her with wide eyes.

"And you were blonde and shallow, and Alfred let you into the Batcave without telling me."

Despite the hundred times Tim Drake sat in Mr. Offred's office conjuring up images of Joker lowering the headmaster, inch by inch, into a vat of piranha, of Poison Ivy's flytraps tearing him limb from limb, and Laurence Olivier as the Nazi dentist in Marathon Man drilling his teeth without Novocain, Robin didn't hesitate to pull the terrified schoolmaster off the ledge of Hudson U's Human Resource Tower.

It was ironic really: the paper debunking Batman had done its work. Offred had obtained a coveted interview at Hudson U on the very day the Scarecrow attacked the campus. Fleeing what he thought was his worst nightmare—a lynch mob of Brentwood Academy students with spider-legs driving him towards the open mouth of a giant lizard with the head of his ex-wife's alimony attorney—Offred fled to the ledge only to encounter his true nightmare: undeniable proof that Batman (or at least Robin) was real! For the young vigilante not only swung in from nowhere to save him from certain death, he deposited him safely on the ground, directly in front of the clicking cameras of the Gotham Times, Hudson Observer, and WHUB, the campus television station.

A short distance away, Barbara clicked her tongue in mock-sympathy as the camera zoomed in for a close-up and the caption appeared: O. Offred, author of *Batman as Myth*, saved by Robin.

Dick hung up the telephone.

"Selina says he's awake and he's fine—but apparently rubber, neon, nipples, and Las Vegas are on the 'do not mention' list for a while, whatever that means."

Barbara muted the television and turned to Dick pensively.

"It's happened to you too, hasn't it, the fear gas?"

"Yeah, long time ago. Why?"

"It creeps me out," she answered with a shudder. "The idea that... you take a breath and all of a sudden your worst fear is there in front of you."

"It's not always, you know, it varies, what you see. First time, yeah but—" he broke off at the horror of the memory, then continued. "But anyway, it's funny, the last time it happened, I flashed back to... it wasn't funny at the time mind you, but I flashed back to the day I got my driver's license. Bruce asked to see it, and I handed it to him—and he didn't give it back. He just walked off. I followed him—down to the

cave (surprise, surprise). And he very nicely informs me that the DMV's standards are very different from his, and he'd be keeping that little piece of paper until I had completed the Bat-driving curriculum."

Barbara laughed happily at the story and the welcome change of subject—but that night, as Oracle logged on and began monitoring, she wasn't able to concentrate. Her mind kept returning to that nightmare thought: *What would it be like? You take a breath, and you're suddenly living your worst...*

Involuntarily her hand moved to the armrest of the wheelchair.

*What if you're already sitting in your worst nightmare?*

Bruce got to wake up. Dick got to wake up. But when she woke up tomorrow the chair would still be there—and the next day and the next. It was a bitter thought. As was the realization that most of her thoughts about Bruce and the others were bitter now.

She was more than this, wasn't she? More than bitterness and hardness and self-pity.

There were worse fates, after all. She'd seen it in the hospital, she'd seen it in her support group. The paralysis could go up to her neck, like the Felpin boy. She might not be able to use her hands. Mrs. Tobas had had a stroke; she might not be able to speak.

It was a devastating thought. As she continued her online duties, Barbara felt numb as she realized: there were hallucinations she could imagine worse than her reality.

When she logged off, however, she rallied. As she got ready for bed, she grew angrier and angrier, as if it was something more tangible than her imagination threatening her with those fates.

"If it was my hands," she thought, "you can operate a computer by voice. And if I couldn't talk, they have those things that read eye movements. I will not be stopped no matter what—Scarecrow, Joker, any of 'em. Never. They won't get the satisfaction. NOT EVER."

Satisfied, mistaking her single-minded hatred for resolve, Barbara put out the light and went to sleep, dreaming happily of an Uber-Oracle, a Cyber-age Valkrye who found a digital workaround for any obstacle the grinning jackal might inflict on her.

She awoke in a cold sweat.

It wasn't fear of the Joker or Scarecrow or paralysis that was clutching her insides with a clammy nausea. It was Selina's words: "Catwoman is whatever I decide to do with my life." So what was Oracle? What it... was it JUST her response to what the Joker did to her? Was her whole life JUST about that? Because that wasn't being a hero—that wasn't even being a person.

That was the nightmare.

Oh god.

That *was* the nightmare. Not losing the use of her legs. Not losing it all.

Going from birth to death with this one event driving it all—no conscious choices, just reacting. That wasn't being human, it was being an animal.

Barbara let out a long breath. She saw the sunrise beginning to bleed through cracks of the Venetian blind.

"And I didn't even have to inhale fear toxin to lose a whole night's sleep to this," she thought bitterly.

*You've got to be a person before you can be a hero.*  
Words to live by. It was worth a lost night's sleep.



# THE R-WORD

---

"I know they're in the room now," whispered Mrs. Ashton-Larraby with a pointed nod of the head towards Bruce and Selina's table, "so I'm not naming names. I'm just saying that I'm not completely convinced the change is permanent. I don't know if ... *the person in question* has really, well, reformed."

"I don't think I'd use that word in any case, Gladys. 'Reformed' makes it sound like there's something wrong with the way they were before, and that's bound to raise hackles, whether they've turned over a new leaf or not."

"There *is* something wrong with it, Matilda, it's *immoral*."

"Just because someone doesn't live their life by your rules doesn't make it immoral."

"Oh, come now. Every week a new girl. Half the time, he didn't even know their names. I've seen him peek at the placecards during dinner, and one time when it didn't give her name, he called his own date 'Miss Guest.'"

"Well, I'm all in favor of 'the R-word.' It was dreadful trying to keep track of all the people one couldn't sit him next to: the jealous boyfriends, the angry exes, the sisters, friends, and psychiatrists of the exes."

"Will be dull, though. Clive and his friends always, I shouldn't say this, but they used to bet on the height and hair color of whatever woman Bruce brought to a party."

"And of the one he left with."

There was a round of uncharitable laughter as the trio forgot they were not to be naming names.

Selina munched a potato chip viciously as the IM window labeled IVY continued to scroll text almost too quickly to read.

*I don't like the look of it*

*I really don't*

*We all know you're inclined to go both ways Catty*

*Grab some green then turn around and pull some nobody out of a crater*

*like you're a goddamn member of the justice league*

*But Harv says that's not such a bad thing*

*going both ways*

*if only you were more random about how you went about it*

*of course that's Harvey's way*

*But really*

*this is just monstrous*

*So you're dating a straight arrow a few months*

*that's no reason to go on the wagon*

*I swear you're worse than Harley where the men are concerned*

*First Batman*

*posterboy for testosterone poisoning*

*and now this Wayne character*

*greatest living argument for killing them all and letting Mother Nature start over*

It went on like this for some time. Much as Selina was tempted to put Ivy on her ignore list, she knew that could be a costly mistake. Catwoman was proud of the way she could 'humor and handle' her fellow rogues. If she stopped listening for the sake of a few minutes' peace and quiet, she might miss important danger signals. Like this one:

Certainly no right-thinking villain would've helped Batman stop Harvey like you did

or

There are ways to prune back a wild growth to keep it in line with the others

One marked advantage of dealing with crazies, Selina thought to herself, they do tend to babble every thought in their heads. And forewarned is forearmed.

That night, Bruce came over to Selina's apartment with sesame noodles from Little Saigon. It was code for staying in to talk. As Selina transferred the noodles into bowls, set out chopsticks and glasses, and poured the wine, there was a slight, not entirely disagreeable, tension in the air. The couple had always enjoyed expecting the unexpected from the other, and since surviving their first serious quarrel, they were finding a perverse thrill in alluding to their stormy past:

"There's a problem," they said in unison.

"An image problem," Selina spoke first after the verbal collision.

"Yes, exactly."

"You know about that?"

"Overheard something that has me concerned, yes."

"Well, we've got to do something; can't just let it fester."

"Oh, I agree."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"I didn't think you would even appreciate that it's a problem."

"I didn't think you would."

They each smiled happily that the other was being so understanding. Then both spoke, again the same words, again spurted in unison:

"So what do we do—Well, there's the obvious—But you'd never approve of *that*."

Then Selina asked sarcastically: "You *wouldn't mind* if I take Bunny Wigglesworth's tiara?" just as Bruce asked, "You don't care if I start *dating the Laker Girls*?"

There was a long silence before Bruce thoughtfully set down his chopsticks, started to speak, then thought the better of it. Selina placed her tongue on her upper lip and raised an index finger in the air, then she too decided to postpone the tricky business of constructing a sentence at that particular moment.

After another false start, Bruce tried once more...

"What *exactly* are we talking about?"

"I'm talking about my standing with the other rogues since Catwoman's gone legit, what the hell are you talking about?"

"The fact that Bruce Wayne hasn't dated only one woman like this since never. Wait a minute, you're telling me it's a *PROBLEM* not being known as a thief and a criminal?"

"You're telling *me* it's a problem not being seen as a *Don Juan* who thinks his money entitles him to treat women like *fashion accessories!*"

And again in unison: "You so don't get it— I don't get it— But all *YOU* need to do is—"

In desperation, Bruce reached forward with Batman's speed and placed a finger over her mouth.

"All you'd need to do," he insisted while he had the floor, "is put it about that you're using me to get close to all the socialites and their million dollar jewel collections."

Selina glared pointedly at the index finger that still rested on her lip and snapped at it as Bruce finally removed it.

"And all *you'd* need to do is put it about that you're using me for cheap thrills," she countered.

Bruce's eye twinkled as he considered this: "Thrill seeking... like slumming at the Iceberg? Or for that matter, putting the moves on Batman's girl."

He looked up, expecting a laugh at this rare attempt at humor, but received only a stony deadpan.

"I offered. Batman was never interested," Selina said airily.

Bruce put a hand on her waist and nuzzled her neck.

"Man must be an idiot."

The next night, Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle entered the Iceberg Lounge with the intention of defending their joint reputations of having "reformed." She would fence a few suitably suspicious items; he would leer at every woman in the room—every woman except Poison Ivy, as a slap for "posterboy for testosterone poisoning." Then he would spend the next day at the yacht club boasting how fast cars and the Playboy twins are nothing compared to the world Selina opened up to him, slumming with all those colorful underworld characters....

"BW from L, Paris, 1997." Selina was reading the inscription on an antique snuffbox Bruce passed her as a likely item to have belonged to Bunny Wigglesworth. "So who's L?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Lucius."

Selina rolled her eyes as a waitress came over to take their order. Selina ordered a martini and asked to see Oswald; Bruce ordered a scotch and leered at the waitress.

Oswald Cobblepot, aka Penguin, proprietor of the Iceberg Lounge, waddled up to their table a few minutes later. Selina stood, telling Bruce to "soak up some atmosphere" while she and "Pengy" went into his office to speak privately. But Cobblepot sat down, eager to talk with the new arrival. Selina sat back down, eyeing the birdman suspiciously as he played the dashing host to Bruce.

"Nigma said I was to take first class care of you if you came in," he oozed with what one imagined he thought was charm.

After a few minutes of bewildering smalltalk, Selina rather pointedly left the table and waited for Penguin at the bar. She was more confused than ever when she saw Scarecrow approach the table as soon as she'd left. Certainly, he was avoiding her ever since that time she set him on fire. But why would he want to talk to Bruce?

Penguin finally joined her at the bar and Selina showed him the goods. He named a price—which she flatly refused. She made a few insulting comments about his not having the right kind of buyers for quality stuff like the Wigglesworth knickknacks... and it was done. Pengy would certainly assume she was taking this and future hauls to another fence. His wounded pride would lash out, making it common knowledge that she was robbing Bruce's society friends blind. Catwoman's reputation as a practicing thief would be restored, Meow.

She turned back to the table happily, her mission accomplished—only to see that Killer Croc had taken Scarecrow's place at Bruce's side.

"Oswald," she began in a strained voice, "Do you have any idea why Bruce is so popular with..." She trailed off as Roxy Rocket joined Croc. "...with *everybody* who's here tonight?"

Before he could answer, there were sounds of a skirmish at the front door. In strode a figure known variously among the rogues as "The Imposter," "The Choirboy," and "Barney Fife."

*Oh good, Selina thought, dinner theatre.*

She returned to the table, shooing Croc and Roxy away as Azrael strode self-importantly up to Penguin, grabbed the birdman by the throat, and lifted him several inches into the air.

"You'll give me answers, scum, and you'll do it now," Azrael growled.

*Still getting his dialogue from Mickey Spillane, Selina thought.* Aloud she called out, "You do realize that he can't talk when you're putting the full weight of his body on his larynx?"

The helmet turned towards Selina at the angle of a dog hearing an unfamiliar noise, but he let Penguin drop. While the newcomer continued his interrogation of Penguin, Selina turned to Bruce and mused:

"In 1995, Hugh Grant appeared on the Tonight Show shortly after getting caught *in flagrante delicto* with a prostitute. Jay Leno was in a position to lean in and ask a question that everybody in America was dying to have answered." She paused as Azrael threw Penguin into the dessert cart, then moved on to harass a trio of Latvian smugglers. Selina leaned over to Bruce and whispered "*What the hell* were you *thinking?*"

He looked at her blankly, so she continued, "You want everybody to think you're a dimwitted idiot? Pity you can't tell 'em you picked *that* to replace you."

Before Bruce could say anything, Croc and Roxy returned, standing near the table, watching the vigilante question the Latvians without realizing they didn't speak enough English to understand him.

"That man, I swear," Roxy began, "Intellect of a lint trap."

"I don't care how many times he changes his costume," Selina agreed in Catwoman's voice, "I can never look at him without thinking 'Pheromones.'"

"WHAT?" Bruce mouthed in shocked confusion.

Croc chuckled at this. "Fear of moans. What a maroon."

Roxy filled Bruce in on the details of that inauspicious first meeting between Cat and Bat-wannabe. "Catty was the first to discover you can't use big words with this guy," she said, succinctly.

Bruce had been under the impression that, before cracking up, Jean Paul had made an adequate stand-in as Batman. But listening to the universal derision of the rogues, a very different picture was emerging.

"And this guy thought he could be Batman?" Roxy was saying, "Batman's a detective."

"Batman's a scientist," Croc added.

"Batman is hot," Selina finished with a wink.

Bruce moved to the bar to get a fresh scotch. There, Penguin was picking himself off the floor muttering, "Ah, Azrael, valiantly striking fear into the likes of Killer Moth for over a fifth of a decade."

Bruce swallowed his scotch in a gulp. Not only did the Rogues have no respect for Azrael, it was apparently common knowledge that he was the substitute Batman during that unfortunate period when... He turned back to the table at the sound of Selina's audible aside to Roxy: "It's Ra's face I would've liked to see, when he found out his great adversary was replaced by a Ken doll!"

Playing up the angle that he was an outsider who knew nothing of these matters, Bruce put on his best clueless demeanor and asked, "You mean this guy pretended to be Batman?"

Selina turned with the slow burn that meant he was overdoing the idiot shtick.

"Just look at the costume," Roxy answered.

"Just like what he wore as AzBat," Selina added.

"Cept red," Croc completed the thought.

"Like I said," Roxy concluded, "all the imagination of wallpaper paste."

The ride home was silent as Bruce Wayne and Batman debated an appropriate strategy: The Azrael question could be dispensed with as far as Selina was concerned under the umbrella of forgetting past mistakes, but it meant bargaining away the only real affectionately-teasing boyfriend hold he had on her. The corner of his mouth twitched at the memory and Selina noticed.

"What are you smirking at?" she asked, pointing to the corner of his lip.

"Labor Day."

"Are you ever going to let me live that down?"

"No."

The Labor Day barbecue for employees of Wayne Enterprises and the Wayne Foundation was the least-stressful event hosted at the manor. It was held outdoors, so the usual week's worth of pre-party precautions were unnecessary. There was no

double-securing the Batcave access points and triple-reminding the junior partners that there would be caterers and decorators around the house.

Alfred supervised as the grills, tents, and games were set up. Tim lurked near the DJ, visibly drooling over the impressive outdoor speaker system. Dick and Barbara arrived early, chatted for all of five minutes, then headed off towards the rose garden and weren't seen again for the rest of the afternoon. Restless, Bruce paced the party grounds, and then the manor. He would normally have made a quick monitoring run on the Batcomputer, but that was out of the question with outsiders on the grounds and Bruce Wayne hosting a party in two hours. Selina's phone call provided a welcome, if confusing, distraction.

...: *Can you pick me up at the train station? ...*

"Um, sure. Why?"

...: *Don't ask. ...*

No details were forthcoming throughout the afternoon, or indeed after the party when she hung around chatting with Dick and Tim until the last of the cleanup detail had left. Then she asked casually:

"One of you guys are going on patrol tonight, aren't you?"

"Not me," Dick chirped. "Did my weekly night in Gotham on Saturday."

"I'm taking the night off," Tim answered. "School starts tomorrow. But Bruce'll be going out. Why?"

"Shit," Selina muttered under her breath, then added, "I need a ride into town."

"I'll give you one," Bruce materialized from nowhere at the sound of his name.

"You know what," she began, the too casual making-this-up-as-I-go-along lilt in her voice fooling no one. "I can just sleep over tonight and catch the commuter train in the morning."

"Dick, Tim, let us have this room," Bruce spat out in Batman's gravelly baritone.

They did.

Bruce glared, demanding an explanation.

Selina glanced at the ceiling, then down at her nails, then back at Bruce—and then, at last, she complied:

"I... can't ride in with you in the Batmobile because I don't have my costume with me."

"You always have your costume. Where's that big handbag you use?"

Selina blinked, summoning patience for the trial to be endured.

"It's locked in the trunk of my car," she announced flatly.

Ah, revisiting the original question from before: "Why didn't you drive out here anyway, instead of taking the train?"

"Ilkdmkysnmycr," she mumbled behind clenched teeth.

"Ex-cuse me?"

"I LOCKED MY KEYS IN MY CAR, OKAY? HAPPY?! I LOCKED MYSELF OUT OF MY CAR. AND I CAN'T GET BACK IN, BECAUSE I'D NEED A COAT HANGER TO DO WHATEVER IT IS YOU DO WITH THE COAT HANGER AND THE CAR WINDOW AND... THIS ISN'T FUNNY... I DON'T BREAK INTO CARS. AND ANYWAY, I DIDN'T HAVE A COAT HANGER, BECAUSE THAT WOULD MEAN GETTING INTO MY CLOSET, WHICH IS IN MY APARTMENT, THE KEYS FOR WHICH ARE ON THE SAME KEY RING THAT'S LOCKED IN MY—THIS ISN'T

FUNNY—AND I HAD TO GET HERE BY FOUR FOR THE BARBECUE—BRUCE, THIS ISN'T FUNNY!"

But it was funny. Bruce made a feeble effort to hide his smile by scratching his nose, until Dick and Tim's cackling behind the closed door made the gesture pointless.

"Now, wait a minute, okay, you don't do cars, I'll give you that much," Bruce began, mentally adding *Thank god for small favors. Only reason I still have the Batmobile.* "But you can break into condos, so why can't you get into your apartment?"

Selina looked daggers at him, then hissed.

"Lockpicks are in my costume which is..."

The voices outside the door said the last words with her.

"...locked in the trunk of the car."

The deal was struck the next afternoon at D'Annunzio's. Selina would forego all future jibes about the great Dark Knight Detective putting his mantle and reputation in the hands of a rookie that didn't have the brains, the character, the sophistication, or even the *vocabulary* to go a full round with Catwoman. Bruce would relinquish all future references to the best thief in the Western Hemisphere locking herself out of her car, her apartment and, effectively, her life.

As they raised their glasses to seal the bargain with a toast, the words "look at them," "backsliding," and "such a pity" drifted over from surrounding tables.

Mrs. Ashton-Larraby clicked her tongue unpleasantly.

"I said so from the start, backsliding into his shallow old ways."

"Slumming at that horrible downtown club with all that riffraff," added Matilda.

"Using that nice girl for cheap thrills."

Bruce and Selina's eyes met in a silent, invisible highfive.

"By the way," Selina asked curiously, "Why were you so popular at the 'Berg last night? I swear, I've endured Harley's karaoke with those people and they never buzz around me that way."

"Oh that," Bruce answered bitterly. "Apparently I'm the only one that hasn't heard all those 'Almost Got'im' stories you all evidently tell *ad nauseum* in your spare time—which incidentally are *TOTAL EXAGGERATIONS*. I couldn't believe the shameless whoppers—what? It isn't funny—Selina!"

Selina scratched her nose vigorously as she sputtered, "the treacherous, thieving, blackmailing, murdering lunatics also LIE? How shocking."



# WATERING HOLE

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*Kittlemeier's shop was in a poverty-stricken area of town. To say that it was unimpressive would be an understatement. Its windows were patched with plywood, and its door handle was so rusty it almost posed a physical threat. The shop was not listed in any telephone book. Its door bore no street number. No sign proclaimed what it sold. Those who peered into it from the doorway saw only a dimly lit room with an ancient counter, an old-fashioned cash register, an out-of-date calendar from the local service station, and a curtained doorway leading to another room that opened onto the alley.*

*One would think to look at it, that Kittlemeier's shop could not possibly attract customers, and in truth it did not attract many. But those who needed Kittlemeier's particular services always seemed to know where to find him.*

*—from Neutral Ground by Mike Resnick, The Further Adventures of Batman*

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Harley Quinn tripped up the five steps to Kittlemeier's shop, then checked her watch before entering, for Mr. Kittlemeier was very strict about appointments. "10 am" meant 10:00 precisely, not 9:58 nor 10:05. She carried a metal briefcase full of cash, and a shopping bag to discreetly carry away the new costume, the chattering-teeth gas-grenades and the razor-edged playing cards she was picking up.

