



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

#19

Cat = Sales
Dearly Beloved

W

Mr. Bruce Wayne

requests the pleasure of

company

at the wedding of his

by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
DEARLY BELOVED

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By
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Edited by
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DEARLY BELOVED

A pulsing orb of fire spun slowly in the nothingness of space. Over eons that are but minutes in the cosmic scheme of things (or maybe it's the other way around), Selina realized the ball of fire was her head. Awareness grew slowly. She became aware of absence... there were no city sounds outside the window... there was no warm mass of Whiskers and Nutmeg curled at her ankles... and the throbbing ball of pain was her head...this was not good...

The first system to "come online" was smell. She smelled coffee.

An eye cracked open and saw – BRIGHT – LIGHT - BAD - LIGHT - BAD – SILVER POT - LIGHT - BAD !

Logic circuits were not yet online to connect this bit of sensory data (silver pot) with the previous one (coffee smell) - nor with the next:

"Want some coffee?"

The words had no meaning, but at that primal core of her brain she did perceive that the sound was Batman's voice.

Throbbing head and Batman's voice. Oh, serious shit going on here.

She forced her eyes open again and saw a not-pointyBat-head silhouetted against the BAD BRIGHT LIGHT BAD still streaming through the window.

"Dead?" she asked.

"Tattinger '96," he answered.

"Feels like dead," she croaked.

"Well in that case, Kitten, you've got eight lives left," he chuckled. She opened her eyes to see Bruce smirking at some private joke. "Good morning... Mrs. Wayne."

THE DAY BEFORE...

6:04 a.m. Sunrise

The rays of warm sunlight that escaped through the slats of Venetian blind to fall on Dick Grayson's eyelids were not enough to wake him, only enough to dimly transport his subconscious to an earlier time. He was home. Wayne Manor was home now. He'd come to accept that the circus would never be home again. He'd even started accepting the idea that Bruce could be his father without treading on the memory of his real father. In a way, Bruce was his father in this new life, in this new identity: Robin. Batman and Robin. How cool was that! He was a superhero! He fought evil-doers! Well, he wasn't allowed to fight them yet, but that was coming. He had to train more first. And he wasn't allowed to train if he didn't get his grades up....school... Why does it have to be so early? It was never like this at the circus. The tutor was Gretchen, the lion tamer, and she was onstage 'til 10:30 like everybody else on show nights. Class started promptly at noon! Why did these city kids have to start so...

“Rrrly,” Dick drooled into his pillow. “Toorrly. Tellem uptll...patrlng...can’t schooo t’day.”

That’s when Alfred would say “Master Dick, you know the rules. If your nighttime activities interfere with a proper school schedule in any way, it is the nighttime activity which will be discontinued,” adding quietly when he thought Dick couldn’t hear “and a jolly fine thing that would be, too.”

When Alfred’s voice did not intercede as expected, Dick pulled himself awake... His old room. As he had every day since coming back to the manor, Dick took a deep breath as if expecting to smell bacon and coffee brewing. Smells from the kitchen would never reach to this part of the house, but for some reason, he still expected – **WEDDING!** Lord God, TODAY- WEDDING—WEDDING TODAY—WEDDING DAY—NOW—HERE—SHIT!

6:10 a.m.

If you’re a Gotham City ‘night person,’ it sometimes happens that you can wake up in a drugged fog and have to piece together just where you are and what’s going on. I woke up in just such a fog, minus the drugs. I wasn’t in the catsuit...

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

Whiskers and Nutmeg were curled on my ankles—I was home.

::Twitterbringngng::

But something was definitely happening that I couldn’t quite work out.

::Twitterbringngng::

There was that noise.

::Twitterbringngng::

It was... my eyes focused on something next to the bed and, with Herculean effort, I grabbed onto an idea...

::Twitterbringngng::

It was *the PHONE*.

::Twitterbringngng::

How could this...who could this be?... who that I know would call at... I didn’t even know what that said on the clock...

::Twitterbringngng:: ::Twitterbringngng::

“Oh for god’s sake what do you want?”

Was this the rogue line? No. I rephrased:

“Who are you, and what do you want?”

...:*Selina! Panic attack. Help me, girl. Time for estrogen solidarity!...*

“Ummh...Wha?”

...:*You know that dream where you wake up and there’s a history test that you haven’t studied for and you’re totally unprepared and you’ve got to go take it right now?...*

“What? No. I don’t know that one ...I know the one where there’s this noise that won’t stop and it turns out to be the phone and...who is this again?”

...:*Selina, meow! Wake up! It’s Barbara!...*

I yawned, swallowed, breathed, and swatted Nutmeg off the phonocord. More awake now, so I managed a (comparatively) friendly: “I don’t know a Barbara. Call back in an hour, please.”

