



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

#13

Cat = Sales

Knight Before Christmas



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES

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KNIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

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 BRRRRRINNNGGGGG, 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."