"3-2-1," she counted down as the secondhand of her Looney Toons watch clicked on the hour. The tiny bell over the door tinkled and she entered with a perky "Hiya Mistah K!" But no Mr. Kittlemeier appeared from behind the curtain. Harley waited a minute, then another before... it was strictly against the rules, and violating the rules even once could get her barred from the store for life. But what could she do? This was a pick-up appointment, which meant fifteen minutes only and not a split-second more. If Mr. K didn't appear soon, she wouldn't have time to look at the new costume, let alone try it on... Taking a deep breath, Harley ventured behind the counter and touched the curtain.

"Mistah K?" she called into the empty workroom.

She opened the door to the alley.

"Mistah K?"

Then returned to the shop.

"Mistah K?"

This was unheard of, impossible. Where could he be?

Harley waited a little longer, uncertain what to do, until the impossible happened again: the bell above the door tinkled and, for the first time in the shop's history, two Kittlemeier clients saw each other face to face.

Even in the days before Catwoman, Selina Kyle was never a particularly domestic person. There were errands and household chores that had to be done sooner or later, but she always postponed them to later. Grocery shopping was never a popular activity. Vacuuming scared the cats into hiding for hours. And her apartment—as well as every lair, hideout, and safehouse she'd ever occupied—had one storage closet that was a terror to even contemplate opening.

The night of the 'slumming' visit to the Iceberg, Selina was given a door prize: a tabletop plastic glacier shaped like a penguin. Even by the standards of a waddling birdman whose main criminal motif was an umbrella, it was a hideous piece of objet d'tacky. On arriving home, Selina didn't hesitate to open the closet door, toss the glacier onto the mass of junk, and slam the door without a glance. There was a soft kerplunk after the door closed, to which she didn't give a second thought. Later that night, there were a few more thumps and bumps, which she didn't hear at all. What she did hear, at 6:18 the next morning, was a distant and plaintive aieooowww.

Selina's left eye opened a sliver at the noise, which repeated: aieooowww.

"Whiskers?" she croaked.

aieooowww.

Stumbling through her apartment, she followed the sound until reaching—oh hell—the door to the storage closet. She placed a hand on the knob, turned...

aieooowww

...and a small landslide deposited old magazines, a tattered cat-o-nine-tails, a windbreaker, a tennis racket, the blueprints for the Whitney Gallery, and a box of Christmas ornaments onto the floor at her feet. Whiskers stood on a rolled-up tumbling mat balanced precariously on a document box labeled 'Cancelled Checks 1990s.' There were 8 feet of heaped up clutter between the cat and the door. It would take hours to clear a path for a person to walk over and pick her up.

"Aieooowww," Whiskers cried.

"You got yourself in there, you'll get yourself out," Selina told the cat flatly as she tossed bits of the landslide back into the closet.

"AieooOWWW!" Whiskers insisted, and there was another soft kerplunk from the clutter beneath.

Selina's face fell as she realized Nutmeg was unaccounted for and had apparently gone exploring in the lower depths of the clutter. Her head rolled back with a self-pitying "What did I do to deserve this" appeal to the heavens. And another avalanche dropped a set of lock picks and a tube of outdated security schematics onto her foot.

Four hours later, there was a knock on the door. While Selina was surprised to see Edward Nigma (released from Arkham already?), he was even more surprised to see her looking like the deranged scullery maid in an Edgar Allen Poe story.

After a few colorful words about spending her morning cleaning out a closet full of nutmeg or something equally baffling, he got down to business: Could she -this was strictly against The Rules and he was risking life and limb even suggesting it- but could she get a message to Bat...

He stopped when he noticed, in the piles of assorted clutter, a bull-whip, a cat-o-nine-tails, and a set of clawed Catwoman gloves. He noticed too that Selina was giving him the look of death. Recalling that the deranged scullery maid in Edgar Allen

Poe had done unspeakable damage without anything like this assortment of weaponry, he stopped and went back to the very beginning:

He'd had a fitting at Kittlemeier's—a new costume and some exploding question marks. But when he opened the door, Harley Quinn was still there from the previous appointment.

"That's impossible," Selina interrupted. "Kittlemeier's never once double booked or run overtime."

"That's the point. He wasn't there. We looked all over. Mr. Kittlemeier's gone."

Selina looked thoughtful but didn't speak, so Nigma continued:

"The pixie and I aren't exactly in the detection business, so we thought maybe the police should look into it. Anything happens to Kittlemeier, I shudder to think."

"Okay, so you called the police."

"What's that, a joke? We call the police—and say what? The nice old man on 12th street who makes all our gadgetry is missing? So, I sent them a riddle."

"You sent them...?"

*"Hi! wrote angel.*

*Learn with ego.*

*The war legion.*

*Glow in the era.*

*Grow in the ale.*

*Wine hot glare.*

*What iron glee."*

"Eddie, when they let you out of Arkham, did they give you any special medication?"

"They're anagrams. For 'watering hole.' Don't you see? Kittlemeier's is our watering hole. Neutral territory. We go there; Bats goes there. Like in the desert where predators and prey can all go and drink."

"Okay, okay, let's just move on," Selina cut him off with some impatience. "You sent this surrealist haiku about watering holes to the police?"

"Yeah, but then I thought: Now, it's going to look like I did it!"

Selina agreed that it would look like Riddler 'did it,' but didn't think there was the slightest chance anyone would figure out what he was supposed to have done.

"So you want me to tell Batman that you didn't intend the riddle to mean you'd done anything to Kittlemeier..."

"Right. We just want Bats to find him."

"And why, exactly," Selina began in a dangerous tone, reaching for the cat-o-nine-tails, "do you think I'm in a position to be delivering messages to—"

"Oh, come off it, 'Lina! I know we're not supposed to say so, we even warned Bruce Wayne not to mention it, but everybody knows you and Batman have some kind of a thing, certainly enough that you could ask him to look into this and not kick the crap out of me for no reason like last tiiiiime—"

The last word was delivered as he was hurled unceremoniously into the back of the storage closet. There was a loud squeal and a blur of fur dashed out from above him, followed by another shooting out from below.

"You... warned Bruce. Not to mention—Wait, let's go back. First, who is 'we?'"

The blurs came to rest at the closet door behind their mistress's legs and all three glared at a cornered Edward Nigma, demanding a full and complete explanation.

Barbara hated getting up before noon when Oracle hadn't logged off until four. But she couldn't help it. She was awake at six, couldn't get back to sleep, couldn't stop thinking through how to classify the previous night's anomaly in the database.

The call had come in shortly after midnight. Robin and Spoiler foiled a break-in at the Botanical Gardens where two men clearly in Poison Ivy's thrall used umbrella weapons that hadn't been seen since Penguin abandoned the hands-on approach to pursue safer racketeering activities through his nightclub. The umbrellas were gussied up with clumsily tacked-on vine leaves, but they were recognizable as Penguin umbrellas just the same.

What did I do to deserve this? Bloodied up my last set of claws settling the score with Mad Hatter for that stunt at the mythology museum, ruined a perfectly good whip handle beating the truth out of Eddie, and I couldn't get any of it repaired or replaced 'til I find out what happened to Kittlemeier.

This was not a case for Batman, that was for damn sure.

I'd be damned if I'd ask his help, that impossible, arrogant, infuriating,—

Stop.

Deep cleansing breath.

Alright, truth be told, under normal circumstances, I would probably laugh at the idea of Eddie, Harvey and Jervis going to brief Bruce about "The Rules." But still. Those bastards! I went nine rounds with Batman about that protocol business, went out of my way to avoid giving out any inside information on them as a result of our relationship—and they pull this! This... this... testosterone conspiracy! Turns out, now the only one he had inside information on as a result of the relationship was me!

And did he tell me any of this? Noooo. He told Barbara not to mention the book. He told Dick and Tim "no pussy jokes." He...

I'll bet the look on his face was priceless.

Sigh.

I guess it is kinda funny. But, damnit, no. This, right on top of the other, it was too much. I was not asking for his help on Kittlemeier, I was going to solve this one on my own.

That night, Nightwing stumbled into Barbara's apartment, holding his head, blinking deliberately, trying to focus, and unable to latch the balcony door behind him.

"Can you help me out, Babs, I've got a little bit of a problem here."

"What happened?" Barbara asked, guiding him to a chair.

"Harley. Incident with one of those big laughing gas grenade-things."

"Oh my god, did you breathe any of it?"

He shook his head, trying to calm her fears but intensifying his headache tenfold.

"It didn't go off," he said, "It hit me in the head."

Barbara felt above his ear where he gestured... and winced. There was a palpable lump.

"Damn things always explode into a cloud of laughing gas a couple feet in front of you, but this just kept coming and kerpoink. Felt like a goddamn brick."

I was already pissed, okay? Hearing about the Rogue Committee visiting Bruce would not have set me off if I wasn't already pissed. I realize it was years ago, but still—I had just found out—and it's not like there's a statute of limitations on that kind of thing.

Cleaning out that damn closet, I just happened to unearth some old newspaper clippings. And on the back of one was a full page ad from the Do It Right campaign. Microchips were becoming cheap, and Wayne Enterprises introduced a line of mid-range products for consumers and small businesses that thought they couldn't afford what were, at the time, considered high end corporate tools.

"You've waited long enough," began one ad depicting a one-man bookkeeping office packing up cartons of paperwork and installing a single desktop PC. "Now that you're doing it...DO IT RIGHT. Business Solution Suite-WE"

Like everybody else, I'd seen the ads a thousand times...

"Life is short," began another, picturing a busy mom paying the bills and sorting recipes at the touch of a button while the kids, visible through a big picture window, played soccer in the yard. "Free yourself to live it...DO IT RIGHT. Home Suite-WE"

...I thought nothing of it. Who knew?

Well, now I know. Bruce Wayne is Batman... the arrogant, self-serving, duplicitous bastard.

Raised to fight and do little else, Cassandra Cain had a very limited understanding of social relationships. She'd made some progress since she assumed the mantle of the new Batgirl. She was acquiring a limited vocabulary that sufficed to echo Spoiler's opinion on whatever was being discussed, and she attended, perfunctorily, the various meetings Bruce mandated for the "bat-family." But she wasn't so far along that, since moving out of Barbara's apartment and taking a room of her own, she would ever return to Barbara just to touch base and say Hi.

Thus, Barbara knew there was some purpose in her showing up unasked, and it was an awkward moment when the original Batgirl realized what that purpose was: her successor was out of tungsten cord. It was the material of choice for swinging around the city and, for some reason, she was unable to get a new supply. She wanted some from Barbara's old costume.

Barbara told herself it was a reasonable request. Cassie had a limited understanding of anything outside of the mission. She wouldn't realize this might be a painful subject for Barbara, and even if she did realize, it's unlikely she would put such considerations above obtaining the supplies she sought.

Barbara pointed her to a box under her bed; Cassie rummaged and eventually found a quarter-reel of cord.

“There,” Barbara made an effort not to spit the word. “Anything else you need, you’ll have to get from the Batcave. Understand?”

It was years ago; it was another lifetime.

I wanted a change from museums and jewelry stores. I was breaking into the Expo Center. and he found me. We traded barbs. We fought. It was physical. It was very physical. Especially after I tripped and he landed on top of me.

We wrestled a little more and... it seems like nothing now, but then it was, well, we both had it ratcheted up pretty tight back then... Body to body, breathing hard, perspiring, adrenaline pumping ...neither of us made a conscious decision... it just... happened. It morphed... from a fight into... God, I hadn’t thought about this for years. He was such a mystery back then, and his touch was... electric... Somehow, the scratching became caressing, and the squirming turned into this rhythmic bucking and grinding. It was getting intense, and I honestly don’t know what might have happened if we hadn’t heard those sirens...

We were so screwed up.

It was unthinkable that we might be seen like that, so rather than relocate to somewhere more private and continue what we both so clearly wanted to continue, we shot to the far corners of the roof and never mentioned it again. DenialFest ’95.

I hadn’t thought about it for years... But now I remembered as clearly as if it were last night. His hand coming up my waist, gently, so gently, and he murmured, “Too long, we waited too long.”

And I arched my back slightly, pushing into his chest and answered, “then LET’S... DO IT RIGHT.”

Two weeks later, Wayne Enterprises launched the DO IT RIGHT campaign.

Barbara felt bad after Cassie left. The poor kid didn’t have a lot of people to go to where she could make herself understood. What was she supposed to do if she runs out of cord and can’t get more, improvise something with telephone wire?

...

Improvising.

Barbara thought back to Poison Ivy using the Penguin Umbrellas.

And Harley Quinn’s malfunctioning gas grenades.

And a half-dozen other anomalies of the past week.

And now Batgirl was unable to get new tungsten cord.

Something was wrong—upstream.

Something had happened, at the source.

She snapped open the OraCom panel and opened a channel to Batman.

At Kittermeier’s, there was a note stapled to the door. An incomprehensible riddle was scratched out, and written beneath in Harley Quinn’s flowing handwriting was:

*He’s not here.*

*We don’t know what’s happened.*

*Enter at your own risk.*

Below that, in the handwriting of the original riddle, the words were scrawled:

*It has no panache.*

And beside it in the margin, in Harley's hand again:

*But it's clear.*

Making a mental note that the note-writers were mental—then smacking myself for the Nigma pun, I entered Kittlemeier's shop. It wasn't any dustier than usual, but the emptiness made it seem dustier.

I searched.

As often as I've gone through other people's things when they're not at home, it was an eerie feeling. Opening a parcel under the counter, I found a Harley Quinn costume and some vicious looking playing cards. In the back room, I did a double take when I realized there was a Batman utility belt half-assembled on the worktable.

The breakthrough clue came at the cash register. At some point, the countertop must have swelled and made the register wobble, because, underneath one corner, a folded envelope was wedged in to steady it. The envelope had an address in the East Village. Walking the route from the shop to the address, I stopped in every coffee shop, grocer, and convenience store. One block from his flat, I hit the jackpot in a quaint Hungarian restaurant.

"Ya, Kittlemeier, he stops in most nights. Jaegerschnizel, potato pancake, extra sour cream, half litre of Dortmund with dinner and a lemon schnapps after."

I had to smile, remembering a fitting when I was freezing in that miserable backroom with only a tiny space heater. Somehow we got to talking about his rates, and he said he made enough money for his only vices: good German beer and a little glass of schnapps after dinner.

"Has he been in lately?" I asked.

"No," came the scandalized reply. "He's in hospital. Didn't you know? He was mugged—four nights ago. Beaten. Very bad. Gotham Presbyterian."

It was upsetting news, I won't pretend otherwise. But that's not why I changed into Catwoman. It's true I'll sometimes use the suit to better deal with... whatever it is I don't want to deal with, but not this time. This was Kittlemeier, and it seemed more appropriate somehow to go to him in costume. A tribute of a sort.

Fortunately, Gotham Presbyterian is a downtown hospital. By that, I mean that they're in the front lines and they don't have time for nonsense. You can walk up to a nurses' station wearing leather and spandex, ask about a sixtyish gentleman brought in four nights ago, and expect to get an answer without a lot of carrying on.

The nurse told me Kittlemeier had been moved out of the ICU into a private room that morning. If she even noticed I was wearing a mask, there was no indication.

I crept into his room and was relieved to see that—despite a leg cast, traction gizmo, neck brace, a black eye, and a nasty looking cut on his forehead—he looked much the same as always.

"Mr. Kittlemeier?" I whispered, not sure if he was awake. His eyes popped open instantly; clearly he had not been asleep.

"Selina!" he waved me in happily.

"I heard you had some trouble," I said.

“Bah, hoodlums. Not my kind of people.”

“Nobody we know then?” I smiled.

I figured as much, but it was good to have it confirmed. No name villain would dare touch Kittlemeier. What would be the point?

“No. Nobodies. But dats is not important now. Vat is important is my shop. It is going to be very deeficult getting started up again. My clients, they get the time for the next appointment when they come to the last one. Now that I have missed so many, I can’t have zem popping in to see if it’s a good time. But, I zink I have a zolution, if you vill help me.”

Before I could ask what he was getting at, he held up a hand and said, “But dats is for later. You must go now, my dear, for my next appointment id here and I can’t have clients running into each other.”

“What?”

I thought maybe he was confused, what with that head wound and all... when a scalloped shadow fell over the bed.

I nearly jumped out of my skin—the sneaky Bat scared the HELL out of me.

“This won’t take long,” he said to Kittlemeier. “I just have a few questions, if Catwoman wants to wait.” Then he turned to me and added with a mouth-twitch, “Or to tell me what she’s doing here?”

Damn.

Maybe it was cleaning out that closet and thinking about the past... when he was “Batman,” not the guy inside the Bat... but looking at him now, growling, waiting for an answer... I was struck with how knowing who was in there didn’t make him any less sexy.

“Well?”

I meowed instead of answering him, sauntered up—completely forgetting Kittlemeier was a captive audience—and kissed him. He seemed surprised (though why I can’t imagine, kiss follows meow nine times out of ten for as long as we’ve been doing this). I got a little carried away and sunk a claw into his shoulder, and he pushed me back.

“You zee, dis is why the appointments must be kept zeparate,” Kittlemeier intoned. “I can’t have dis kind of zing going on in my shop.”

I left Kittlemeier’s room through the window, and immediately a batarang attached to a silken cord (Kittlemeier’s finest, \$29.95/yard) dropped down in front of me. I used it to ascend to the roof where, instead of the customary brooding bat, I heard, unmistakably, the voice of the boyfriend with a grievance...

“What was THAT about?”

I tried to pout, but a smile leaked through.

“I’m mad at you,” I told him.

“So I gather.” (He was fussing with the shoulder as if it was gushing blood. It was a tiny cut at most, the big baby.) “What did I do?”

“You didn’t tell me the Three Stooges came to see you with that Rules nonsense.”

“Oh, that. I was saving that.” A mischievous smile formed beneath the cowl that was all Bruce. “I thought, now that they’ve introduced themselves, maybe next time at

the Iceberg, I'd bandy the names about..." he came closer, wrapped an arm around my waist, "...just to see the look on your face...'such a pity Eddie and Harv couldn't be here tonight.'"

I giggled a little at this. Bruce in playful mode. It was very odd seeing—really SEEING—Bruce under the cowl.

"Well, it was silly anyway not telling me," I answered, reminded of the other issue. "Those rules don't apply to you..." I nuzzled his chin, the old blind spot, suckering him in, then worked back towards the ear and delivered the blow "...only rule that applies to you is no using our pillow talk in Wayne Tech advertising campaigns."

Following my instructions from Mr. Kittlemeier, Catwoman prowled again that night—breaking into no less than thirty-five rogue hideouts, leaving cards announcing Kittlemeier's official reopening and giving them the times for their next scheduled appointment.

I did cheat where the vigilantes are concerned: I gave the list to Barbara to distribute to Dick, Tim, Steph and the others.

The next night, three nameless thugs were delivered to the door of Gotham Presbyterian. Each had a concussion, a broken leg, two broken ribs, and assorted scratches and bruises. Each was trussed in ivy and wore a top hat with a playing card, a book of riddles, and a two-headed coin wedged into the rim.



## WE GATHER TOGETHER

---

"Writer's block? How can Poison Ivy have...?"

"Well, it's not writer's block *exactly*, but that's what we call it. You think those themed crimewaves just happen?"

"Yes."

"Well, they don't. It takes some planning: targets, timetables. You can't just improvise that stuff. And Ivy's out of ideas at the moment."

Batman (in costume, minus the cowl, but still very much Batman) looked like someone told him that gravity was just a theory and sometimes things fall UP. While he tried to wrap his brain around this bizarre new notion about criminal behavior, Tim gave up the pretense that he was playing Tomb Raider and not eavesdropping.

"There's only like a thousand florists in this city," he said, "not to mention a dozen environmental groups, and all the stuff with green in the name."

Selina just blinked at him.

"You want me to suggest that? 'Cause I've got her e-mail."

"I wasn't saying I want her to hit those places, I just think it's weird she wouldn't think to."

"Well, boys," Selina yawned—catlike—like she meant it, "It's been real. But it'll be dawn soon and I should get home."

"Stay," Batman said automatically, typing as he spoke. "I'll only be 5 more minutes." Normally he went to sleep after returning this late from patrol and would log the night's activities in the morning. But they were entering a season when the demands of the Wayne Foundation encroached on his daytime hours, and it was possible that Bruce Wayne's affairs would prevent Batman getting any computer time 'til the following night. Eighteen hours was too long to postpone making log entries.

Selina was quite sure "5 more minutes" meant sometime between now and the afterlife. And she wasn't about to be told to 'Stay' like a cocker spaniel until her lord and master had a free moment. She knew perfectly well how to realign his priorities-

"Okay, then," she began, heading for the passage to the manor and transitioning smoothly from Selina's voice into Catwoman's with each step. "Five minutes... then I'll be in your room... opening your safe ...and I'll be naked."

Tim turned his attention to Bruce, still typing for a second more until... there was no visible movement of the head or body, but his eyes snapped up from the monitor. "Did she just say...?"

Tim didn't bother to answer as Bruce began saving files in a hurry. He returned his attention to Tomb Raider, reflecting "Damn, Dick wasn't kidding about shameless banter in front of the impressionable young sidekick."

...: Bruce, face it:... the phone squawked in Dick's voice, ...: Mary Tyler Moore, Murphy Brown, and YOU! You have an appalling track record when it comes to giving parties. It's a curse. You entertain—disaster follows. So why don't you just take it as a hint from the cosmos and stop giving these parties. ...

"We make our own destiny, Dick. There is no curse. It's Thanksgiving; it's a family holiday. We're finally acting like a family around here. You'll be here if I have to—"

The threat that followed was not one most people would classify as familial, but allowances must be made for families that regularly find themselves shot at, gassed, bound, gagged, locked in dungeons, suspended from a height, buried alive, and shackled to explosives.

Bruce hung up the phone and dialed Selina. There were no snide comments about his party-giving from that quarter, but now that the subject was raised, he couldn't resist asking:

"So how come Catwoman never hit a Wayne party?"

The answer was not comforting: ...: *Too predictable.* ...