...:Ha. Ha. Listen, I've been thinking - They had the bachelor party at Bruce's penthouse and Poison Ivy showed up. You don't think there could be any truth in that curse, do you?::...

At this point, I woke up enough to realize what day it was—the Wedding Day—Barbara's special day. Mustn't call a girl a loopy, paranoid headcase on her special day.

"No," I said, "I don't think Ivy hit the party cause it was Bruce's penthouse, I think it was probably because she figured there'd be rich men to ensnare." Including Bruce, which, note to self, I will take up with her at a later date. For now, I swatted Whiskers off the belt of my bathrobe as Barbara went on ... something about rose petals...

I could focus on the clock now—it was six o'clock. Six o'clock in the morning—not a time of day we night people routinely deal with, and I'd have to say that, based on my experience with it so far, there's a very good reason for that.

I walked the phone towards the kitchen and stared at the coffee machine. It looked complicated - I didn't think that was going to be happening any time soon. I'd go down to Raoul's Cart in the park as soon as I was off the phone and dressed. *Off the phone*, the idea echoed. *Yeah, speaking of which...*

"Look, Barbara, under the circumstances, if it were me, I'd be looking forward to it! Scatter the rose petals and watch people squash'em flat. High spiked heels and all those flower guts oozing out. It should be very therapeutic.... No, I don't think it will remind anybody else about Ivy. Everybody will have other things on their mind like how beautiful you look..." -and, I thought, how big Catwoman's ass looks in those yellow ruffles.

6:20 a.m.

Bruce stood on the stairs of Wayne Manor, staring over the banister at a ringing telephone in the hall. He assaulted it with the same deathscowl he'd direct at gangbangers playing cop-killer rap. The deathscowl could make the lowliest scum look to the skies as though actually sensing the malevolent force of judgment about to descend on them. It could make pushers, mobsters and sociopaths cower in dread.

The telephone merely twittered in cheery defiance.

Bruce hopped over the banister, answering defiance with defiance. He had realized sooner than Dick or Selina what day it was, which made it obvious to the deductive mind why Alfred was not available to answer the phone. Still, he wasn't nearly as awake as his physical manner let on. On the rare occasions he was up at this disgusting time of day, it was for a Wayne Enterprises meeting, and who cared if he was alert for that.

He picked up the receiver.

"Wayne Manor, Bruce Wayne speaking."

...:Morning, Handsome,::... the warm voice caressed his ear and, for a split-second, his instinct said Catwoman instead of Selina. Catwoman taunting him back to life from some half-conscious haze. Straddling him on the ground of some alley or hideout, purring threats or hissing propositions into his ear, and playing with the edge of his mask as if, one of these days, she might actually—

...:Orders from General Barbara: If Dick slept there last night, he needs to be out of the house by nine o'clock sharp...:

Catwoman taunting him out of a half-conscious haze never said anything like that.

...:She has to come over to dress and supervise the setup, and they can't see each other today, it's a rule...:

On the cold, damp floor of a hideout, her warm body on top of him, he would always murmur something stupid. Old habits were hard to break:

"Huh? Wait. So why are you calling again?"

...: Use your head, would you! What if it was Barbara that called and Dick had answered the phone! ...:

Feline logic. There was no arguing with it. Whether the subject was culpability for releasing dangerous criminals as a diversion to pull off a theft or wedding day telephone etiquette, you couldn't win. A man simply could not win.

...: So you'll tell him? ...:

"What?"

...: You'll tell Dick to be out of the house by nine. ...:

And if God forbid the subject was whether it's possible for a man to be present in a room with a stripper—or a woman posing as a stripper—and not happen to notice that he knows her in another context, even if it's a context where the man is usually focused and observant, that does not necessarily mean it's because he wasn't looking at her face.

...: And that doesn't mean the cave, Barbara was very specific about this, it means out of the house, off the grounds, and completely out of the picture—we don't want any accidents. ...:

6:25 a.m.

Dick's Wedding Day realization produced only a few moments of panic, which a hot shower had cured.

He skipped down the stairs, down the hall past the little telephone table - "Morning Bruce" - and turned smartly into the kitchen—when his stomach lurched forward, up, down, then up again.

It was a sense memory - intense and strangely unsettling: Alfred had thoughtfully laid out, on the left of the counter, a pitcher of orange juice and two glasses... beside the juice a bowl of apples behind, a basket of muffins in front. Toast rack. Then a tray of bagels and croissants and a covered dish over a flame: scrambled eggs, bacon, kippers. The Gotham Times, The Daily Planet, two plates, napkins, and utensils. Serve yourself.