"Excuse me? *Canary Diamonds, Lynx Furriers, Tiger's Eye Opals, jaguar mask, Lionshare Brokerage, Egyptian cat gods, Maya cat gods, Norse cat gods, Kitty Barnes's Penthouse, Katz Jewelers...* and that was just the '90s!"

...: *There are exactly six hundred and forty three cat-related targets in the greater Gotham area; predictability wasn't a concern.* ...

Bruce, who only knew of four hundred and sixty, made a mental note to update his database.

"Are you sure your father's okay with this?" Selina was asking Barbara as the inner circle sat in the drawing room waiting for the other guests to arrive. Public opinion was more or less split as to whether Selina Kyle, the star of the off-Broadway show *Cat-Tales*, was indeed Catwoman, the notorious catburglar. She had no idea which opinion the former police commissioner held. But it was definitely Selina, the star of *Cat-Tales*, that delivered that devastating summary of Jim Gordon's performance running "the most incompetent and corrupt police force in this country." She didn't think he'd be eager to meet socially the woman who had pronounced him "the most inept peace officer in the Western Hemisphere."

"It took some weedling," Barbara answered, "but he's coming."

The unspoken allusion to Selina's show, combined with the recent talk of theme-crimes, made Bruce more aware than ever of 'the Catwoman factor' in their lives now, and he would undoubtedly attribute his next statement (and all it spawned) to that chance series of conversations.

Dick, on the other hand, would say Nemesis took note of Bruce's airy dismissal of *The Curse* and took matters into her own hands:

"Speaking of Jim," Bruce graveled in Batman's deep baritone, then he eased into Bruce's more casual day-voice as he went on. "I did want to mention that he's, you know, rather more familiar with Batman and Catwoman than most outsiders we've seen since... Well, I just wouldn't want to risk... I don't know how recognizable the teasing and the bickering might be to him, so could you please, just for me, dial it down to five just for the day."

Selina, Dick, Barbara, Tim, Stephanie, and even Alfred were too stunned at the monumental inadvisability of the comment to say anything for nearly 30 seconds. It was Tim who finally found his tongue. He turned to Stephanie and said, "See, other guys can too be that stupid."

Unfortunately he said it just as Dick took a swallow of mineral water and the resulting coughing fit spattered Barbara's silk skirt with droplets of moisture.

Selina accompanied Barbara to the washroom to repair the damage and, by the time they returned, other guests had begun to arrive, so it was impossible to openly discuss bat-related topics.

Nemesis cracked her knuckles. She was just getting warmed up.

Alfred did not make errors in the kitchen. Not of any kind. There was no way the delay of the turkey by a full sixty minutes could be laid at his door. At Bruce's, certainly, and Selina's too. For it was her fault that Bruce no longer looked on cooking as a mystical alchemy understood only by the high priest Pennyworth.

In his awakening to the culinary arts, Bruce had examined a number of foods in their raw and cooked states, working out all that happened to them chemically, at the molecular level, as they were mixed, whipped, pureed, baked, boiled, or fried. He had not investigated turkey, however, and he was curious to see how it was possible to roast two different kinds of meat, the softer white meat and the fattier leg meat, to the same level of moist tenderness.

The method was, in fact, a closely guarded Pennyworth secret and not one Alfred was inclined to share to satisfy some scientific curiosity that had nothing to do with the pleasures of the table.

Bruce was not inclined to take no for an answer and had made use of Batman's stealthiest intelligence-gathering techniques to learn the secret. He discovered the bird soaking in a brine of vegetable broth, kosher salt, and allspice berries, and he easily worked out what was going on: Seeking to balance the salt content inside and outside the bird, there would be a constant flowing of moisture in and out of the meat, which would trap the moisture and the flavor in the turkey where no amount of overcooking would dry it. It was ingenious!

Unfortunately it was so ingenious that Bruce had to see it with his own eyes, and he snuck into the kitchen several times to obtain a cross section of the turkey meat in various stages of roasting for later analysis under a microscope. Each time he opened the door, a little heat escaped from the oven, and by the time Alfred discovered the violation, an additional hour was needed before the enormous bird would be ready.

The delay, during which Alfred nursed his grievance against both Bruce and Selina, gave Nemesis a grand opportunity to arrange the company into twos and threes, where a variety of unfortunate comments were overheard:

*Overheard by Selina:*

"Hey, Dick, Bruce doesn't do that 'what I'm thankful for' around the table, does he?"

"Never has before, Tim, but this year, who knows."

"Damn, I hate those."

"You could say you're thankful your girlfriend doesn't threaten to set you on fire."

*Overheard by Mrs. Drake:*

"Glad you could have us over, Bruce."

"Couldn't keep you and Tim apart on a family occasion like this, Jack."

"Not just that, if it was at home, my stepmom, well, we love her, but..."

"But her idea of Thanksgiving Dinner would be some soy turkeyloaf."

"And sprouts."

*Overheard by Barbara:*

"Hey, Tim, so what was that thing before with Steph?"

"Dick, shh. Keep your voice down. I'm in enough trouble, okay? What thing?"

"Other guys can too be that stupid."

"Oh, she showed up in a new outfit last night. 'Do I look fat in this?'"

"Ouch, I remember when Babs did that to me. Do they all do that? Why do they do that?"

"To HURT US."

"It was that awful blue thing with the yellow. I wanted to say, 'No, doesn't make you look fat, makes you look like you'll give me a lapdance.'"

*Overheard by Stephanie:*

"Tim."

"Hey, Bruce."

"So what was that thing before with Stephanie?"

"'Do I look fat in this?' ... She did, too."

*Overheard by Cassie:*

"Alfred, please, take pity on me, change the place cards. I've offended every woman here, and if I have to sit next to one at dinner, I'll never get out alive.... Except Cassie, I haven't said anything about her. Hell, what is there to say? She doesn't talk. Sit me next to her; that'll be safe. It'll be like sitting with a potted plant, but it'll be safe."

When they sat down at last, the lines of discord crisscrossing the long banquet table would have made a fine cat's cradle. The only exception was the one person one would expect to be nursing a grudge: Jim Gordon. The retired commissioner was on his best behavior. There was more, he was certain, behind his daughter's insistence that he accept Wayne's invitation than simply not leaving him alone on Thanksgiving. He looked at Dick and Barbara seated side by side, thinking they were hiding whatever spat they'd had, the same way they thought they hid that they were in love. This was a *family* gathering.

While Dick clinked his glass, Gordon considered that he should really talk to Bruce. They were going to be family; the man should know how much his friend knew.

Dick said he had an announcement to make—and Gordon wondered if the delicate discussion with Bruce should be held now at the official engagement, or on the wedding day itself.

Dick said he hoped this news would be of special interest to Commissioner Gordon—today, he decided. He would be too choked up at the wedding.

Jim Gordon sat back in his chair, assuming the posture of the Proud Papa... And then...

Dick said that he'd received a special commendation for busting an extortion ring that had been operating in Bludhaven.

Nemesis chuckled as the entire company was again stunned into silence.

Everyone had made the same assumption as Jim Gordon: it was a holiday meal, Dick had a special announcement, of interest to Barbara's father. Dick was the only one who didn't get it, not even when his would-be father-in-law intoned in a voice heavy with sarcasm: "Yes, indeed. I can't tell you how very *pleased and proud* I am to hear Dick's *wonderful news* about the -cough- extortion ring."

He would later find an unexpected ally in Selina, who complimented "pleased and proud" as suitably parental verbage for the slam, but added that she would've hit the word *ring* with a little more irony.

From that moment on, they were friends.

Having escorted Jim Gordon and the Drakes to the door, Bruce returned to an empty drawing room. Alfred, Selina, Dick, Barbara, Tim, Stephanie and Cassie had all adjourned to the kitchen, where Dick was halfway through one of his standup routines on "The Curse."

"Seems we've proved definitively, we don't need a Joker, Harley, Ivy, Hatter, Two-Face or Croc for these little affairs. We can destroy them quite nicely on our own."

"We?" Barbara questioned, munching a cold drum stick. "You're the diplomatic genius who got my dad worked up with all that 'special announcement' crap."

Dick considered flinging a bit of cold potato at her, but Alfred anticipated him and moved the bowl out of his reach. Cassie immediately reached for it and served herself a large helping. Alfred gave her a pleased smile. Of all the bickering dinner guests, she was the one who had not let the emotional cross-currents affect her appetite. Indeed, she had eaten more than Dick and Tim combined.

Before entering the kitchen, Bruce took a final glance at the east window, hoping vainly for a reprieve from the Bat-Signal. Nothing but a clear and empty sky met his gaze.

He sighed, then swung open the kitchen door with just enough Bat-bravado to upset Tim's acrobatic reach for the whipped cream and cause the bowl to spill over, dropping an enormous white glop squarely on Alfred's foot.

It was enough. The tension bubble popped, and first Dick, then Selina, then Tim, then Steph, then Barbara, began to smile. By the time Alfred smiled, Dick was laughing. By the time Cassie laughed, Selina was holding her sides. By the time Bruce gave in to a half-twitch, Barbara had tears streaming down her face.



# KNIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

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In the years he'd fought Catwoman, Batman had sometimes wondered *what might happen if*—if they got past the claws and the Batarangs, if they ended the pretense and admitted their feelings, if they somehow became a couple. They were the kind of fantasies that kept one warm on a freezing rooftop on a long stakeout in the middle of December: they involved champagne, roaring fires, and silk lingerie. His imagination never conceived anything like this bizarre piece of paper:

~~~~~  
*Harley Quinn cordially invites you  
to a Christmas Part-ay  
HA-HAcienda North  
December 22  
9:PM 'til the Fat Lady Sings  
Secret Santa \* Puddin' via Joker-Cam \* Regrets Only*  
~~~~~

The invitation sat openly in the mail tray just inside the door of Selina's apartment, so Bruce assumed he was meant to see it. Consequently, when Selina emerged from her bedroom in a breathtaking new party dress, his very first words were: "Don't even think about declining that."

Selina's eyes narrowed and she hissed, "Thanks, I bought it special, it is a festive color isn't it."

"Sorry. The dress is very nice. Don't even think about declining that invitation from Harley."

That set the tone for their whispered banter throughout the evening.

The holiday season always meant more duty appearances for Bruce Wayne. In a typical year, the endless party-going put a strain on his patience. There were so many events; he had to pace himself. If he alienated his bimbo escorts at his usual rate, there wouldn't be enough to get him to the New Year. Also, many of these events were fundraisers where he was representing the Wayne Foundation to people shelling out thousands of dollars for their good works. He had far less license to act the idiot flop than at ordinary social functions. It made the whole ritual a great bore, and without the usual pressure valve of escaping into Batman at the end of the evening. The crime at this season was mostly the petty theft of desperate people and best left to the real police.

But this year, he didn't have to suffer a string of bimbos. He had Selina. And he discovered it was a whole new world attending these events with a real partner at his side, a cohort who found the whole thing as tedious as he did. Despite spending most of their professional lives on opposite sides, Selina shared his outlook on the world as these society women did not:

It would be a crisis if the Guest of Honor was trapped in her embassy by rebel guerillas...

It was not a crisis that she was trapped by the bandstand by Fred Brunn pitching his screenplay.

It would be a crisis if Mr. Freeze turned the chandelier into a lethal rain of icicles like last year...

It was not a crisis if the lobster mayonnaise curdled.

An hour into the first dinner-dance, Bruce and Selina had established a silent language of glares and glances that evolved into running commentary on their surroundings, dinner companions, and the inanities of social chitchat. It helped keep them both awake through endless parties that blurred into each other like so much curdled lobster mayonnaise. As the weeks progressed, the couple expanded the secret dialogue to include discussion and usually heated debates on some topic of no importance. On the night of the Wayne Foundation Snow Ball, that topic was the invitation to Harley Quinn's Christmas party.

In the receiving line, Selina made it clear that she loathed the Rogue mixers and went to as few as she possibly could.

Bruce countered that, since she'd had to defend her reputation once already this year from rumors that she'd reformed... er, "the R-word," that is... it wouldn't be such a bad idea to make more of an effort with the Rogues, and this was a perfect opportunity.

At supper, she tried to explain that it was not a perfect opportunity at all. Going out to a karaoke bar, maybe. But a party at Harley's home? It's not like anybody felt safe eating whatever food the whacko-miss served, so you had to bring something and keep an eye on it, making sure you only ate from that dish. All in all, it was too much trouble.

Bruce didn't care. He said he'd whip up a plate of Alfred's puff pastry.

With horror, Selina realized he wasn't just urging *her* to go, *he* fully expected to go along as her date!

By the time they reached the dance floor and could have a prolonged conversation instead of exchanging only two and three word snippets, Bruce—or rather Batman—was as determined as she'd ever seen him. She had two choices: she could go to the party with him, or she could go wearing a wire. But The Rogues Gallery Christmas party was something he had to see, up close and personal.

Bruce would later say he never made mistakes like this before Selina came into his life. Tim would say that Bruce was so used to fighting with her, he had to take the opposite position of whatever Selina advocated, even if, as in this case, ("Don't look at me like that, Bruce. It's true and you know it.") even if, as in this case, she happened to be *right*. Dick would say that Batman was used to walking into traps: the too-obvious clue led to the Ha-Hacienda, the Greenhouse, or the abandoned warehouse. While sometimes the villain would indeed be there, they were expecting company, and whether they were there or not, something nasty was always waiting. That knowledge never stopped him: in he'd walk, bold as brass, head held high, confident he could face whatever was waiting on the far side of that door.

Dick, it should be repeated, would say this *later*. Right now his head was fully occupied with walking into another kind of trap.

*Bold as brass...* he rang the doorbell.

*Head held high...* he struck a pose.

And...

"Merry Christmas, Dickey." (Gulp.)

...and in he walked...

"Merry Christmas, Barbara."

...as confident as he could be that he could face what was waiting on the far side of that door.

As Bruce and Selina approached the door to the HA-HAcienda, the melodious sounds of *101 Strings play Danny Elfman* was competing with The Chipmunks singing *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*. When the doorbell rang *Dogs Barking Jingle Bells*, Bruce stared at it in horror and Selina whispered, "Remember, this was *your* idea, Bright Eyes."

As they shed their coats, a very tipsy Roxy Rocket bounced up to Bruce, handed him an asparagus spear and said it was mistletoe. Then she kissed his cheek and mumbled an incomprehensible warning about loaded yellow cubes and an exploding fruitcake. Penguin came to collect her, explained that the punch was 600-proof (a hyperbole, surely) and the yellow cubes floating in it were Jello shots. Roxy called him an adorable birdie-wirdie (going beyond hyperbole into the land of incomprehensibility) and kissed his nose.

Penguin looked pleased. Bruce looked confused. And Selina looked ill.

She scanned the room warily. Croc was stationed near the food, Scarecrow at the Bar, and Poison Ivy was ticking off her hostess for having murdered a tree and decked out its dead body with lights and garlands. Behind Ivy stood Harvey Dent, looking as if he'd heard quite enough of the tree debate for one lifetime. He waved eagerly to Selina, and she and Bruce joined him at the punch bowl.

"It's blue," Selina observed dryly.

"And packs quite a wallop," Harvey told her. "We figure about 200-proof, and while we cannot bring ourselves to disapprove on technical grounds, we are drinking tap water. You saw Roxy?"

In answer, Bruce held up the asparagus spear.

"We lucked out this year," Harvey remarked, "*Puddin'* is still in Arkham." The sarcasm with which his former friend delivered the pet name reminded Bruce of just how much Harvey could liven up a bad party. Harvey pointed towards a TV monitor in the corner under a hand-painted sign that read JOKER-CAM.

"He's here in spirit only," Harvey assured them.

On the screen was the Joker's ever-grinning face, delivering a tirade: he hadn't had any eggnog, and if he didn't get some, he wouldn't read them all *The Nightmare Before Christmas* later. Harley immediately filled a cup and placed it next to the

monitor. Edward Nigma strolled casually over to the monitor and slyly turned down the volume.

Harley joined the group at the punch bowl and Selina congratulated her on a good turnout this year. Harley said everyone who was free had been invited—except Hugo Strange. Strange was off the A-list, Harley announced grimly. “Never does anything. Comes to every single event, oozing slime, leering and drooling, hits on all the women, but does he ever commit a crime? No. He’s a groupie, that’s what he is. And he’s off the A-lieeee...”

Harley’s tirade was interrupted by a pinch from Edward Nigma. He gave an innocent “who me” look as Harley squirmed off and restored the volume on the Joker-Cam.

“Good party,” Nigma smiled to the others.

“Bad timing,” Harvey chided him. “We were just finding out why Hugo Strange was blackballed.”

“Don’t think anybody’s ever been blackballed before,” Eddie answered.

“Well, except for Catman,” Harvey smiled at Selina.

“Yes, except for him,” Eddie concurred and also smiled at Selina.

“I make no apologies for that,” Selina defended herself. “I don’t like the guy; he doesn’t like me. We’re very frank about it. Word got around that you don’t want both of us at the same party, and everybody picked me instead of him. Tough cookies.”

By now, Mr. Freeze had snuck over to the Joker-Cam volume and turned it back down. Again, Harley noticed and restored it.

“Listen, pet, imitation is the highest form of flattery,” Eddie argued. “If I went after everybody who ripped off my shtick: Cluemaster, Puzzler, Zodiac Master, I wouldn’t have any time left for Batman!”

“Zodiac Master?” Two-Face sneered, “If it took you more than two minutes to finish off the whole bunch of them, you should turn in your keys.”

“Seriously,” Selina agreed, and even Bruce nodded. Riddler knock-offs. Of all the costumed criminals he’d faced, none seemed so suited to selling used cars in East Podunk.

Harley cleared her throat and announced that Mad Hatter had again rigged the Secret Santa drawing. There was general laughter at this, and Bruce gathered it was an annual tradition. While Harley made her announcement, Scarecrow moved stealthily towards the Joker-Cam, winked at the company from behind her back, and again cut the volume. The sudden quiet drew attention to some odd sounds emanating from the coatroom.

Karma, the principle that what goes around comes around, that good things come to those who help others but cosmic payback visits those who are selfish and hurtful. Karma is a tricky business. Dick would have thought he’d racked up enough of a positive balance in an average week as Nightwing to earn one perfect evening. This was to be it. He’d placed his order with the cosmos: tonight, it would happen. Tonight, he would show Barbara the most sublimely wonderful night of her life... and

then he would pop the question. The cosmos owed him; Karma owed him. And tonight, he was calling in the marker.

They'd gotten as far as Merry Christmas, Dickey/Merry Christmas, Barbara.

He was just about to think "So far, so good" when the OraCom panel emitted a harsh, rude BRRRRRINNNGGGG, and a horrid light glowed red next to the channel labeled Watchtower.

Barbara gave him a "places to go, people to see" shrug and touched the panel before he could say "Pretend we just left."

Damnit.

They weren't out the door and already a setback. Where was Karma when you needed it?

Ivy joined the group and spoke, nodding her head towards the coatroom door and the odd sounds it was producing: "Not a pleasant thought, that."

"Now what?" Harvey asked without really wanting to know. He was spending too much of this night listening to Ivy's complaints.

"Penguin and Roxy—ulgh," Ivy answered, pointing at her uvula with a 'gag me' gesture.

"Gonna hate herself in the morning," Selina agreed.

"She *is* drunk," Eddie added.

Only Two-Face, who usually let Harvey take the wheel during social functions, was less than sympathetic about Roxy's plight. "Every office party, there's one. At City Hall, it was sweet Brenda O'Shea. Roxy's just that type to get tanked and Xerox her tush. And since we don't have a copy machine... Penguin."

The rest of the room was apparently discussing the same subject, for they heard Scarecrow in the circle behind them explaining, "She didn't know those yellow things in the punch were Jello shots."

And across the room, Mad Hatter, ever the gossip, was fleshing out the details: "Penny was being nice, trying to take her keys, and one thing led to another..." This evoked a group-Ewww from his audience.

Selina reflected that every time Ed Nigma tried to be nice, he got beaten up. Penny got lucky. There was no justice. Speaking of which, Bruce had disappeared...

*"At this most joyous and sacred season of the year, which all peoples and cultures recognize, either through religious holidays like Christmas and Chanukah, or through Winter Festivals marking the Solstice, it is more than especially important that we take the time to reach out and embrace those who have attained a place of importance in our lives ..."*

It would be unfair to say Dick disliked Diana. She had, it's true, a tendency to harangue. She liked a soapbox. She liked to instruct her teammates on ways to improve themselves and had a disagreeable tendency to wrap up her message in an air

of royal condescension. Superman could get away with the occasional speech-making because he had that Midwest butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth way about him. Bruce could pull off telling you the way things should be because... because there was no way to stop him. But Diana, Diana oozed this self-important sense of British colonialism... civilizing the savages...

It occurred to Dick that it was beginning to sound like he *did* dislike Diana quite a lot.

Possibly that was because the videofeed that began *A Holiday Missive from Diana, Princess of Themyscira* had been droning on for ten solid minutes, and there was no end in sight.

At his core, through going to live with Bruce at Wayne Manor, through Robin, through Nightwing, through becoming a policeman, Dick Grayson remained an easygoing, circus kid. That may be why he found the pretensions of Diana's *Holiday Missive* hard to take, but it also kept him from taking a house like Wayne Manor for granted. He had asked Bruce to "borrow the house" and asked Alfred to stage the most gloriously elegant, romantic evening imaginable, just as he'd done months ago for Bruce and Selina. The requests (and the obvious reason behind them) were the most wonderful Christmas gift either man could ask for, and Alfred especially went the extra mile devising the menu.

*Pate de foie gras*  
*Sole bonne femme*  
*Croute decailles Pennyworth*  
*Bombe surprise*

The music was soft and unobtrusive. For once, Dick followed the tips Bruce gave him, which were delivered with the no-nonsense instructional tone used for combat training: *Chitchat only through the pate course. No matter what happens, keep to light subjects, easy manner, like a Sunday in the park. Only with the arrival of the fish, may you turn the conversation to more serious matters such as mutual friends—but take care that the friends discussed are all happy couples. You're setting a tone...*

Dick took a deep breath and began: "The last time Alfred made this, it was for Bruce and Selina, in the garden, when he gave her the cat—" when the tone was shattered by a sickly hacking noise. It was Barbara, trying to swallow, gesturing for him to put down his fork and... assuming an expression he hadn't seen since the day he spilled Diet Pepsi on her keyboard.

"Is this gelatin under the fish supposed to be so sweet?" she gasped finally.

"Sweet fish? I don't think so, I... oh my... god." He had taken a bite, and dove for his water glass. It was disgusting...

Selina put down the puff pastry and looked at Bruce with an unconcealed malice he hadn't seen since he kept her from the Van Deegan Emeralds.

“Darling,” she began in tones that also echoed a time when sentences were punctuated with claws and blood, “when you cook, do you set out the ingredients beforehand in those little custard cups, like on cooking shows?”

He nodded.

“Does Alfred?”

He nodded again, cautiously.

“And, by some chance, were you both in the kitchen cooking at the same time today?”

They were. After the Thanksgiving fiasco, Bruce had again been banned from the kitchen. But Alfred made an exception that afternoon. Spirit of the season—forgiveness and goodwill—but supervised.

“And was there salt, was there *supposed* to be salt, in whatever Alfred was making?”

In April, Bruce Wayne’s neighbors, the Finns, acquired the services of Monsieur Anatole, a temperamental but talented *chef de cuisine* from Nice. In May, it reached Alfred’s ears that the new arrival’s reaction, on hearing the Englishman next door was not only Mr. Wayne’s butler/valet, but his *cook* (he would not use the term *chef*), there was a tirade about those tea-swilling peddlers of Yorkshire pudding that no self-respecting Pennyworth could let pass.

By July, both men knew the other visited Harriman’s Gourmet Pantry on Mondays and Thursdays, and each made a point of never entering the store while the other was inside. Each would chat up the clerk and learn what the other had purchased, and each devoted some considerable time deducing the other’s menus. In September, Anatole remarked to the clerk that it was a pity selling good truffles to a, how do you say, ‘a limey,’ as they overcook the delicate mushrooms until all flavor has flown like those petite birdies on the Rue de Bologne. The following week, Alfred replied that it was criminal to sell salmon steaks to ‘a frog,’ when they smothered them in so much cream sauce and garlic, you didn’t know if you were eating salmon or broccoli. In October, Anatole served an intimate dinner party Leg of Lamb *a la Pennyworth* with a glaze of French cognac in place of the Scottish malt. In November, Alfred responded with Lobster *a la Anatole* with ground savory leaves in place of the garlic.

In December, there was a knock at the kitchen door at the Finn Estate. A meek and terrified kitchen maid showed Mr. Pennyworth (surely not *that* Pennyworth? But English, and from next door, who else could he be?) into the sanctum sanctorum of Anatole’s kitchen.

Alfred introduced himself with such an air of polite humility, Anatole wondered if he’d possibly mixed up the names somehow. Could there be two English servants in the neighborhood? This affable butler and the upstart cook with whom he’d been feuding? No, for the man said distinctly “from next door” and “special dinner (so he was the cook!) ruined.”

*Sacre bleu*, the man wanted a favor! His deadly enemy was here seeking a bit of brisket and crème de caramel to salvage a meal ruined by his fish ‘n chips incompetence.

Oh, a *very* special dinner... for two... l'amour!

Alfred spoke eloquently of the lady's beauty and the gentleman's long and poorly-hidden infatuation—since they were children, it seemed. Well, what was a sentimental heir of Escoffier to do? The dinner Anatole was preparing for the Finns was for sixteen. There was more than enough to give Pennyworth two portions of main course and dessert so young Monsieur Grayson (“Grayson? *Un nom Français, no?*” “A French name? It may be,” Alfred lied.) ...so young Monsieur Grayson did not have to ‘pop the question’ over pizza. And in exchange, Anatole would have Alfred Pennyworth’s ‘undying gratitude.’ *Bien.*

While Alfred was throwing himself at the mercy of Anatole, Dick and Barbara waited in the drawing room, where a splendid fire was laid for after dinner. Dick figured they had time now, so he set a match to the kindling... Unfortunately, this little-used drawing room had a clogged flue.

Bruce finally reappeared. He was munching—to Selina and Harvey's horror—a plate of fried chicken strips. Selina repeated that you couldn't just pick something from the buffet at a Harley Quinn party, but Bruce assured her that he'd been watching Killer Croc devour a whole bin of these for half an hour with no ill effects.

Selina and Harvey each took a piece of chicken, embarrassed they'd never thought of such a test themselves. In the interests of gastronomic variety, Selina told Harvey that she and Bruce brought the puff pastry, which were therefore safe to eat—but she wouldn't advise it. Harvey said he'd brought the rum balls.

He failed to add that he/Harvey had gotten into a bit of a spat with he/Two-Face in the making of said rum balls, the former insisting they were too moist and adding more flour, the latter that they were too dry and adding more rum, until each was the size of a golf ball, weighed half-a-pound and contained a full shot of rum.

Ivy had moved on to telling Mad Hatter her complaints about the massacre of vegetation the holidays entailed: not just the trees, but the holly, the mistletoe, the cranberries and sage... while Harley, having restored the Joker-Cam volume yet again, donned a red hat and began distributing the Secret Santa gifts. Harvey groaned when it was discovered that Selina had picked Ivy's name:

“See, Pussycat gets it,” a pleased Poison Ivy announced to the room. “This is a LIVE poinsettia. It hasn't been murdered to satisfy some freakish whim of holiday décor. Power to the Plantlife, Catty!”

Selina gave a cautious smile and turned back to Harvey who, unable to stand another round of Ivy's fanatical ravings, went outside for a smoke.

Selina looked down at the gift in her hand. Mad Hatter had rigged the Secret Santa, as usual—and she wasn't one of his favorite people just at the moment. The red and white Ha-Ha paper said it all: Joker had drawn her name.

*That settles it, she thought, I'm not opening this without ...hey, wait a minute...enter my Dark Knight in light-absorbent armor. Probably has a SOP on opening Joker parcels.*

She whispered to Bruce, “What do you think? X-ray, pressure chamber or just soak it under water for a bit?”

But he was gone.

He was...

...across the room... examining the Joker-Cam.

She joined him as he bent down to look underneath it, then behind, examining the various cables with interest.

"I'm trying to figure out if it's two way," he mumbled by way of explanation. "'Cause if it is, Riddler's a dead man. Have you seen how he's been pinching Harley all night?"

Selina stared hard. "Tell me you didn't drink the punch."

Bruce looked insulted. "Of course not..."

Of course not. Bruce seldom drank. He had a dozen ways to appear to be drinking in public, but almost never consumed any alcohol. As a result, he was a bit of a flyweight. Selina remembered a bottle of champagne that went straight to his head.

"...just a couple a'those rum balls."

"Are you out of your mind," she hissed. "Getting snookered in this company of all places?"

"Oh, lighten up, Kitten. That's what office parties are for." This was a whisper, and Selina was fairly sure no one else could hear—but, as he continued, she still couldn't believe he'd say it at any volume. "'Sides, these are my people as much as yours. Look, ended the Volume Wars."

He held up the volume knob of the Joker-Cam with a devilish grin, then added, "Incidentally, Tom Blake—Catman—he was copying me, not you. Changed the B to a C, that's all. Check out the costume some time. Really obvious..."

In the spirit of Peace and Good Will towards Man, Selina ignored the thought that, of all the Rogues in this room who'd tried to kill Batman at various times, none ever came as close as she was at this moment. All she had to do was powder her nose and leave him here to blurt out god knows what.

"We're going home now," she said firmly.

"Did I mention that I'm part of the family now?" he replied.

Outside, Harvey Dent watched a marginally more sober Roxy Rocket analyze the rat's nest of cars in the driveway, trying to work out exactly how many had to be moved before she could get to her own vehicle. He flicked an ash into a nearby hedge—and thought of Ivy's *Plants are People too* rant when the 'hedge' cried for him to watch what he was using for an ashtray. A bald, bespeckled head emerged. It was Hugo Strange—living up to his name: crashing a party to which he'd not been invited by hiding in the bushes.

"Outrageous!" the interloper began. "It's outrageous. I, Hugo Strange, excluded from this gathering, but Batman—*BATMAN* of all people—is in there even as we speak."

Roxy, hearing the commotion, stumbled over to join the conversation.

"I shan't let this insult pass, I tell you, I shall not."

"Did he say Batman?" Roxy squinted up at Harvey.

"Bruce Batman Wayne!" Strange pronounced. Both Harvey and Two-Face winced, Harvey for Selina's sake and Two-face because Strange's Batman thing was an

embarrassment to the Rogue community. He was not 'of two minds' and a coin toss was not necessary. Harvey ruthlessly punched Strange in the kidney, slammed him against the wall, and growled:

"Look, Hugo, we're sorry if your invitation was 'lost in the mail,' BUT COME ON NOW! Do you really think if Wayne was Batman, he'd come to the party AT ALL, let alone..." he spun his victim around so his face pressed against the window, through which Bruce could be seen feeding the Joker-Cam volume knob to Killer Croc... "Let alone, get sloshed?"

He peeled Strange off the window and again propped him against the wall: "Now. YOU WILL NOT go in there and embarrass Selina with your nonsense. Here."

He gave the defeated Hugo Strange his unopened Secret Santa gift from Mr. Freeze, and a rum ball, then sent him packing. He filled Roxy in on the sad details of Hugo's fixation on exposing Batman's identity—and his eventual crack-up when he failed, insisting Batman was Bruce Wayne of all people. It was sad, really.

Roxy sobbed with the sentimentality of one who consumed eight yellow cubes before realizing they were Jello shots. She wandered off remarking how very sad it was.

Two-Face was not so easily put off. He railed against Harvey for beating up Strange without the courtesy of a coin-toss.

*You wanted him beaten up too, Harvey thought.*

*Yes, but we wanted to DO IT OURSELVES.*

*Serves you right. You didn't check with me before giving Ivy that corsage before, and you know what that stirred up.*

Despite Dick's fevered imagination flashing images of "FIRE AT WAYNE MANOR! FILM AT 11," there was only enough smoke to create a thin, eye-tearing ...haze... and to push Dick over the edge...

"Ah, nothing says Christmas like that smell of mesquite," Barbara mused.

"Grrr"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Think Bruce will mind that we kippered his drawing room?"

"Grrrrrrr"

"You said something."

"NO, I didn't."

"Sheesh, bite my head off why don't you. I'm the one who skipped lunch because you promised me—"

Dick slammed the arm of the sofa and stood, facing the fire, back to Barbara.

"Dicky, what gives?" she exclaimed. "It's not like you to fly off the handle like this."

"I just wanted everything to be perfect tonight because, well, hell, you know."

"I do?"

"YES, EXACTLY."

"Huh?"

"Go back one."

"One what?"

"Do you have to be so dense? I said, 'hell, you know' and then you said..."

"*Stuff like this never happened to me before you...*" The voice was Bruce's.

"...So this is MY fault now?" and Selina's.

"Oh, great," Dick muttered as the new arrivals continued:

"I didn't tell you to eat those things." "Do I smell smoke?" "If you remember, I didn't even want to go." "You said Harvey's food would be safe—Do you smell smoke? Alfred? Dick? I smell smoke!"

The voices got closer.

"I meant safe as in non-lethal." "The way it played out it certainly could have been lethal."

"Again, not my fault."

They entered the drawing room just as Bruce, still in a slightly diminished state, fell back on the kind of things he used to say in a fight with Catwoman...

"So you deny all responsibility for the consequences of your actions."

...and as Alfred entered from the dining room, having obtained a replacement dinner from Anatole at great personal sacrifice.

Dick and Barbara fled to the dining room. Dick closed the door behind him but didn't sit. Bruce and Selina's post-party spat completely drowned out the warble of the soothing alto sax. So much for 'setting a mood.'

A holiday missive—incredible dinner—fire—and now this. Every man has his breaking point. This was it.

"SO WILL YOU MARRY ME OR NOT, GODDAMNIT?"

People who live in the night are acquainted with all kinds of quiet. There's quiet enough to hear the distant traffic. Quiet enough to hear your breathing. Quiet enough to hear a lover's heartbeat. There's please-god-don't-let-me-die quiet, and can't-remember-her-name quiet. Is-he-lying quiet and can't-make-rent quiet. There's the quiet that inspires poets, and quiet that torments the lonely.

The quiet that descended on Wayne Manor after Dick's "SO WILL YOU MARRY ME OR NOT, GODDAMNIT?" could best be likened to a cold cosmic hand grabbing Bruce and Selina by the scruff of their necks and jerking them into shocked silence. Their argument came to a screeching halt. They tripped over each other trying to get next to the closed dining room door. It was a performance more evocative of the comedic stylings of Rebo and Zooty than the stealth masters Batman and Catwoman.

Their new sign language spontaneously expanded to include the phrases: "Let me in." "Me first." "But I'm better at this than you." "Sober, maybe, but not tonight." "Bitch." "Bastard." "That was my foot." "Move your elbow." and "Wait, there's a better way. Follow me."

Minutes later in the Batcave, Bruce fired up the surveillance system that could monitor any room in the house. He punched a few keys and the screen came to life, revealing Dick embracing Barbara while she cooed over a gold locket.

Selina gave Bruce an "I don't believe *you* lecture *me* about morality" stare, until he held up a finger and said "Say it, and I won't turn up the volume."

She didn't, and he did.

*"It's not a ring," Dick was explaining on the viewscreen, "'cause Alfred said this comes first."*

*"So are we really engaged, or just engaged to get engaged?"*

*"Does it matter?" he asked, kissing her cheek.*

*"It's an easier announcement if we're just plain engaged," she smiled.*

*"Then that settles it, we're engaged."*

*There was a pause when Dick's never-leave-a-sweet-moment-alone instincts took over.*

*"Of course, we could be engaged to talk about thinking about getting engaged and still be a step ahead of the Denial Twins."*

*Barbara laughed, so Dick continued.*

*"Can you believe they're fighting about rum balls now?"*

Barbara laughed again...

...while Bruce glared at the viewscreen.

*"This from the Puce-Couch couple," he muttered.*

*"I picked out that locket," Selina added with indignation.*

*"And I lent him my house!" Bruce matched her indignation and raised an aggrieved assertion.*

*"And they think we don't know they're listening right now," Dick intoned.*

*Then, because sharing the victory is the fiancée's prerogative, Barbara said, "It's just like Bruce to eavesdrop like that, but I'm surprised at Selina."*

Only Selina could have endured the dark cloud of foreboding that formed around Bruce as Dick completed the thought:

*"It really is a shame, isn't it, the way he's deteriorated her moral make-up."*

*"Let it go," Selina whispered with a laugh, "it's Christmas."*

The brooding intensity normally associated with Psychobat eased momentarily, and then resumed. Selina tried again...

*"It's Christmas, and your son just got engaged to the girl of his dreams. You really want to burst a blood vessel over this, or do you want your present?"*

*"Two days yet."*

*"Oh. And you know what a stickler I am for rules like that."*

The naughty girl grin produced the lip-twitch despite Bruce's best efforts to squelch it. His peripheral vision noticed that the monitor from the dining room now displayed a lovely linen damask. Dick had covered the camera with a napkin. The soft murmurs still picked up by the microphone were... private. Bruce switched off the feed abruptly and seemed to switch his mood at the same moment.

*"Okay, Christmas in ten minutes. Wait here."*

*"Why?" Selina asked, confused.*

*"I've got to go get your present."*

*"Well, I've got to get yours, so why don't we just take this upstairs to the tree."*

*"Why? Where'd you hide mine?"*

She looked at him like he was insane. Hide a present?...*From Batman?...In his own house?*

*"UNDER the tree, where else would you put—you know what, never mind, I don't want to know. The day you start making sense, I'm turning in my keys."*

"It's Christmas," he shot her own words back at her, "and my son just got engaged to the girl of his dreams. You want to ruin this, or do you—hello—wait for me."

They adjourned to the tree, where a mood more in keeping with the season prevailed.

As Selina unwrapped her gift, Bruce thought back to the panic moment at the entrance to Bergdorf's. The department store seemed to be scattered with landmines and he had to avoid every one of them.

It was those damn cat pins. Dick had told him about Selina's reaction to finding the first in his safe, and he'd seen her reaction to the second, although he hadn't realized at the time what was behind it... Yes, there were two pins, so he'd presented them as one for Catwoman and one for Selina. He'd worried it was stupid. He was trying to get himself out of a bind. He never meant to come off so sensitive and insightful. But, okay, he had these pins he'd bought years ago, just as he told her, bought with her in mind, as he also told her. He'd bought them as Catwoman bait, but, who knows? Maybe in some dark recesses of his mind, he'd dared to hope that one day...whatever. However it happened, he'd blundered onto being brilliant and understanding, and he wasn't about to mess it up now with something stupid like what Geena came up with.

As far as Bruce could figure, Geena was Lucius Fox's revenge for every missed meeting and early exit the long-suffering Wayne Enterprises President had had to cover for. Geena was a personal shopper with a sense of 'whimsy' (her word) that was 'so lacking in corporate gift giving.' Lucius hired her to do the Wayne Executives gift baskets, and what she might have sent his corporate contacts Bruce shuddered to imagine. When it came to Selina, the little twit had latched onto the Catwoman angle as though she was the first to realize someone with a moniker like Catwoman might like cats!

"There's fur, of course," was how her list began.

*Oh, great, Bruce had thought, Just because she never tried to kill me before doesn't mean it's too late to start now...*

"And cat jewelry. I guess she likes precious gems 'n stuff since she used to..."

*Was this woman for real?*

"Cat statues. Egyptians really liked cats. y'know. You-bass-tiss, I think it's called. I guess she'd know something about that stuff."

*Was this what Ra's went through on The View?*

"Cat boxes, leopard print pillows..."

Bruce stopped listening. He was expected to know her better than this. Hell, he *DID* know her better than this.

Cat stuff.

Was this what he sounded like all those months ago? "You don't have a lot of cat stuff around your apartment," he had said. She got mad. Now he realized why.

"And I thought, EUREKA!" Geena continued to bubble, "TIGERSTRIPES!"

*Eureka.*

"Well, Geena, thank you for your time. You've given me some splendid ideas," Bruce blurted, making for the door of the consultation room as though evading

a hail of gunfire. But he didn't escape without a final, "Oh good, because I can ship any of these items anywhere within the continental U.S...."

The door closed behind him and, in the relative quiet of the sales floor, the wisp of a thought solidified. It was remembering the cat stuff conversation that struck the spark: *Something from the beginning*. They'd both come so far in the past year. He should find something from the time when they never dreamed where they were now was possible. *Back to Xanadu?* No. Hellmonth was coming up right after Christmas. Not the time to leave town. That wasn't the start anyway. *Where did it really begin?* Something from the museum maybe? *Wonder if they'd sell that calico she joked about...* No, that was back to cat stuff. "Damn it!"

The last word was said out loud, and evoked some un-Christmasy stares from the surrounding shoppers.

Bruce ignored them. He was suddenly beaming. He had a wonderful idea.

Selina looked down at the tickets with a bewitchingly puzzled gaze. She bit her lip and the top of her nose wrinkled. She was beautiful, always. Graceful, fun-loving, bright—but seldom cute. She was only cute when she didn't get it.

"But don't you have a box at the opera?" she asked.

"Yes, a very prominent box at the edge of the dress circle. Those are different. Look closer."

She did, and then looked at the seating chart printed on the back.

"They're against the wall?"

"Yes."

"Of the second balcony?"

"Yes."

"These are *bad* seats."

"That's one way of looking at it. Look closer."

"I don't get it."

"I don't believe you're a cat burglar and can't read a seat map! What is that?"

"A door."

"Leading to?"

"A hallway?"

"A fire escape."

"A fire esc—" She stopped... looked up with a 'lightbulb' jolt... and saw the most astonishing parody of her own naughty-girl grin peering down on her... "It's the exit to the roof," she completed the thought.

"Yes."

"The roof of the opera house."

"Yes."

Smile turned to laugh which turned to a different pleased-but-confused 'who are you and how did I wind up with you in my life' smile. It was hard to believe this was him—oh, hell.

"Thank you," she stammered, kissing his cheek, "but mine's going to seem really stupid now."

"Can't be worse than the ideas I rejected before coming up with this." Bruce assured her, thinking of tiger stripes.

"Don't be so sure."

She handed over a small package, which he opened, peered into, then spoke:

"It's an empty box."

"Yes."

"Empty."

"See, there's a point, it's—"

"There's nothing inside it."

"Yeah, that's what *empty* means. This really did make sense before—"

"I don't get it."

"The BOX is the gift."

"Will this make more sense if I get drunk again?"

"You're not going to make this easy, are you? Look, I wanted to do something special. Just for you, not bat-you. I mean, you know what it meant to me that those pins weren't just for Catwoman. Besides which, theme gifts generally suck. They say 'I don't think enough of you as a person to have given this more than ten seconds thought.'"

"You gave Ivy a plant."

"Ivy doesn't have a lot of outside interests. And after the year Clayface gave her potpourri, we all learned to play it safe."

"Potpourri? As in dried petals and leaves and heads of dead flowers."

"Yeah, the screams went on for days."

"I wondered whatever happened to him."

"*Anyway*, point is, I didn't want to do something practical like an electron microscope, and I *suck* at the sentimental stuff. Given a warehouse full of innocent nothings, I'll find 'Rosebud,' the one item that just happens to trudge up god knows what painful memories from the annals of '*Christmases I have cried through*.'"

Bruce looked down at the empty box and back at Selina. It occurred to her that this was starting to sound like a pretty insulting gift.

"See, I figured you'd be more of a basket case at Christmas. Hell, a lot of perfectly normal people are a mess at the holidays..."

Bruce looked back at the box and back at Selina. It occurred to her that this was *continuing* to sound like a pretty insulting gift.

"Look, I asked Dick, I asked Alfred, I asked Tim..."

She stopped herself before adding "...*they each had a nice list of shit to avoid. You apparently have bad associations connected to almost anything human beings can eat, wear, touch, read or smell between December 20th and 26th.*"

This wasn't working. She also rejected "*See, darling, you're what we call damaged goods.*" That really lacked that whole love and goodwill holiday spirit.

"...And I kept thinking of that damn story where the gifts cancel each other out: selling the hair to buy the watch chain and selling the watch to buy the combs... You know that one? (Shit, this is worse than explaining what I'm doing in a bank vault at three o'clock in the morning.) So I thought: Hey! Have a few square inches of air, deliberate choice to... avoid picking the gift from hell."

For once, Selina thought she wouldn't be averse to a little rescuing from the gallant hero. The hero, it's true, was not insulted, nor disappointed. He was big enough to see past her less-than-flattering prattling to the sweet intention beneath. It was... actually... very sweet. It was a very sweet—and very amusing—gift. And he began to enjoy it immediately. The smile, not a twitch-smile but a genuine and tender one, broke through at last.

"What's that for?" Selina asked suspiciously.

"You weren't kidding, you do suck at the sentimental stuff."

She pouted slightly. He took her chin in his hand and kissed her tenderly.

"Thank you. Merry Christmas, Kitten."

Then he stroked her face as he went on, "You know, Selina, nothing, no *gift*, can compare to being able to say 'Merry Christmas, Kitten.'" Another kiss before he added, "Which is fortunate, really, since *nothing* is what I got."

# TIMES GONE BY

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*"But seas between us braid hae roar'd  
Sin auld lang syne."*

--Robert Burns, Auld Lang Syne

Tim and Stephanie were not prone to the angst-ridden tribulations of the older couples. It was New Year's Eve and their conversation was devoted to the most famous song no one knows the words too: Auld Lang Syne.

Robin had won the toss and he and Spoiler were stationed in a prime position overlooking Gotham Plaza, while the others patrolled less interesting parts of the city.

At 12:01, Robin indulged in the common dating maneuver of quoting famous movies. In particular, Billy Crystal, *When Harry Met Sally*, 1989: "What does this song mean? My whole life, I don't know what this song means..."

It would have brought at least a chuckle from any girl in Gotham—except Stephanie Brown, whose father was the Cluemaster and whose mother was a teacher of English Literature and of Scottish descent. Her parents' disparate interests in obscure trivia, Celtic pride, and a fierce admiration of the poet Burns meant that Steph was able to provide from memory the original 18th Century transcription and a modern translation of all four verses of the classic song.

"It means Times Gone By."

"Isn't that Casablanca?" Robin asked.

"That's AS Time GOES By."

"Oh. Well anyway..."

"We sing: 'Take a cup of kindness yet for times gone by.'"

"Most people I know sing ♪-dum-dum-de-dum-dum-DUM-dedum, FOR AU-ULD LAND SYNE-♪."

"Then the next verse, the friends take hands and drink 'a right guid-willie waught.'"

"Mm. Very interesting. So anyway..."

"...which'd be a drink. My Mum'd say that's a mite more important in the highlands than a cup'o'kindness."

"Got it, 'a right guid-willie waught.' So ANYWAY—looks like the crowd's thinning out down there."

"♪-But seas between us braid hae roar'd, Sin auld lang syne... ♪ "

"We're singing now? Steph, I was just making a joke."

"Means ♪-Seas between us, broad, have roared, since Times Gone By-♪..."

The world of the Batman was complicated with a variety of wildly-clad, hyperactive characters with sinister intentions. Alfred's world was not and he planned to keep it that way.

He was happy—no man more so—that Dick and Barbara had at last taken the great step of becoming engaged. But that did not call for the introduction into their lives of a wildly-clad, hyperactive character with sinister intentions. That did not call for the introduction of Mr. Corry.

Mr. Corry was a wedding planner. A Wedding Planner. A dark foreboding shuddered through his system at the mere thought of the words. Dear Miss Gordon, she was an outsider in the world of old Gotham society. She didn't know yet, poor thing. Things like that were not done, not at this level.

Dick might be a Flying Grayson, the former Robin, and Nightwing the scourge of Bludhaven, but he was also the son of Bruce Wayne... of the East Egg Waynes... Thomas's boy, and Martha's, who was a Van Giesen and a cousin to the Bassets.

There were forms to be observed. It was that simple.

Alfred expected resistance on this point from the younger generations that didn't think such things mattered. He expected it from Barbara; he expected it from Dick, and he expected it from Bruce—Bruce who thought nothing of disgracing his family name, appearing as a fop and a rake at the slightest provocation.

Well, Alfred got the expected resistance from Barbara. And from Dick, although that didn't count. For as the boy was soon to discover, the groom's opinion on any subject from the dress to the seating arrangements ranks right up there with that of the family dog.

But Alfred was pleased to find an unexpected ally in Bruce. Bruce wanted to make a fuss. He hadn't been much of a father to Dick, especially since the boy had grown up. No support for his transition from Robin to Nightwing, no show of pride for his leadership of the Titans. It was time to make amends, and this was how he would do it: a big announcement, a big party, a big splash—something to make the papers and set the social world on its ear. Dick was his son, and Bruce Wayne was going to say so in as grand and public a manner as possible. So there.

The more Alfred hovered around the murmured conversations about flowers, music and color schemes, the more encouraging glances he perceived from Bruce. When Alfred ventured to cough at a particularly objectionable suggestion, he perceived a nod from his employer. When he actually suggested to Barbara that he be allowed to make some calls of inquiry, he saw an out and out smile from Bruce. By New Year's Day, the name of Mr. Corry was heard no more at Wayne Manor, and Alfred was firmly in command of the Gordon-Grayson nuptials.

No one involved in this glittering but unremarkable story so far could realize that Talia Head, a.k.a. Talia Al Ghul, daughter of Ra's Al Ghul The Demon's Head, had long ago put feelers in place to notify her if someone at Wayne Manor ever made the inquiries Alfred was now making about diamond solitaires, tiered cakes, engraved invitations, photographers, flowers, musicians, caterers, and couturiers...

### **January 2nd, A-minus 19**

Dick sorted through an unusually thick stack of mail. He'd spent days at a time in Gotham before...

bill, bill, bill

...just not recently. There must have been this much mail waiting for him in the past...

flyer, bill, 500 free hours of AOL, Christmas card from "Aunt Kate" (do I have an Aunt Kate?)

...he just didn't remember it that way since he'd been confining himself to the family dinner/patrol, one-night-only visits.

The drive back to Bludhaven was quiet time, time alone in his head, the first chance he'd had to really think since popping the question. It didn't happen the way he'd planned it. It wasn't a story they could tell their friends; they'd have to fabricate something suitably romantic later. More lies. There was no aspect of their lives that wasn't tied up in lies and cover stories. Sometimes it bothered him. But at least it was done. He and Barbara were engaged to be married.

Dick wasn't aware that he'd had 'expectations' until they weren't met. It took so much to work himself up to that proposal. It was the first time letting go of the trapeze, the first time putting on the mask as Robin, first time having sex, nothing was supposed to be the same after that. But he was the same. Barbara was the same. It was kind of surprising. They had lots more to talk about now. Stupid as it sounded, he hadn't fully realized to get to married you have to go through the wedding. (And he sure didn't realize what the wedding entailed.) Yes, they had a lot to talk about now, but they were still Dick and Barbara, and the way they were together hadn't really changed.

1000 hours of AOL plus free digital camera!...

... and a slip of blue paper:

"Dick, Not alone this week are you? Come have a slice of plum pudding at your neighbor's. Clancy"

Oh dear.

And another one:

"Guess you had plans. Merry Christmas Dick. Clancy"

Then a coupon book, a W2, and another sheet of blue. This one smelled faintly of red wine:

"I get it you're in Gotham. Give 'em all my best best- well you can't do that because you'll be back when you read this. Clanc"

and finally:

"If you're back, come have a glass of champagne with your neighbor. Happy New Year. Clancy."

Oh hell.

It was a flirtation—a harmless flirtation. She was his landlady, she happened to live next door, she was about his age—but it didn't mean anything. It was just fun. Why do people have to assume any contact between an unattached male and female is some big romantic thing? Hell-o-hell-o-hell... People do get sentimental on the holidays though, don't they? And lonely. Oh man. He had to fix this...

### **January 3rd, A-minus 18**

"Here it comes," Selina whispered, "the death rattle."

On the stage far below, the vengeful princess Amneris, third side of the most powerful love triangle in opera, pleaded (in Verdi's most intense writing for a mezzo-soprano) with the Egyptian priests to spare her lover Radames, whose fate she had already sealed in a fit of jealousy over his love for Aida.

"Selina's Operatic Rule #4: whoever make a noise like that will not be getting the guy in the end."

Bruce smiled. It was the last act, and the couple had relocated at intermission. He noted with amusement that, while Selina understood opera well and was clearly enjoying it very much, she did not approach it with the reverence of a typical opera fan. She would whisper only occasional comments in the theatre, but here on the roof she was free to let herself go.

Here on the roof... It wasn't so very long ago that he met her here as Batman.

It was a crazy risk to take, unlike him—inviting her like that.

*You always get to pick the time and place. That's patently unfair.*

*9PM. Roof of the opera house.*

*I'll be there if you will, unless a real crime intervenes.*

Inviting her to meet in costume but off the clock, so to speak. No crime for either of them to hide behind. How did he ever manage to do it? How did he ever pull himself out of the quagmire of guilt, denial and self-righteous posturing he'd worked himself into?

"I am vengeance, I am justice, I am...in desperate need of a personality transplant."

That was how. Her show—where she'd said it out loud: they wanted each other. She said it out loud, and the universe didn't collapse on itself. Then that strange epilogue at the museum. He said it. Well not exactly, but he'd said "This isn't a burglary, it's a date." He alluded openly to the fact that he was a man and she was a woman and there was something between them that had nothing to do with bats, cats, or crime. And again the universe didn't implode. He smiled at her that night—and the gaping void of nothingness didn't rise like a great anti-matter serpent and swallow the cosmos whole.

That was all it took: that little pin-prick. That led to the note, which led to this very roof, which led to all the rest.

"She has the audacity to act disappointed now," Selina was narrating again. The defeated Amneris mourned over the sealed tomb in which Radames was buried alive and where his true love, Aida, had hidden herself in order to die with him.

"Remind you of any jealous deranged hypocrites you know?" she added, but that wasn't why Bruce grimaced. He was remembering this duet from that night—"Nice choice of music for a first date, stud."

It sure was: Rigoletto, Traviata, Aida, La Forza del Destino, Un Ballo in Maschera. All the loves sung of that night ended badly. What a spectacularly bad omen for a first date. Well not exactly a date, and not exactly their first—but still.

### **January 6th, A-minus 15**

Dick's hands shook. Nightwing! Black Belt! Acrobat since age 4! Trapeze artist since age 6! And his hands shook trying to dial the freaking phone. He had to talk to Barbara—or maybe Bruce first. Get some advice from the more experienced thoughtless playboy asinine womanizer shithead—he had to fucking fix this.

"Your decorator called."

After leaving those four heart-breaking notes over the holidays, that was Clancy's sole comment when she saw him again. Not the slightest reference to plum pudding, Gotham, or New Year's Eve. "Your decorator called."

He didn't have a decorator.

"From Gotham. Getting mighty fancy on us, Mr. Dick. Getting a bigshot city decorator."



*This isn't opera, this is life.  
Why should love have to be tragic?  
—Langford Wilson, BURN THIS*

### **January 7th, A-minus 14**

The degree— to which Batman was genuinely troubled may be gauged by the fact that he cut the final turn from the public road onto the Wayne property so short that the left rear tire flattened a miniature dogwood, turfed a patch of azaleas, and ultimately failed to set off the electric eye. Having failed to disable the hologram that concealed the cave's main entrance, he drove through what appeared to be a wall of solid rock without batting an eye.

He removed the costume like a man in a trance, then stood in the costume vault for a full minute, staring at nothing. To conceal his preoccupation, if only from himself, he took a shower in the cave before changing into Bruce Wayne's sweater and slacks and ascending, reluctantly, to the manor. Selina would be there by now—and Dick—and Barbara. Saturday. Family dinner. Why did it have to be tonight? He needed her alone. And Dick would be so damn amused if he asked to talk to her privately. Dick's flippant amusement was one thing he didn't need right now.

There had been a cat crime at the historical museum, a cat's eye crown set with onyx and lapis lazuli. Catwoman hadn't done it; that was obvious. Even Bullock knew it. The crown was, in all probability, less than 300 years old, made to cash in on an 18th Century fad for ancient artifacts. The same museum held far more valuable pieces; some Roman mosaics depicting leopards in the coliseum were valued at \$450,000. The crown was, at best, worth \$15,000. If he knew that, Selina did. Her guilt or innocence wasn't the issue.

The issue was that he knew—KNEW—she was innocent before he'd heard the facts of the case. It WAS NOT POSSIBLE that she had done it, no more so than that Dick or Tim or Alfred could have done it. He trusted her, that was the issue, trusted her absolutely.

He'd thought love was the big word. It was a big, yes; hell, when it finally came along it was monumental. But this was something more. This was his jugular exposed, his neck on the chopping block—total naked vulnerability. He trusted her. Jesus Christ, how did this happen?

They had to slow down, that's all there was to it. The situation had gotten completely out of control.

Barbara had been busy. After selecting Dick's new couch she looked at carpeting, chairs, endtables, wallpaper, plants, pictures—the works. She wanted to surprise him, set it up while he was away. She called his landlady to find out about wheelchair access at his building. But Barbara was no decorator. She was Oracle, she was once Batgirl, and she was a policeman's daughter. She could read people. Something in Clancy's manner, her voice when she said Dick's name, it was a dead giveaway.

This was so much worse than Huntress. A one-time bit of passion between costumed identities was one thing. An ongoing flirtation, if not an intimate friendship, if not more, with Dick, that was another matter entirely.

And she hadn't known about this one.

Alfred repeated that he was not aware of any change in plans.

Bruce's continued absence from "Family Dinner" might be explained by the signal that had appeared just at dusk. But it was turned off over two hours ago and he still hadn't returned.

Dick was a no-show and so was Barbara.

To be honest, I wasn't that heartbroken about Dick & Barbara. I was getting a little uncomfortable with them lately, particularly the bride-to-be. Since the engagement, Barbara seems to want a 'girlfriend'—which would be fine, except... she's asking way too many questions like: if they have the wedding at the manor, what colors would be good in the great hall?

And then if maybe I don't want to voice an opinion about a color scheme for a freaking WEDDING in the great hall of WAYNE MANOR (for godssake Barbara!), then I get: "Oh come on, don't look at me like that, Selina. You have good taste—Or the garden! Wouldn't the garden be perfect in the springtime?"

Plus, okay, maybe I'm still smarting from having stepped into that trap in the delicate matter of the Bridal Registry.

Alfred said register at Bergdorf's: silver, crystal, china. Barbara thought Bergdorf's was stuffy. Bruce grunted something about listening to Alfred. Dick said who cares. And then—then—all four of them turned and looked at me.

Now, okay, a lot has changed in recent months, but still. Remember me, lady with the whip? Meow? We can never get past smoldering looks 'cause you're a thief and I'm Batman? REMEMBER THAT SHIT? I don't think I'm the one that should be stuck breaking deadlocks because the bat family can't reach a consensus.

I didn't say any of that, of course. I went and powdered my nose. But Barb followed me! A little estrogen solidarity, she asked for.

Okay then, I told her: Marveck's on 49th. Gorgeous stuff, tasteful, quality, but not stuffy.

And she cackled. No "Wonderful, thank you so much!" No "estrogen solidarity." She indulged in one of the most revolting cackles of triumph I have ever heard in my life—and I've heard Joker! This was a spectacle. It echoed through the halls of the manor. Dick heard it, Bruce heard it, and worst of all, Alfred heard it. (I don't sweat pissing off Nightwing or Batman, but Alfred? I may be brash, but kitty isn't crazy.)

So I tried to concoct a nice, respectable, Catwoman reason for knowing about Marveck's.

"Couples leave town right after the wedding," I told her, "leaving an unoccupied condo full of gifts. A Bridal Registry is like a thief's yellow pages."

Maybe not brilliant, but plausible, don't you think? I really think a 'girlfriend' should have backed me up here, but ol' Barb cackled even louder. Estrogen solidarity indeed.

No modern woman likes to admit to thinking about this stuff. It's not important after all. Marveck's happens to have nice china and crystal—and they happen to have a bridal registry. I don't know why I retained that little bit of information, but I did. Sue me.

"None of them called?" Selina asked with a touch of that hardness Alfred had once assumed was her 'Catwoman' voice.

"No Ma'am, er Miss." Alfred had never encountered 'Catwoman,' so it was a normal assumption at first. But the more he saw of her at the manor—at the far end of the dinner table, sitting with Bruce by the fire, sparring with Bruce by the fire—Alfred was beginning to hear something else, a similarity to the late Mrs. Wayne.

If Bruce was a forceful personality, it could be fairly stated that Martha Wayne was a force of nature. That's not to say she was shrewish, but she was strong and confident, as the daughters of those founding families tend to be. Like Bruce, she felt deeply and had strong views about the way things should be.

Also like Bruce, if she latched onto something, she committed totally: 10,000%. That 10,000% was a concept not recognized, nor even possible in any type of mathematics would not deter her one bit. Hospital needed a Neo-Natal wing and Mrs. Wayne was on the job: organized 3 balls in 7 months, made the rounds of all the industrialists before corporate donations were a common practice. She preyed mercilessly on the social climbers, dangling invitations to the Wayne Garden Party and the Debutante Cotillion. If only they could give enough to get onto that committee with her their place in Society was assured....

It was she, Alfred knew, who was responsible for the Wayne name on all those libraries, museums and university buildings. Thomas would have written a check quietly, but Martha! Martha wanted to use the ambitions of the nouveau riche the same way Bruce would one day use fear in criminals. There was the same kernel of ruthlessness behind it, any means to the end: There was only so much one family could do on their own, but if their donations could motivate others to give, that's what they needed to be doing. Hence, ultimately, the Wayne Foundation.

It was also Martha that instilled a great sense of responsibility in Bruce. "The more you are blessed with," she would say, "the more you need to give back." Bruce was to inherit a great fortune, a name that brought influence. She could see from the similarity to Thomas that he would be handsome, and even by age six it was clear that he was fiercely intelligent. He'd been given so much, she instilled this sense of noblesse oblige, a responsibility to give back, which—although she certainly never intended it—contributed more than a little to his tremendous sense of guilt.

Batman found a way to postpone Bruce's return to the manor: It was a cat-crime. It was a frame-up. And there was one particular person that would want to harm Selina—one who, still on the outs with her father, would not have access to subtler means of making trouble.

Bruce sat at his workstation and pulled up the file on Ra's Al Ghul, then entered a secondary code that accessed his private file on Talia.

Out of habit he avoided looking at the picture and concentrated his attention on the text. Scrolling past the introductory facts, dates, and places, his stomach tightened as he neared his observations and analysis in the fields below.

The first phrase that popped out at him was "genuinely torn between me and her father..." It struck him that that wasn't entirely accurate. She chose her father every time. She always said she felt bad about it, but that's not being 'torn,' that's disappointment that she couldn't have her cake and eat it too.

"Divided loyalties..." Again, it seemed a poor choice of words. Loyalty was a free and independent being's conscious choice, a choice to stand by a friend or a cause, come what may. It was a commitment of strength and character. Passively staying with a tyrant because you're conditioned to be a submissive little lotus blossom, that is neither free nor choice nor strength nor character.

Bruce glanced absent-mindedly at the photo, then kicked himself for the slip. Her image would suck him in now, silencing his doubts in spite of everything...

Except it didn't.

He saw a lovely and exotic face, a face he knew—that was all. It had no power over him. He saw a woman that would caress his cheek instead of scratching it and call him 'Beloved' instead of 'judgmental jackass'—and would leave him, hurt and defeated and alone.

"Are you that stupid or just self-destructive?" The voice was so soft, Bruce thought for a moment it was his own—until the hand reached around and snapped off the monitor.

Dick was livid.

He'd opted for "advice from the more experienced playboy womanizer" and he'd come to Bruce—but the Bruce that advised him on the proposal dinner, the Bruce who pulled it together and was finally making a life with Selina. Not this schmuck sitting alone in the Batcave mooning over Talia's photograph!

"She's the best thing that ever happened to you," he screamed. "How can you jeopardize that? How can you even think about ruining it for some meaningless flirtation with... that... psychotic, shallow, obsessive, treacherous daughter of a Fu Manchu clone!"

Dick had never hidden his contempt for Talia or for Bruce's weakness for her. Defensive, Bruce had always shutdown these outbursts with brutal finality.

On this occasion, however, there were no tender thoughts to be defensive about. He was clear-headed enough to see as Batman saw. He noted the words Dick spoke and the telling pauses... "the best thing that ever happened to you... how can you jeopardize that... for a meaningless flirtation with -pause- treacherous daughter of Fu Manchu" (Dick's usual tirade about Talia).

Instead of Batman's most ominous growl, it was a strangely tentative voice that finally spoke.

"Dick, has something happened between you and Barbara?"

The Sensei said those moments of understanding never last. He said it's easy to forget our times of knowing, to believe we made an error at the very moment we were truly wise. He said I would suffer this more than most, as I am prone to assume the worst of myself.

Of course, the Sensei never understood. He knew I was there to get something. He knew I could only go along with the philosophy to get what I needed. The training said the hate, the fear, the pain disrupted the natural flow of Ki. You must let go of these to connect with the Oneness of Being. I can put myself into that mindset to workout and to fight, but I can't live there. I cannot give myself over to the ebb and flow of the universe. I can't stop hating. The Sensei knew that much—he made it clear that I wasn't fooling him—but he didn't understand. He thought I was stubborn. He thought I had a choice. He didn't understand that the world isn't like that, that you can't think that way and live in this world.

When I left, he said he'd lived in this world longer thinking his way than I had thinking mine. But his world isn't Gotham.

The moment didn't last.

Poor Dick.

I could see he was in pain. He hates Talia, yes, but that outburst wasn't meant for me. I tried to be there for once, to be understanding. And what did I get? "Bruce Wayne and his women... Batman and his women." My reputation was the cause of all his problems, like he's had nothing to do with this harem that's collected around him. When I was his age I was preparing, studying. I was in Tibet listening to the Sensei tell me the moments of understanding don't last.

"Damn it, boy," I snapped at him when I could stomach no more, "You want to be your own man, stop blaming everyone but yourself for what your life is."

That's how long the moment of understanding lasted.

Well, no one ever called me "Mr. Sensitivity."

It's done now. There's no taking it back.

Robin and Spoiler were young enough to still celebrate when they'd captured a name criminal, even one as inconsequential as The Mime. Nightwing found them near their favorite drivethru. Irked at the happy-couple appearance he perceived (though in fact, they were just patting themselves on the back), he was less than polite to Spoiler. He said he needed to talk to Robin on "family business" and turning his back on them for Robin to follow or not.

"Well, that was rude," Robin announced when he caught up with Wing.

"No hassles tonight, okay bro?" The weariness in his tone said it better than the words.

"Okay, Dr. Drake consulting. What's up?"

"You know what today is?"

"7th"

"Yeah. JANUARY 7th—fourteen days and counting. All the excitement with the engagement I forgot: Hell Month, bro."

"Shit. I forgot too."

"I just yelled at him."

"You what? Wha'd you go pick a fight for!"

"I FORGOT, OKAY. And I didn't PICK a fight, I had it thrust upon me. I found him hunched over his computer sighing over Talia's picture for chrissake—and Selina waiting upstairs!"

"I don't care what he was doing, you've got no business yelling at him at a time like this!"

"Do you think I don't know that!"

"Yeah. Well. Better to apologize now, you think, or wait 'til after?"

"I don't know. Better to get it over with I s'pose. Hey, did you ever warn Selina?"

"About Hell Month? No, did you?"

"Oh no."

The Sensei said those moments of understanding never last. He never mentioned that they might flicker out (or in) in the middle of a sentence. That you could go into a room thoroughly expecting to say one thing and suddenly find your mouth has been hijacked and you're saying something else entirely.

The situation with Selina was—is—completely out of control. And I was—I am—I will put a stop to it. It's just that, when I walked into the dining room and saw her, I realized there was the whole cat-crime thing to explain first. She had to be told, and it was going to be hard enough going into that while making it clear she was not a suspect and this was not a conversation with Batman... but we need to slow down. No. That just wouldn't work.

So I put it off. Yes, I put off saying "let's slow down," but that doesn't explain how I wound up saying the other.

"Sorry I took so long," it began.

"No problem," she said airily, "I just sat here watching the silver tarnish. Anything exciting in town?"

"No. Not really. Well, not exactly—"

"This sounds good already."

*My first mistake. I hedge and she gets excited. Like if I'm uncomfortable, it automatically means she's going to have fun. Impossible woman.*

"It's not what you would consider a big exciting case, no," I explained.

"What a curious formula of words."

*The gimlet look. She knew I was being evasive and she did—damn her—she did as she's always done. Stuck her hand on my chest and her tongue in my mouth and pulled whatever she wants out of my brain while all the blood is flowing elsewhere.*

"Don't... do that," I stammered.

*Never worked before. Didn't work now.* The voice in my ear was all hot breath:

"Why not?"

"This is serious," I said, pulling her arms off me and trying to step back. That never worked before either... but it never produced the look she gave me now. No playful pout, no 'claws are out' glare, no naughty grin, it was more... Jesus, what was that? Cold. Searching. Gears turning. Selina?

Without meaning to, I blurted it out.

"Something's happened—historical museum—a cat-crime."

The whatever-it-was look deepened into whatever-it-was squared—hurt, scared, indignant, I still don't know.

"I see."

"Look, I know you didn't do it. It's a non-issue, I swear. Even the police know—they knew before they called me..." I was throwing out too many words without thinking—not like me—but I had to make that look go away. "Selina, listen to me, this isn't a thing. I know you didn't do it."

"I heard you the first time."

What does that mean?

"What does THAT mean?"

"It's not like you to repeat yourself is all."

Oh.

"Oh."

"So what did the police want?"

"Hmph, kind of funny actually. New commissioner has political ambitions—doesn't want to honk off Bruce Wayne or his new girlfriend, so..."

She smiled. A good sign.

"...so they asked Batman to question me?" she said, showing she understood.

"Yep. Well not question-question. Just, 'do you know of any enemies that would want to set you up this way?'"

She gave a disgusted grin: "Yeah, head usher at the Hijinx Playhouse."

It was my turn to smile. She prattled on about how the ushers hated the part in her show where she walked through the audience on the armrests. I slid an arm around her waist and felt the tension ease out of my shoulders. It was over; we were going to be all right...

NO! This was not all right. This was not the status quo. 'All right' was not my relaxing because Kitten wasn't upset with me. 'All right' was not feeling good that Pussycat understands I'm not accusing her of anything. 'All right' was not trusting Catwoman so blindly and absolutely that she could destroy my world just by—

"Bruce?"

...just by...

"Bruce, you're holding on a little tight there, you want to let go."

...I looked down into those deep pools of green. Yes, she could destroy me. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't betray me, then leave me hurt and alone. She wasn't like Talia...

"I'm not kidding, let go."

hurt and alone. Why would I want that? Why did I ever think even for a moment...  
*Are you stupid or just self-destructive*, Dick had asked...

A blinding pain shot from my elbow to my wrist, and the arm fell open.

"Sorry about that, but I warned you."

I stared stupidly.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm sorry... Kitten... I just have... a lot on my mind right now."

“Yeah, I guess so.” The whatever-it-is look was back. “Give the demonspawn my best,” she said and started for the door.

The demonspawn...

“Talía?”

“You said her name during your little fit of catalepsy just then.”

The sound of her heels clicking towards the door was enough to snap me out of it. Selina wouldn’t leave me, I had said. That’s true... unless I drive her away.

I ran after her. I thought *‘out of control’ ‘jugular exposed’ ‘slow it down.’* I caught up with her—*‘neck on the chopping block’ ‘slow it down’*—I turned her to face me—*‘slow down’ ‘slow down’ ‘slow down’*—and I started to say it:

“After all we’ve been through, all that’s happened, not just the past year, but all of it... Selina, Selina how can you doubt that it’s you who... are the love of my life?”

*Life is what happens while you're trying to do something else.*

—John Lennon

**January 8<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 13**

There are women out there who find shoe shopping therapeutic. I am not one of them. The stress-reducing qualities of finding the perfect spectator pump with gunmetal heel just eludes me... Even on sale, even if you have the perfect handbag to go with them. I don't get the thrill; it's just plain nuts.

When I'm freaking out, I put on the catsuit. And before anybody says that's weird, I would ask them to step up and explain the shoe thing to my satisfaction. Then they can analyze Catwoman all they want.

I went back to the opera house tonight—and the museum—and the vault at the auction house. I guess I wanted to put the relationship into some kind of context or something. Who knows... 'Why' isn't a question I ask a lot in the catsuit.

I would have gone back to Bruce's safe, but it's a better than even chance that he would've found me and if he did, he'd think I wanted to play. I didn't. Not tonight. And not with him.

The love of my life?!?!?! Where did *THAT* come from? Where the fuck did that come from?

Right after the shoe thing, I'd like somebody to please explain how we got from 'the right to remain silent' to 'the love of my life' because that was *not* supposed to be possible.

I was breathing hard.

I'm not sure exactly what had me so... agitated?

Scared. The word is scared.

I've been playing with fire, not just for months but for years, and now it turned out this stuff I thought was flame retardant is, in fact, lighter fluid.

Nice bit of sophistry there, Selina. Now can you explain what you mean by it, or shall we go look for a nice patent leather slingback?

It was months ago we said 'I love you.' I took that plunge without even thinking... It was like a deep breath after climbing stairs. It was automatic. Easy. Painless. Since then I've been going along, letting myself be pulled along ...fun and sex... fun and sex... without thinking much about what it meant... fun and sex... Bat and Bruce... but...*THE LOVE OF MY LIFE?* Jesus, Bruce.

Wait a minute, stop right there—not Bruce, Batman! Let's try and remember this started with Batman.

*THE LOVE OF MY LIFE!* No pressure there, Stud.

That's like: 'the one,' your soulmate, your once in a lifetime chance to screw it up for good. *YOUR ONE AND ONLY SHOT!* Happiness, love, everafter, the music swells, the curtains close, and the credits roll, copyright Paramount 1956.

That's what doesn't happen.

That's what just isn't possible.

Batman and Catwoman? Maybe. Why not. We've done it. It's doable. But *THE LOVE OF MY LIFE?*

That doesn't happen to people like us.

We've got to slow down. Hell, we've got to back up.

A curious thing happened right then... Catwoman slapped me. Seems there's a line even I don't get to cross.

"FIRST," the cat in me hissed, "'people like us' are PEOPLE. What can happen to *them*, can happen to *us*. What you're describing may be rare—but it does happen occasionally. Every 10,000 couples or so somebody gets a shot at it. Sooner or later it was going to happen to someone in spandex—may as well be you. May as well be us."

*Yeah right, I thought, may as well be me that gets the rare chance to screw this up permanently.*

I'm not sure how she did it, but Catwoman uncoiled the whip. I shut up and listened.

"SECOND," she went on, "since when do we back down from a challenge? We don't fold when the stakes are high, do we? We raise the ante."

For the 65<sup>th</sup> time since January 1<sup>st</sup>, Moira Selmon muttered that they weren't paying her enough to put up with this shit. Then she reminded herself of her new year's resolution to stop swearing. Desperate for some act of defiance that wouldn't cost her her job, she opened up her screensaver and replaced LEXCORP: A BETTER VISION FOR A BETTER FUTURE with LEXCRAP: WHAT DOESN'T KILL ME MAKES ME STRONGER.

Lex Luthor, still the real CEO of LexCorp, had taken his private secretary and her staff to serve him in Washington. Moira was 'promoted' to serve as the stand-in's secretary. Moira had no problems with the word "secretary" as a job description, but she objected to it as a name. Yet Miss Head still addressed her this way occasionally—as did that caller. He of the unpronounceable name and the 10,000 rude messages.

*...: Secretary, please inform your mistress that she is to call me at once. ...*

*...: Secretary, inform Miss Al Ghul—What? No, I do not mean Miss Head, I mean Talia Al Ghul—that she is to contact me immediately. ...*

*...: As you still live, Secretary, I assume my messages are being delivered. Tell your mistress that I am most displeased that she continues to ignore me. She is to call at once. ...*

Finally Moira asserted herself. She told Miss Head that the days were passed when "typewriter" referred both to the machine and the woman who operated it. She would no longer answer to "Secretary" or deliver messages from anybody who called her that.

Two days later, Omar arrived. Omar was a courier. Not a deliveryman, a courier. Moira thought that sounded romantic, like something from a spy novel, until she heard Talia call him "Courier." Then she realized it was just FedEx for people like Miss Head who called people by their job titles.

This morning Miss Head was in a state before Omar even arrived with the week's worth of "Call Me-NOW" messages: Something in the papers, something she was expecting to find in the papers that wasn't there. Something about Gotham City.

Like any good secretary, Moira warned her fellow underling that 'The Suit' was in a foul mood. Omar didn't understand such warnings. It was his role to deliver his message if it meant his life. If his message displeased, that meant his life. If he returned an answer that displeased, that meant his life....

Omar had hoped for better things. Indeed, he was raised to be a soldier, to die for the Demon Head in battle, or even to be a palace guard and die defending his master's interests—but it wasn't to be. He was strong, but he was too short. A mere messenger, that was his fate.

He returned to his room at the Steven's Motel.

He had asked for simple lodgings, and they gave him this vast room all to himself. He said this was too much, he was a humble man—the boy at the desk now called him Mr. Humbleman, and he still had the vast room all to himself.

When his affair with Huntress came to light, Nightwing worked out his frustrations in a knockdown-dragout with Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn. No amount of psychobabble could substitute for a good adrenaline rush. Life and love were complicated; fight or flight was simple. Reducing himself to that primal core of instinct, blood and bile, that's what he needed. Except Batman had blocked that particular outlet for everybody just now.

It was Hell Month. Everybody knew it: every career criminal, every street thug, cop and stoolie, every drunken PI in a bad suit that could've staggered out of a cheesy film noir. Everybody knew in January, Batman went on some kind of crusade, probably a new resolve for the New Year or something. Whatever it was, you didn't want a piece of it. You just didn't. Crime went up in surrounding cities as crooks with bills to pay took their business elsewhere.

Only Nightwing, Alfred, and Robin knew the truth. Batman was inactive during the holidays. There was crime at that time of year, yes, but crime motivated by fear, not the kind he could discourage by instilling fear. The system had to deal with those criminals in its own way.

Batman returned to a full work schedule on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. The anniversary of his parents' death was January 21<sup>st</sup>. The period in-between these two dates was Hell Month, a time in which both Bruce and Batman became increasingly emotional, erratic and, if you were a criminal, dangerous.

Omar had continued to find the great city of Metropolis confusing. At dawn he would make his regular pilgrimage to LexCorp headquarters and deliver messages to the Great One's daughter. His duty done, he would return to his room until it was time to depart. On every visit to the LexCorp building, the handmaid smiled and talked with him as though he were an equal. One day she offered him 'coffee and a donut.'

Omar had not ventured into even fast-food restaurants. He was too low to take food prepared by others. He had subsisted thus far on microwave popcorn from the motel honor bar. But if it was presumptuous to pay others to prepare his food, it would be worse to refuse the handmaid's charity. He'd accepted the coffee and donut.

### January 15<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 6

The handmaid—no, that was wrong, not handmaid, “Miss Head’s secret... something”—Moira, had started introducing Omar to the delights of a great city. He had now experienced a donut, a movie, a basketball game, and the view from the observation deck at the Daily Planet. She also took him to “her gym” (better equipped than anything he had seen in the DEMON compound), and if on the next trip he could stay over the weekend, they would go to an amusement park.

Omar now considered delivery of messages to Talia as an unpleasant ordeal at the start of the day. When it was over, the day was his to wander, explore, and often to spend the lunch hour with Moira. They ate gyros in the plaza across from the LexCorp building, unaware they were watched from far above...

No sane being could say Superman was a coward.

A conversation with Bruce would be unpleasant, but that wouldn’t stop him if it were pressing. This was not. An agent of Ra’s Al Ghul was making regular visits to Metropolis. That alone wasn’t enough to warrant alerting Batman.

True, if it wasn’t Hell Month, he’d probably make the call anyway. But it was Hell Month. Who needed that.

Besides which, Superman was busy. Hell Month in Gotham meant more crime everywhere else.

The week saw an escalation in Bruce and Selina’s relationship that bore closer resemblance to a poker game than a romance. She treated her fears about “the love of my life” as a dare from her old adversary. She responded aggressively, moving some personal belongings into a drawer in his bedroom. He answered by giving her a workstation in the cave with a personal password. She took over a shelf in the bathroom. He gave her a hook in the costume vault. Just as they once set each other off violently, they were now daring each other with an outward show of a relationship growing more intimate.

The sex, however, was not growing more intimate—quite the reverse. Each had had a revelation about their relationship that made them gulp—their instinct was to slow down and instead they found themselves going faster. Apprehension and tension were a natural result and, because there was a game of Relationship Chicken being played, those feelings could find no outlet in daylight. They found expression in increasingly angry sex. The embrace that slammed against the wall, Selina chalked up to lust. The forceful landing on the floor -excessive passion. The thrusts that were more frustrated than tender awakened the cat. Selina was not one to become passive in the face of aggression. Her nails found scars on his back that might have been from Catwoman—or might have been anything. She taunted him. *“C’mon Dark Knight, I can take it. That the best you can do? Meow...”*

Alfred observed the domestic maneuvers: the shelf and the drawers and the hook, but knew nothing of the Bat and Cat game raging beneath the surface. He inadvertently added fuel to the fire when he began placing the day’s menus besides Selina’s place at breakfast.

That night, Selina was feeling more defensive than usual—Bruce had ‘love of my life,’ the accommodations in the cave, Barbara asking if Pachelbel’s Canon was too clichéd for a society wedding, and now Alfred positioning her as mistress of the house. She had some underthings in a drawer of his bureau and a bottle of moisturizer in the bathroom.

And it was her turn.

Catlike, feeling herself in an inferior position, she overcompensated. She searched for something deeply personal, not just intimacy, but vulnerability. She told him about her past...

It was true, what she’d answered when he first asked: She had no “origin” in the sense of one defining moment that made her Catwoman. But she hadn’t sprung out of the sidewalk at age 23 wearing a catsuit. She had a past. Now she told him what it was.

Bruce was stunned. It seemed to him this revelation must have taken the same resolve and soul-searching it took for him to tell about his parents. It required more than an empty gesture in answer. It needed more than some bauble he could buy with money... Well, there was one thing—and he knew it bothered her.

“There’s something I should tell you,” it began.

“Hm?” was the only encouragement he got. Selina was half-expecting a bat-like pronouncement that he already knew about her history.

“I think it’s time I tell you the truth about me and Talia.”

In the last moments observing a culprit, in that final second before Batman and Robin descend on their prey, there is an electric charge in the air which Dick once described as “fleas mating,” a silence that isn’t truly silent, an intense emptiness that draws attention to the slightest sound.

“I think it’s time I tell you the truth about me and Talia,” Bruce had said. And a fleas mating silence dropped like a tarp over the drawing room.

The silence continued until the fleas might be raising a family...

This was going to be a very sore subject, and Bruce hadn’t rehearsed what he would say. He paused to choose his words, and Batman’s danger-signals lit up the control panel.

*Just spit something out, Damn it!* his thoughts roared *Saying the name and letting it lay there is playing with gasoline and matches.*

*‘Did I mention you’re the love of my life,’* some corner of his brain suggested. *NO stalling for time!* Batman screamed, *Just spit it out and stop trying to be clever.*

“I never loved her.”

Selina stared.

The unbidden image that came to her was Rhett and Scarlett—“Ah nevah loved Ashley...not *really*.” Surprisingly, Selina found herself cast as Rhett: “Well you’ve certainly done a remarkable imitation up ‘til now.”

Bruce knew none of this, he just saw her staring quietly, so he continued.

“She was...intriguing, beautiful, fascinating. I won’t pretend otherwise.”

“The bad girl thing,” Selina whispered softly, almost seductively, looking away into the fire.

"Maybe," he admitted. "Maybe she kept insisting we were in love so often that I let myself believe it a little."

She looked up skeptically. He explained.

"I think we all buy into the idea of tragic star-crossed lovers a little. That two people who are so totally wrong for each other must share some kind of doomed passion."

"So she said you were Romeo and Juliet, and you bought it, is that what you're saying?"

Bruce sighed. He never should have begun this without working out what to say.

"Look, Talia comes from a world of arranged marriages: you 'love' who you're told to. So, for her, this constant yakking about it is—"

The tension broke suddenly as Selina stopped him with a gentle touch on the wrist and an enormous grin:

"Yakking?"

"Constant."

He went on, unaware that it was the choice of words and not the concept she questioned:

"She has to say 'Beloved' at least four times in a typical paragraph. Haven't you ever noticed, forty percent of our conversation has to be her pining how in love we are and she's my destiny."

He was stopped this time by a malevolent glare.

"No," Selina said flatly, "I've never actually had occasion to do a Beloved-count in your conversations with the demonspawn."

In Bruce's mind, the glare from Selina wasn't half as threatening as the one from Batman. If he didn't pull out of this, but fast, he'd be sent to the showers and Batman would finish the conversation himself.

"What I mean is: she thinks declaring herself my 'great love' will make it so. She wants a way out with her father and thinks I'm it—so she's decided she 'loves me' and she thinks she can impose what she wants on reality. If she just says it often enough, it'll be true."

The glare softened a little. He was getting through.

"Why are you telling me this?" Selina asked gently.

"I don't know. Needed to be said, I think, after..."

"...after 'the love of my life?'"

"Yeah, that was...that was... ah..." Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose as though trying to squeeze the thought out. "That was more the kind of thing she'd say. It's not my style."

"Oh, I noticed that immediately," Selina commented with some flippancy.

Bruce smirked.

He was about to remark on the difference. With Selina—with Catwoman—their feelings were more evident the more they denied them. He never got to say it, because her demeanor changed abruptly...

"Wait a minute, let me get this straight: you callously encouraged that pitiful little twit's deluded fantasies, which you didn't fully believe in yourself—Why? To keep a foot in the door at DEMON HQ?"

Put that way, it sounded cruel...

Batman could be cruel.

He would use a criminal's fear for his own ends, and he would use this one's romantic obsessions. He *did* try to hide it from himself with the notion that he might truly love her—but that illusion was no longer possible. He was in a real and loving relationship that made him happy; it was impossible to not see the sick, dysfunctional one with Talia for what it was.

Selina's remark still hung in the air:

"You callously encouraged that pitiful twit's deluded fantasies, which you didn't fully believe in yourself?"

Reluctantly, he nodded.

"You preyed on that dimwit's credulous simplicity?"

Ashamed, he nodded again.

"You slut."

He glanced up.

She was joking.

Impossible woman.

"You said it yourself, once," Bruce groped for something to say and stumbled over the truth. "I'll use anyone or anything to achieve the goal."

"You led her on."

"I did very little leading on. I may not contradict her much but that's not the same as actually initiating..." He stopped at a pair of familiar green eyes reveling in his discomfort. It struck a chord: "Why am I explaining this to you of all people." He was smiling now, and got a smile in return.

"Amoral jackass," she teased.

"Judgmental bitch."



*No matter what the future brings...*  
— AS TIME GOES BY, Casablanca

### **January 16<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 5**

Nightwing was desperate for some action. The mind-numbing deconstruction of thoughts and feelings past was making his teeth hurt. He longed to sink his fist into the soft solar plexus of a goon that deserved it.

He didn't want to ask Babs for a lead, however.

He decided he could do so indirectly through Robin. Making up for his previous rudeness, he stoically let Spoiler finish her explanation that the language of the famous Robert Burns version of Auld Lang Syne is more sophisticated and elegant than the original folk song would have been...

When she finished, Nightwing tentatively asked his favor: Could they call Oracle and learn the whereabouts of a good old-fashioned brawl?

They did. But by the time Nightwing arrived, the last guy standing was booked for drunk and disorderly.

Robin and Spoiler called in again. This time Nightwing promised to take over their patrol on Valentine's Day.

That call sent him to the docks—where an illegal shipment of drugs turned out to be an illegal shipment of Cuban refugees. INS agents were in place and the bust promised more red tape than bloodied lips.

On the third return to Robin and Spoiler, they were waiting with a list of demands: Nightwing would have Spoiler's motorcycle detailed, get them tickets to the U2 concert at the Garden, next time Big-B called a 'be here unless you're dead' meeting, 'Wing would get them out of it. And oh yes, if THIS call didn't pan out and he came back a fourth time tonight, he would bring a double order of hot wings from WingDings, 2 diet sodas, and a mocha shake.

He agreed. It didn't matter; he was passed caring.

The final address brought him to a West Side rooftop where, instead of any visible crime scene, he observed a distant flash of light. Flash, flash, flicker, flash flicker—it was a modified Morse Code only the bat-family used.

S-I-L-L-Y-B-I-R-D---Y---D-I-D-N-T---U---C-A-L-L---Y-O-U-R-S-E-L-F

Can't pull one over on the all-seeing Oracle.

Sillybird?

Sensing—hoping—that maybe he wasn't in as much trouble as he'd thought, Nightwing shot a line and swung in the direction of Barbara's apartment.

It's been wisely observed that, while Bruce was at the core of Hell-Month, he seemed less aware of it than others around him. Those who knew only Bruce Wayne knew he was bad-tempered. Those who knew he was Batman knew he was more brutal. All he knew was that he hurt. As the day approached, he remembered more often that it was coming, and his stomach would churn and he'd push the thought away. Then he'd

look at it, lurking in some corner of his mind. Ugly and foul. Waiting for its moment to return.

Then he would snap at Alfred or snap some thug's wrist. It was all the same, a reflex. Hurt for hurt. Pain for pain.

The foul thing was never deterred. He couldn't hurt it. Couldn't frighten it. It was. His parents were dead. He saw them die and that left him this wretched, driven, tormented... Batman.

He clenched and unclenched his fist reflexively.

Dick was avoiding him since the fight in the cave.

Alfred was walking on eggshells.

Tim was avoiding him *and* walking on eggshells.

Lucius was sending e-mails instead of meeting in person.

Selina stood him up at d'Annunzio's.

He clenched his fist again...

He told her the truth about Talia. Maybe he should have told her the truth about her instead. What was the more important revelation: that this nothing, insignificant dalliance in his past was a nothing, insignificant dalliance, or that he trusted her?

He unclenched his fist ...it was stiff and sore. And it ached to punch something.

In the four minutes between the invitation addressing him as "Sillybird" and reaching Barbara's terrace, Nightwing reconsidered his position:

He was not in trouble with Barbara. The girl could be prickly, sarcastic and even acid-tongued, but she would not summon him to an ass-chewing with a teasing endearment like "Sillybird."

Why did he think he was in trouble, anyway? Felon's guilt, maybe. He felt like a heel when he saw those notes from Clancy because it looked like maybe she read more into their flirting than he'd ever intended.

But he hadn't done anything wrong.

Had he?

So the women talked? So what? That didn't mean he was in trouble...

It was awful to think he might have hurt Barbara—it was awful the way he turned right around and attacked Bruce. "Okay," he thought, "screwing up a bit lately, and that's why I'm making mountains out of molehills. Barbara talked to Clancy, Clancy talked to Barbara. No big."

He opened the terrace door and removed his mask as he entered Barbara's apartment. He was Dick here, not Nightwing. Bruce taught him the importance of those gestures from the first training sessions in the cave. Mask on was Robin/mask off was Dick. It was part of the discipline, but it was also a courtesy to him and to Alfred.

Barbara acknowledged his arrival with a raised hand, but kept her back to him and went on typing. It occurred to him that she seldom left her workstation during these visits, seldom powered down the monitor and stopped being Oracle.

"Barb, I'd like to talk. You think maybe..." He let the sentence trail off, expecting a muttered complaint.

Instead she turned from the keyboard with a warm smile and chirped: "I guess Gotham and cyberspace can spare me for a night. Howya doin, Studmuffin."

He beamed.

"That's the gal I fell in love with—I don't get to see enough of you."

The Clancy issue was dispensed with in exactly seven sentences: Barbara wasn't a psychotic demonspawn, after all. She wasn't thrilled when she realized his landlady had more than a professional interest in Dick, but she accepted his assurance that there was nothing deeper or warmer than ordinary friendship. They ordered takeout, and popped Casablanca into the VCR.

Abruptly, after Ingrid Bergman and not Humphrey Bogart urged Sam to play *As Time Goes By*, Barbara snapped off the television.

"What do you mean, you don't get to see enough of her?"

Dick blinked.

"Um, huh?"

"You said 'that's the gal I fell in love with, I don't get to see enough of her.'"

"Did I say that? Well, I guess I meant—I don't know, I meant—you were so cute and smiling and happy to see me—"

"Whereas I'm usually what?"

Now, Dick realized, he was in trouble...

All right, he decided, if he was going to be in trouble, let it be for something he really felt and not for some wild misunderstanding about Clancy: He was in trouble—or expecting to be in trouble—more often than he'd like. Barbara was crusty, prickly, sarcastic, dyspeptic, curmudgeonly and downright bitchy more often than not. She didn't used to be this way.

"Before the chair," she whispered so low he didn't hear it.

"I know that girl is still in there," he was saying, "under all the porcupine needles. And I'm always looking for her. But..."

"But instead you're stuck with me," Barbara spat bitterly. Bitter was the last thing she wanted to be.

She wanted people, she wanted Dick especially, to forget the chair, to forget what happened with the Joker...to see *HER*. So she acted strong, invulnerable. And too often, it only made them more conscious of all that had happened to her, of how much she'd changed.

"I can't be that girl anymore, Dick. She's gone. Joker killed her." She removed the locket and held it out. "If that's who you want to marry, you should take this back and just..."

"Whoa, whoa, waitaminute, stop, slowdown, NO...I said 'that's the girl I fell in love with.' *SHE* is *YOU*, Barbara. You-past but still you. I asked You-present to marry me and that means all of you: you then, you now, and you every possible you-future. I'm pretty sure that's in the contract somewhere: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health. That means whatever might happen, whatever we might become, we're a set now. That's the deal." He took the locket from her hand and held the chain up, poised to lower back around her head. "You up for it?"

Selina awoke uneasily with no memory of having gone to sleep. That was never a good sign in Gotham City. It was even worse if one woke up *not* in Gotham City but in a private plane 30,000 feet over the China Sea.

By the time the plane landed in Mongolia, one might figure things were as bad as they were going to get. But then if one found out their host was Ra's Al Ghul, they might consider that things could, in fact, get worse.

This was Selina's thought. She delivered a glare that would have reduced Batman to ash. Ra's appeared not to notice, then asked if she was partial to venison or game.

For someone like Selina, it was a bit of a letdown. Brought before the evil one himself, the great Ra's al Ghul, practically immortal, megalomaniac, father of the demonspawn, damn near took out the entire JLA—and he asked “the chicken or the beef?”

*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child!*  
—King Lear

#### January 17<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 4

"I told ya all I know, I sweulgh—" Snook's naturally raspy wheeze was already growing thick with blood and snot when this last blow doubled him over, retching hopelessly. "I told ya everything," he whined. "Just let me die now."

The gloved fist that held him by his hair released it abruptly and Snook crumpled into a whimpering ball. Batman thought it would be a kindness to deliver a final nerve pinch and give the miserable snitch a few hours of oblivion. He was halted by a dark boot positioned between him and the cowering Snook.

"You mind telling me what you're doing here?" Nightwing asked simply. "Snook's a very accommodating fellow in the normal course of things, aren't you, buddy. It isn't necessary to—" as he moved away, Batman delivered a brutal kick, knocking Snook into the wall.

"-to do that," Nightwing concluded. Dick had screwed up Hell Month right out of the chute, and another scene with Bruce was the last thing he wanted. A scene with Batman was the *very* last thing he wanted. But he couldn't overlook this. Hell Month was Hell Month, and the Gotham stooges might be in hiding, but that did not justify Batman coming to Bludhaven and beating his best snitch nearly into a coma.

"Look what you've done there, that arm—that's 14 stitches at least—that *I'm* gonna be paying for."

Batman looked at Nightwing defiantly. With frightening economy of movement his arm shot out and lifted the helpless Snook off the ground, dragging a bleeding arm along the ragged brick wall until it was probably cut open to 16 or 18 stitches and looked even worse.

"WHAT GIVES?" Nightwing screamed.

"Nothing that concerns you. Stay out of it," was the only reply.

"Happy to," Nightwing answered. "Just keep it out of my town."

Batman glared.

Nightwing glared.

Batman kicked Snook into the wall again. Glared again. And vanished.

"January 17<sup>th</sup>," Nightwing muttered. "A-minus 4."

The absence of a third place at Ra's al Ghul's dinner table assured Selina that Talia would not be joining them. All the evidence seemed to confirm Ra's assertions that his daughter was not in residence at the compound, that she had no role in his present operations, and that they were, in fact, not on speaking terms at the present time.

It sounded juicy: Geraldo in Hell. Today on Sally Jessie Raphael, family squabbles among the undead. "My daughter let my enemy out of his holding cell and now he's stymied my plans to conquer the earth." But Selina couldn't get to any of these juicy details because Ra's wouldn't get past the part where Talia didn't return his phone calls.

Selina eyed her host, trying to get a handle on him. It was cute in a way, the megalomaniac complaining that his daughter never called, never wrote, the criminal mastermind that couldn't get a phone message past a secretary.... Still, this man was a dangerous power. Everybody said so.

Well, not quite *everybody*. Joker always said Ra's was an overrated hairdo. Most chalked it up to jealousy: there were those who said Ra's and not Joker was Batman's greatest foe, and Joker took that kind of thing personally. Nevertheless, Selina thought, the clown might just have a point on this one. He might even have lowballed it. What had Ra's accomplished, really? His most distinguishing feature as a Rogue was that he was his daughter's father. That and being older than dirt. Oh, there's a leader for the resume: remembers when turbans were the big new thing.

Selina smirked at this thought. Then, noticing that Ra's was looking at her, she let the smirk morph easily into a smile and nodded at the pheasant. Ra's smiled back, and Selina was satisfied. He was another rogue, and he could be handled like the others could. This one prided himself on being more civilized than common brawling villains.

"Come now, Catwoman," he had said "you're not going to be priggish like the heroes, are you, and insist on a dank cell in the basement. You're to be my guest for the few hours or days until the Detective arrives. You may as well enjoy a proper bedroom and a good meal."

"All right, then," Selina had thought, "humor him and handle him." She was not one to insist on a dank cell in what Ra's called the basement but she was sure anyone else would call a dungeon. He wanted to treat this like a dinner party instead of a kidnapping, that'd be just fine. Pass the potatoes, father of demonspawn.

"An emissary of Ra's Al Ghul has been in and out of Metropolis at least a dozen times this year! Did you NOT KNOW, or did you NOT THINK IT WAS WORTH MENTIONING!"

Superman disliked confrontations, particularly with colleagues. Man of Steel Invulnerability notwithstanding, he was raised by soft-spoken farmers who taught him that reasonable people could talk out their differences without resorting to:

"I LIKE TO THINK THAT IF SOME FLUNKY OF LUTHOR'S STARTED RUNNING A UPS SERVICE OUT OF GOTHAM, I WOULD GIVE YOU A HEADS UP!"

"No," Superman answered carefully, "I'd say if an agent of Luthor's set up shop in Gotham, you'd pound him into a 1 x 1 cube and send him to me 2<sup>nd</sup> day ground."

"You think you're in a position to criticize how I work when you've been HARBORING A MINION OF RA'S AL GHUL!"

"I'm monitoring the situation. Waiting to see if something would happen."

"It's happened. Tell me what you know."

"What? What's happened?"

Batman glared.

And glared.

And glared.

In the spirit of Hell Month, A-minus-4, the Man of Steel caved like a cardboard UPS carton in the rain.

The flight to Mongolia was torture. Batman was adept at juggling many thoughts at once, planning for countless contingencies. Such mental dexterity made it possible to relive a dozen moments from his past with Selina while visualizing a dozen grim scenarios the future might hold.

*"The easy way or the hard way, Catwoman"... "Why Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"*

What if he lost her? She could be dead already for all he knew.

*"You're part of the night, just like me." ... "You're a thief."*

Dead like his parents...

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

That was a bigger trust moment than telling her his real name... it was bigger than the L-word, and it was certainly bigger than knowing she didn't take some trinket from the historical museum. Everything he is, was, and would ever be stemmed from that one fact, and he told her. And now Ra's had her. She could be dead already...like his parents. Like Jason...

*"The life we've chosen, it's not easy. And it's not safe..."*

It's not safe. It's not safe. It's not safe. She could be dead already.

*"If we haven't acted on our feelings so far, I don't think anyone can say it's the result of laziness or cowardice on our part"... "I don't know about that. There's a difference between the risk of getting shot or running into a burning building, and risking getting your heart broken into tiny little pieces and handed to you."*

*"The easy way or the hard way, Catwoman?"... "Why Batman, how hard do you want it to get?"*

Alone again. He'd be alone again. He opened himself up—he smiled, he called her kitten, he said the L-Word, he allowed himself a happiness he didn't deserve and now the cosmos was rising like a serpent to swallow him whole.

HOW HARD DO YOU WANT IT TO GET?

Oh God.

When Batman arrived at the DEMON compound, he found them having dinner.

He'd been frantic... and they were at dinner. He found Gotham snitches were in hiding for Hell Month, so he'd gone to Bludhaven. He'd beaten Nightwing's pet contact practically into a coma, then had words with 'Wing, then had more words with Clark when it turned out the Boy Scout was holding back information on DEMON activity in Metropolis. He'd been... scared... scared for her and scared of losing her...

And they were *at dinner*.

Comparing notes, from the sound of it, about the slanders of the American media:

"It's the visuals I most object to," Ra's was saying, "they made me look like a villain."

"No, no," Selina answered, "It wasn't a flattering picture, I'll give you that. But the character assassination is much worse. They had me stupid, homicidal, psychotic, and playing with guns, and don't get me started on what they're saying about me now."

"A minor libel, in my opinion, compared to the visuals. Really, my dear, it's fair to say you are a stunningly beautiful woman, and that creature depicted in the newspapers denies you your most magnificent characteristics... Wouldn't you agree, Detective?"

Batman preferred picking his own moment to reveal himself. He stepped out from behind a service partition with hatred in his heart. Ra's continued addressing him, enjoying his triumph immensely:

"Indeed, I nearly executed the agent who brought her here. For this bewitching creature simply could not be that Jane Doe I read of in the Gotham Post."

"And you had your agents kidnap her because...?" Batman asked ominously.

"As a means to secure your presence, of course. That is how one makes an appointment to see you, Detective, by taking one of your inner circle."

"It's beneath you to call my secretary?"

Ra's wasn't going to acknowledge this. He turned back to Selina, but continued to address Batman:

"This one is an improvement over those impudent boys, incidentally. They would not have made very pleasant dinner companions, not after our last meeting."

Batman smirked unpleasantly.

"That's why you took Selina? Because she wasn't there when you made a fool of yourself over Black Canary?"

"I heard all about that," Selina shot out. She was irked at being discussed as if she wasn't there, and she wanted in on the confrontation. "They told me! Got a little worked up after that last dip in the pit, I take it."

"It happens sometimes. My men overreacted; they had not seen it before."

"Because you killed off all those who saw it the last time?" Batman ventured.

"The Italian civil wars killed them, Detective; it was 1420. In any case," he turned back to Selina, "whatever you may have heard, my dear, you did not make an issue of it. This, I appreciate. No, you cannot escape being 'the civil one' in this particular instance. The boys' mocking would have been quite insupportable."

Selina was taken aback. The civil one? No one had ever accused Catwoman of such a thing.

"What do you want, Ra's?" Batman spat in a most uncivil tone.

"The Asian Properties Wayne Enterprises acquired in a corporate takeover two months ago."

Bruce stared, and Ra's continued.

"I'm perfectly willing to pay fair market value, and I wish to make sure you won't refuse simply because it is I who am asking."

"That's the most ridiculous load of bull I've ever heard, even from you. What do you want?"

Ra's raised an eyebrow, then tried a new approach.

"Perhaps I was curious and wished to meet the lady?"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT, RA'S?"

"My daughter is sure to come to me sooner or later and ask me to intervene, and I took this opportunity to..."

"WHAT DO YOU WANT, RA'S?"

"Detective, I will thank you not to bellow like a bad actor in my house—"

**"RA'S! WHAT DO YOU WANT?"**

There was a long silence, then the truth:

"I want it understood that I was not involved in my daughter's attempts to frame this young woman."

Selina's eyes grew wide at the statement. She was ready to do some yelling herself, but Batman was now calm. He had sat down at the table, and poured a glass of wine from the pitcher. His tone became conversational:

"Oh, I know that, Ra's. Cat's eye crown? Please. You couldn't be that obvious if you tried."

"Exactly. This is very embarrassing, Detective. I truly don't know what to say."

Selina was sputtering now...

"Oh, I can imagine," Batman was saying to the man who, though an enemy, his greatest, was nevertheless a mastermind and a criminal genius. "None of it rubbed off, did it? You, then Luthor. She didn't pick up... anything."

"That was a favor to me, you know. Lex taking her. I contributed more than a little to his campaign. You see, I was proud last time she left, finally showing a little spunk, I thought. A promising sign. But look what she goes and does: still uses my network to spy on your butler, still uses my network to stage this cat-crime, still uses my money to buy her penthouse in Metropolis..."

"You're kidding."

"Truly! But my name, that she won't use. Beneath her! She said my book was an embarrassment and now that she's an executive she couldn't be associated with something so lowbrow and florid. I mean, really, Detective, 'florid.' From *Talia!* I don't have to tell you..."

"Excuse me," Selina interrupted, but was ignored.

Batman was nodding and said, "For that matter, the new name—*Talia Head?* What is this a James Bond movie?"

"Excuse me," Selina tried again.

"Indeed. Don't think all the guards here aren't having fun with that one. They don't say it in front of me—only you would do that—but I know what's said in my house."

Barbara's call for "a little estrogen solidarity" echoed, inexplicably, in Selina's mind. There was no power on earth that would make her *defend* the demonspawn...

...Ra's was now announcing that he got a bum rap with this chauvinism charge—he had no particular insistence on a male heir...

There was no power on earth that would make Selina defend *or feel sorry* for the demonspawn.

...Ra's was saying he let Talia think that to avoid hurting her feelings. She wasn't up to the job. Just look at her performance to date....

There was no power that would make Selina defend the demonspawn, but just to be safe, she'd wait in the Batwing.

As she left, she heard Batman proposing a deal: He was taking steps to get "the little pest" out of their hair. If Ra's would keep her there, it would be known that DEMON had no part in the Catwoman frame-up. And he'd throw in those Asian Properties at cost.

"Men are pigs," Selina muttered, as she opened the hatch of the Batwing... to find a DEMON flunky trying to stuff himself in a small hassock beneath the passenger seat.

"America! You are the guests from America! Basketball! Superman! Big Mac and Fries!"

Not a time to split hairs about whether she was a guest or a prisoner, Selina thought. She confirmed her country of origin. She assured him that *Star Wars Episode 2* was not out yet. She could supply no first hand information about Superman or whether the Metropolis Marvels made the playoffs.

"Swept the series against Cleveland, playing the Star City Rebels for the championship a week from Sunday," a deep voice intoned. And Omar became the first minion of Ra's Al Ghul to smile on first meeting Batman.

### January 19<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 2

LEXCREEP: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A DERANGED PSYCHOPATH TO WORK  
HERE, BUT IT HELPS...

"And if it gets me fired, I don't care anymore," Moira muttered, saving the new phrase to her screensaver. Miss Head no longer screeched or threw things when the Gotham papers didn't contain the news she was looking for. She just grumbled that she'd been too subtle, thought he'd be smart enough to figure it out. Then she'd scream at Moira because the faxes from R&D were smudged. A suit's mood swings were part of the job, though. The truth was, Moira missed Omar. She missed how nothing fazed him. The most outrageous details of her day at Lexcorp he shrugged off as the things that go on among suits. None of it could touch him. Once he left a room, whatever had gone on there had no reality for him. He never once complained about a bad day.

She also missed showing him the city, seeing simple things through his eyes. He took nothing for granted. What a gift to be like that, to take pleasure in a gyro on a sunny afternoon and not have the aftermath of a suit's morning tantrum hanging round your neck all day.

"Good morning, Miss Moira," a familiar accent intoned, "what is a de-rang pessy-chop-path?"

Moira looked up and beamed.

"That's 'deranged psychopath.' It means a crazy suit. Like Miss Head."

"You should not display such messages on your desk. It is very dangerous."

"Oh, I don't care. I can get another job. Although, if you're going to be coming around again, I guess it wouldn't be so bad to stick around."

Omar shook his head 'No' but smiled as he did so.

"No, I will not be come round again. This is my last delivery here to the Great One's daugh—" he caught himself and remembered he must speak as Americans speak. "To Miss Head."

"Oh." Moira looked crushed.

"But I will to be staying in Metropolis. I have, how do you say it, changed jobs. That is why this is last message."

Moira looked much happier at this. She took the parcel, an audio cassette, to Miss Head with the rest of the day's mail, then hurried back to the reception area to hear about Omar's new circumstances. It turned out this last delivery was a favor to someone who pulled some strings and got him a job at the Daily Planet....

The sedate offices of LexCorp were suddenly shaken by an earsplitting scream.

*...: this is frankly embarrassing, Detective, I don't know what to say ...*

Talia threw Lex Luthor's priceless Pre-Columbian rattle at his antique Baccarat water pitcher. The cassette played on...

*...: none of it rubbed off, did it? ...*

Her beloved's voice. She threw a Faberge inkwell at a Picasso print.

*...: ...a favor to me, Lex taking her... ...*

She screamed.

*...: Talia Head? What is this a James Bond movie? ...*

She wailed.

*...: don't need a male heir especially, but I need a competent one ...*

Talia tore the cassette player's plug from the wall and hurled it out the window... rather, she threw the player *at* the window—the shatterproof high-rise window—from whence it bounced onto the thick Persian carpet with an anti-climactic *swudt*. Failing to produce the satisfying sound of breaking glass, Talia pounded the player into the telephone until both were a pile of useless electronic giblets.

### January 20<sup>th</sup>, A-minus 1

The unforeseen consequence of playing Romantic Chicken was that, by the end of it, Bruce and Selina found themselves in a dramatically more intimate relationship than either had consciously intended. Each step in the escalation had been real and heartfelt, but there was an undercurrent of responding to a dare. That element dissolved, for Selina, right around the words 'never loved Talia.'

The new circumstances raised a delicate question, one more delicate than faces under a mask or what one was doing in the Summer of '85...

The Nightmares.

Every night they had slept together, Bruce (or perhaps Batman) had had a nightmare. Occasionally he thrashed around but more often he groaned softly, clenched his fist, and pounded it into the blankets.

Every night they slept together... The implication was unmistakable. He'd taken Catwoman into his bed and some part of him would never forgive either of them. The dreams were growing worse the last few weeks, undoubtedly because of the new intimacy, Selina thought.

She should tell him—not let him sit there twisting his hand not even knowing why it was sore.

Yeah right, she thought, tell him. How would that go exactly: "Dear, you know you're a few cards shy of a deck right? Guess what, I'm the cause. And by the way, have I called you a judgmental jackass recently?"

Although...

"Judgmental jackass" struck a chord...

...the unvarnished truth had worked fairly well up 'til now.

WAYNE

Thomas, beloved husband

Martha, beloved wife

*"They were lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their deaths they were not divided"*

### January 21<sup>st</sup>, Anniversary

Bruce placed two perfect but unopened rosebuds beneath the quote on the headstone, then stood erect and began the ritual contemplation of his parents, their deaths, and the rededication of his life to righting this wrong. No, nothing could 'right' the wrong, nothing would bring them back... The rededication of his life to... to the Mission.

The Mission. Good word, just the right touch of sacred overtones. What exactly was 'the Mission?'

The Quest, then.

Ah, like Don Quixote. Quest for what?

This wasn't right. The Anniversary—the pilgrimage to the gravesite in daylight as Bruce and the alley at nightfall as Batman—was a time for solemn contemplation and reverence. Not splitting hairs about what this word or that meant...

"Words matter," his mother taught him early. "They have power. Your words can make others happy or sad. They can persuade. They can topple empires. They can change the world. They can even change *a life*. Choose them with care, Bruce. Always."

"No words can express what I feel since that night, Mom."

"They can't? English is a rich language, Bruce. The language of Shakespeare—and he tackled every thought and feeling human beings experience. I seriously doubt you've come up with something new. So, if you can't find the words, maybe you're not looking hard enough."

"The looking hurts, Mom."

"Of course it does, Bruce. I wish I could spare you that, Son, but it's part of being alive. And I wouldn't spare you that. Better that you hurt than that you died that night... Bruce? Don't you shut down like that, my boy. You are *ALIVE* and *IN THE WORLD*, the sooner you accept that fact, the better... Bruce Thomas Wayne, you pull yourself together this instant. We've a lot to talk through and I'm not going to stop every 10 seconds and repeat that one point. You're alive. It should be obvious to a so-called great detective."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Alright then, what are you thinking, right now?"

"That that's the kind of thing *she* says. 'World's greatest detective' ... She loves going back to that anytime I screw up."

In his mind's eye, Bruce saw his mother smile.

"If she does, I'm sure it's because, like your father, you place too much weight on intellect compared to your feelings."

"That's not it. She just likes throwing me off-balance."

"Well, I dare say you know her better than I... You had another fight, I take it, before coming here today?"

"Nightmares?"

"Yeah. Every night I sleep over."

"Just do me a favor, Selina, and get over yourself. The dreams are... so not about you."

"You know about them?"

"I've only had them since I was 10."

"Oh. I just thought that..."

"Yeah, I know what you thought. Believe me, Kitten, you are not that big a factor in my life. You don't have that kind of power. You think it'd destroy me if you betrayed me and left? You think I care if you up and vanish some night? I've been alone my whole life, you think I'm afraid of being alone again?"

"Yes, we had another fight. Pretty bad one."

"Bruce, I swear, when this day comes around you have no more judgment than a popinjay. That wasn't a bad fight. That was a very endearing little squabble borne of insecurity and very genuine affection."

"Mom, you have some very odd ideas about fighting and affection."

His mother laughed at him.

"Bruce, she was afraid she was hurting you. And you got quite a scare the other day when you thought you could lose her. You behaved quite abominably as a result—that's becoming quite a habit with you, I notice.... Bruce, why do you think it is that you haven't been able to go through your usual vows about Justice here today?"

"I don't know, Mom."

"Too easy. Think about it."

"Because of what happened with Selina?"

"Still too easy."

"I don't know, I guess maybe I..."

"Bruce, you have to make peace with the living before you can make peace with the dead."

"Selina?"

"Yes. And the other one, too."

"Not Talia?"

"Sending that tape was the act of a cad, Bruce. I am heartily ashamed of you. That a son of mine would treat women as you have done."

"Mom, I'm sorry, but believe me, with Talia you don't know what you're talking about. It'd be nice if I could be a hero and end it like a gentleman, but she's not like that. Anything short of a smack in the head she'd spin into some fantasy that Batman is..."

"I will not tolerate this Bruce, I will not. You don't love her, that's fine. But any fellow being is entitled to a minimum degree of respect and consideration and I will not have you concocting these monstrous Batman scenarios to justify anything you want to do to people...."

"You don't understand, Mom. You really don't."

"I don't? Then why don't you explain it to me, Bruce."

"...Why don't I explain that I've made your death into a cheap excuse for being a shit of a human being."

“My poor baby. Where do you get such ideas? I’m not happy about the way you treat other people, Bruce, but I’m most disappointed about the way you treat yourself. You go now—make your peace with the living. Then you’ll be able to come back here and say what you need to say.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

### January 22<sup>nd</sup>, A + 1

Moira hadn’t connected Talia’s interest in the Gotham newspapers with the move on Wayne Enterprises the previous year, not until Bruce Wayne called from the Metropolis heliport demanding an emergency ten minutes on Miss Head’s morning schedule.

Bruce Wayne. Some said the only thing worse than working at LexCorp would be working for that notorious playboy. But the figure that stepped into the executive reception area didn’t seem like a pinch’n’leer. He seemed like any other suit—a little older than she expected, or maybe just tired.

“Mr. Bruce Wayne to see you, Ms. Hea—” The buzzer unlocking the inner office cut off Moira’s announcement.

Wayne stepped through the doorway, and there was an immediate crash of Wedgewood hitting plaster.

Bruce had expected to dodge pottery when he first entered the office. He wasn’t quite prepared for the sight of an office already trashed by three days’ worth of tantrums. The apology, such as he’d rehearsed it, did not seem quite equal to the affront that caused this kind of devastation.

Still, he reminded himself, this was Talia. He was prepared to take responsibility for his actions, but he wouldn’t let this become personal. It wouldn’t do to admit to anything or do any heartfelt soul-searching in front of her. She was too eager to take anything short of cruelty as a pledge of true love.

Well... if not cruelty, *honesty*. Direct and clear: They were nothing to each other. They were not going to be anything to each other. If he picked an unfortunate way to deliver that message, it was only because he didn’t trust himself to see her face to face...

She began to smile at these words.

...without tearing her head from her body with his bare hands, he concluded.

“But, Beloved, I—”

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice, Talia?” he cut her off. “Did you think it would escape my attention that you picked Hell Month to pull this stunt?”

“Beloved, I only wanted—”

“You only wanted to make cheap and sentimental use of a very deep personal tragedy to serve your own selfish ends. A tragedy you only know of, I might add, because your father knows.”

“You must remind yourself always of who my father is, Beloved, to summon the will to stay away from me.”

Bruce sighed, exasperated and exhausted.

"I give up. I'm out of ideas. What's it going to take? Tell me how to make you understand! We're nothing. We have no future. We don't have much of a past. What there was is finished, and it wasn't enough to get worked up about losing."

"You must speak in such terms to convince yourself, my Beloved, not me."

Bruce did give up. It was hopeless. She would read anger as passion, pity as tenderness, exasperation as lust. There was no hope for it. He'd tried his best. She would believe whatever she wanted.

He left her inner office, shaking his head sadly. He left the outer office... then stopped, backed up a step and saw Moira's screensaver.

LEXCREEP: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A DERANGED PSYCHOPATH TO WORK HERE BUT IT HELPS

Bruce faxed Moira's resume to Lucius Fox from WE-One, the Wayne Enterprises Corporate jet. By the time the plane landed at Gotham Executive Airport, Lucius had confirmed her new position heading an assistant training program at Wayne Enterprises—the Metropolis branch.

Lucius repeated that it was a pity not to have a program like this at the corporate headquarters.

Bruce repeated that he had tried, but the lady was emphatic about remaining in Metropolis. "Her fella" worked for the Daily Planet, she said.

Lucius hinted that the real reason was that a secretary at that level probably heard stories about the CEO of Wayne Enterprises and was wary about accepting a job he had offered because he liked her screensaver. The branch office was safely in another city. In a year or two, once she realized the job was legitimate, they could move her to Gotham.

Bruce yawned loudly into the car-phone and said he would take the rest of the day off. Lucius sighed, hung up, and began rearranging the afternoon meetings.

Arriving home, Bruce walked through the kitchen, picked up the morning newspaper from his untouched breakfast tray, poured himself a glass of orange juice, walked though to the butler's pantry and took Alfred's elevator down to the Batcave. He logged in automatically, then dropped the newspaper onto the keypad. One of the automated monitoring routines threw up a map of the city indicating a crime connected to one of his themed enemies. A yellow circle was superimposed on the map with a zoom in on the museum district. Beneath it were the words:

Gotham Historical Museum:

Roman Mosaics... leopards in the coliseum... ..valued at \$450,000

The newspaper headline stared up at him:

CAT-CRIME IN GOTHAM!

January 23<sup>rd</sup>, A + 2

It would be fair to say Deputy-Commissioner Morrison looked at Batman like he was insane. The break in at the historical museum was weeks ago and they *had* called him. The other one? There was no other one. If there was another cat crime they would have signaled and told him, but there wasn't! Of course they would know, they were the police!

Batman gave up and went directly to the museum. It sometimes happened that this new commissioner could not supply more information than the newspapers—but this was the first time he'd offered less.

As Batman landed on the roof, the numb calm he'd maintained since the cave began to buckle.

This wasn't happening. It was a bad dream.

And reality tore abruptly through the haze: *Nightmares.*

*For godssake, Selina, I didn't mean it,* his thoughts ran as he replayed that last fight before the cemetery:

*"The dreams are... so not about you... Believe me, Kitten, you are not that big a factor in my life."*

*(I didn't mean it.)*

*"You think it'd destroy me if you betrayed me and left?"*

*(Oh god, I didn't mean it. Don't you know that? Couldn't you tell?)*

He removed a ventilation hood and entered through an air duct, just as she must have done.

At the grate above the Roman gallery, he saw the indentation of claw marks at the seam.

*You think I care if you up and vanish some night. I do.*

*You think I'm afraid of being alone again? I am.*

I dropped to the floor, not caring much if there were floor sensors to trip. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I made out, quite distinctly, a display of four mosaics depicting exotic animals in the coliseum. There was a rhinoceros, an elephant, a zebra, and in the spot where the leopards should be were... leopards. Gold tiles, broken up every so often with blacks faded to gray faded over the centuries... But... those were supposed to be stolen...

I took a closer look and saw one of the spots wasn't right—too regular and too black—electrical tape. I peeled it off and a note, folded and refolded to a tiny square, dropped at my feet.

*"No, I didn't take it. Why would I? Because of you?"*

I looked back at the leopards. Another too-square spot, and another note:

*"You're not that big a factor in my life."*

And another.

*"You don't have that kind of power."*

And finally:

*"You presumptuous arrogant bastard."*

I tried her apartment. I tried Barbara, I tried Dick, I tried Tim. I snooped around the Iceberg, and Two-Face's loft over the Janus Club. I realized I don't have much experience finding her when she doesn't want to be found.

I went over her workstation in the cave ...found how she sent the bogus crime alert to my monitor... found an e-mail to Barbara... If Barbara knew where she was, she would've told me... there was no point in opening the letter... the subject line read "estrogen solidarity"... impossible woman.

I looked over the bogus newspaper. After the details of the cat crime, there was a story about a school board and a municipal bond referendum. Every movie where they show a newspaper, next to whatever headline you're supposed to look at, there's this story about the school board and municipal bond referenda. Every time. I turned to the last page where the crossword was just a little larger than it should be. Underneath it, in three point type were the words Nigma Novelties.

Eddie.

Gotcha, Kitten.

Much as I wanted to beat the truth out of him, I couldn't actually confront Riddler. Selina could have told him anything. If she said "fight with Bruce" and I went in there as Batman, I was busted. But if she had said she wanted the paper to taunt Batman and I asked about her as Bruce...

So I was slightly screwed.

I waited until the little weasel left, then conducted a thorough search. I found an address book, which was so easy it would have been a trap coming from any other source. With Riddler, it was exactly what it appeared: an address book. If it were a trap, it would be Phonetian hieroglyphs written backwards in lemon juice.

The book listed three cat-lairs.

One was an old address: a fur warehouse before the quake, now a homeless shelter.

One she'd apparently rented to Mr. Freeze as storage space. Six coldsuits and a dry ice machine.

The third lair had a light on...I let myself in ... there was a distinctive smell in the air—a heater that had been cold a long time had just been turned on again... And there she was, stroking one of the cats, though I couldn't see which. I moved closer—it was Nutmeg. Selina didn't know I was there yet but the cat did. It's creepy the way those cats reflect her feelings. The amber eyes staring at me were most definitely hostile. I needed to announce my presence before the little furball tipped her, so I said:

"You do have an astonishing array of cat-stuff around this place, you know that?"

"If I wanted to talk to you, I would've waited on the roof," she answered without turning.

"You're not going to make this any easier are you?"

*Shit, out of practice. I set that one up. Here it comes, I thought, an "easy way or the hard way" comeback.*

"You're tracking mud on my carpet."

*That wasn't encouraging.*

"C'mon, Kitten, work with me here. 'the easy way or the hard way...'"

She turned to look at me.

"Look one of us has to be the black hole of brooding despair and if you're not going to do it..."

*Aha. Banter. It was a start.* Except there wasn't a hint of anything in the words. No anger, no sarcasm, no spite; so much for foreplay. It was time to do what I came for:

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely.

"Not good enough."

"I know."

"Good."

"I can't unsay what's been said."

"What was said was that..."

*Oh God, don't repeat that please, my brain railed at her, please don't say it, don't say it out loud, don't say it...*

"...I'm not that big a factor in your life and that—"

"PLEASE don't repeat that."

"WHY NOT!" I heard her scream only after my own "I KNOW WHAT I SAID!"

"I know what I said," I repeated softly.

Even yelling wouldn't work now. Nothing would. I couldn't change anything that happened. We had our whole lives before us, we had all those possibilities... and I poisoned all of it forever.

"Would it help if I said I didn't mean it?"

*Desperate. Foolish. If I didn't mean that what else didn't I mean. Here it comes...*

"It might," Selina said gently.

"What?"

"It might help a little."

"I don't understand."

"Yeah, that much you've made very clear. You asked, I believe—do tell me if I've mistaken something—you asked if saying you didn't mean it would help."

"Right, I was here, I know what I said."

"That's really not a phrase you want to be repeating right now."

I felt my cheeks burn at the slap. She went on.

"I said it might. That's 'would it help'/'yes it might.' And you're at a loss on what to say next?"

"I just don't understand."

"I can't believe this is the crack intellect that's the terror of the underworld. Have you always been this dense? 'Kitten, Would it help if I said it I didn't mean it'-'Yes Bruce, actually it might'- and now *you* say..."

"But I can't unsay it."

"No, the past is funny that way. You can't unsay what's been said or undo what's been done. You deal with it and move on."

*Something very important just happened.*

"Say that again."

"Oh I give up. First you said—"

"JUST REPEAT THAT LAST PART," I shouted.

"Deal with it and move on?"

That was it: Move forward.

This one thing in the past didn't get to dominate all that came after it. It didn't have that kind of power. Deal with it and move on. Can't change what's happened—move forward.

The Sensei said those moments of understanding never last.

But at that one moment...

I understood.

Stop, assess what happened, then move on.

I'm not sure how long I stood there. I'm not sure if she said anything. I'm not sure if I said anything. It might have been only a second.

"I have to go somewhere. Hold that thought," I stammered, then realized that was wrong. "No, better idea, you come too."

She thought I was crazy. She might have been right.

It was a short walk, and she said nothing. I said nothing.

We reached the alley, and realization dawned.

"This is where it happened, isn't it?" she whispered. "Your parents?"

I pointed.

"That spot right there. 24 years, 2 days..."

"Oh holy sh—"

"...and 4 hours ago."

"Well that explains a lot." She looked at me shrewdly. "Doesn't excuse it, mind you, but it explains it."

In my mind's ear I heard my mother's voice:

"Exactly what I was going to say. Smart girl, Bruce..."

"I get it, Mom" I whispered.

"...but the wardrobe needs some work. Is that purple leather?"

### January 29<sup>th</sup>, A + 8

"Miss Gordon," Alfred was saying, "I do beg you to reconsider. Gotham City is a fashion capital. There are over six thousand dress-makers and couturiers. If Miss Crenshaw, whom I recommended, failed to please, there are certainly other alternatives without resorting to..."

"Mr. Corry recommends Flavel, Wenelio's, or, what was the third one?"

"The House of Shri," the odious Mr. Corry lisped.

Alfred sighed. Barbara's tastes were sufficiently conservative to accept his direction on tableware, invitations, and menus. But not in matters of dress. The stolid Englishwoman he brought in had produced such stodgy sketches of high-bodiced lace, the psyche who designed the Batgirl costume rebelled. She called Mr. Corry, and the dreaded wedding planner now had his foot in the door once again. It wouldn't stop with the dress, Alfred was sure. There would be more abominations to endure.

"Wenelio will provide a crash to contrast your dress," he was saying, "Silver lame is very becoming against the white."

Alfred coughed. "I really don't think..." he began.

"I like it," Barbara chirped.

There they sat, the bat family. Like nothing happened.

Well, no. It had been a little strained with Bruce, but we were working through it. Barb's a doll. Dickey the Dick, on the other hand, didn't get around to telling me about Hell-Month until A + 5. What a guy.

In sync, the four of them turned and looked at me: Deadlock. A silver lame crash.

"What does Dick say?" I asked.

"For it."

"I vote against." *Take that you little shit. Meow.*

Bruce came over beaming, and I guessed he was the second vote against the crash.

"You ever going to let Dick off the hook?" he asked.

"Eventually," I smiled.

"I've been meaning to ask: recent events improve your opinion of Ra's at all?"

That's silver lame crash to forgiving Dick to Ra's the hairdo! I will never understand the way that man's mind works, not after a hundred Hell Months. My confusion must have showed because Bruce very thoughtfully reminded me of my early assessment:

"He's a flyweight, he's a hairdo..."

"He is," I answered, "he really is."

"You don't think he's a dangerous threat?"

"Cause he shows up every fifty months looking jaded, bleak, and gaunt? No. I'm not threatened by gaunt. Gaunt is not a global threat. They're gaunt over at Tower Records. It's not intimidating."

"You are the most impossible woman."

"And he has a cape, oh well, then he must be a force to be reckoned with... Oh, sorry. Incidentally, somebody should tell those people at Tower Records that they're not rock stars themselves."





*“ I drop down to the alley...  
and there... he... is...*

*The Batman. Caped Crusader. Dark Knight.  
Guardian of Gotham. Crime fighter extraordinaire.*

*‘I am Vengeance, I am Justice,  
I am in desperate need of  
a personality transplant...’ ”*

The Gotham Post always took liberties, especially about the theme criminals that populated the city's "nightlife." Catwoman always laughed it off, until the tabloid wrote one false story too many. She mounted a stage show, Cat-Tales, to set the record straight. Once the truth is out there, nothing will ever be the same.

Thank you for making these characters real again. Thank you for keeping the true spirit of these characters alive.

Forget the moniker "Fan Fiction", this was one of the most enjoyable pieces of straight-out fiction I'd ever read.

I'm still on the edge of my seat waiting to see what's next...

Meow.  
Just... Meow.

Consistently the best stuff out there...

It truly is art when a theme and underlying ideas can be moved forward with such eloquence, flow and excitement. Characters developing beyond their static 4-color past and coming alive as never before.