It was First Day of School breakfast.

Dick licked his lip absently—not in anticipation of the scrambled eggs, but in reflection. First day of school breakfast—also served the morning of his interview for a summer internship—also served the morning he left for Hudson U. This was Alfred's big day breakfast: Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life.

Oh man.

He was frozen in the doorway, so Bruce stepped around him, picked up a plate and took a muffin.

"That was Selina on the phone, you're to be out of the house by nine."

Dick's brow furrowed.

"Are we being evicted?"

7:00 a.m.

...: Did Dick send flowers? ...

"What?" Bruce had again answered the phone, and again couldn't help flashing to Batman for parallels. This time, it wasn't a Catwoman-specific memory so much as that sick feeling when he'd realize he'd just stepped into the same trap twice. Follow the riddle to the train station and ZAP an electric charge stuns him into unconsciousness. Follow the next riddle to the dump and ZAP... How many times was it going to take for him to learn? All he had to do was *stop answering this phone...*

...: Morning of the wedding, ... Selina was explaining patiently, ...: it's traditional for the groom to send flowers. Did he?...

"I have no idea."

...: Look, I'm being nice, trying to keep the kid out of trouble. If you don't care enough to do the same— ...

They'd had this conversation before. Back then, she was "being nice" capturing Penguin and leaving him tied up under the Bat-Signal. And he was expected to show his appreciation by looking the other way while she plundered Tiffany's. What's he supposed to be doing this time?

"I will make sure Dick sends flowers," Bruce intoned wearily.

...:NO! Flowers mean Ivy. You gotta make sure he DIDN'T send flowers. CANCEL IT, if he sent flowers, he's got to cancel it! ...

"Yes, dear," Bruce said sarcastically, beginning to feel that, if he had to be whipped by this woman, the literal method might be preferable.

8:50 a.m.

Dick's Mazda pulled out of the front drive just as a small convoy of catering and florists' vans turned into the rear. These were followed by Mr. Jose's station wagon, Mr. Corry's sedan and, on foot, the French chef Anatole from next door. Anatole felt a special connection with this dear young couple, and no rivalry with Alfred, nor even his near-fatal experience here with that homicidal clown, would dissuade him from giving his services for that magnificent dainty: the wedding cake.

He had constructed pieces for a wondrous confection: a mosaic of cake more complex than the mosques of Istanbul, and at its center, a fountain of champagne.

They would have to be assembled, glued together with marzipan paste here on the site, and Anatole planned to guard his masterpiece in person.

No clumsy caterer would be allowed to upset or upstage this glorious creation. Of that, he would be certain.

9:05 a.m.

If I got caught, Barbara would kill me. But “if I get caught” isn’t something I traditionally worry about, and I wasn’t about to start now.

I made a call and explained the situation. He was reluctant, so I purred a little. Sometimes it works. I named a dollar figure and he agreed. Halleluiah.

9:10 a.m.

Bruce watched from his study while the parade of workmen marched cartons of alcohol into the Great Hall where the reception would be held. There was one fellow in particular, not doing the lifting but organizing bottles behind the 18th Century demi-mantel moved from the library to act as a bar... yes, a bar ... that was Sly, the bartender from the Iceberg Lounge! Sly who worked for the Penguin! What was he doing here? *My god*, Bruce thought, *the curse!* What if there really was a curse?

Bruce stepped forward, thinking to question Sly directly, then thought the better of it. This was not a criminal investigation and it wasn’t the Iceberg Lounge. If he took action and there was fallout, it wouldn’t be a case of “Batman triumphant: Banner day for Arkham admissions office.” It would be “The world today saw the rise of new arch-villain Alfred Pennyworth, who single-handedly drove the Caped Crusader out of Gotham City into a hermit’s cave in Guadeloupe.” For once, he’d have to be circumspect.

First stop was the kitchen, now converted to the war room of a vast military operation by the curious triumvirate of Mr. Corry, Anatole, and Constance Catering, each supervising their own teams of serfs in blue, white, and khaki polo shirts, respectively. Alfred, Bruce was told, had a more private headquarters set up in the butler’s pantry. Peeking in, Bruce had the impression of entering the tent of the ranking general.

“Alfred, could I have a minute?”

“Is it urgent, sir?” were the words, although the tone said: “only if you are gushing blood.”

“I suppose not.”

9:25 a.m.

I pulled into the drive. “The garment” sat on the seat beside me in its special couture bag. Just through the gate with the giant looming W, this little Napoleon of a parking attendant said it was too early; he wasn’t set up yet. Oh, but wait, was I the family?

I really had no answer for that, so I showed him the garment. Yellow ruffles. If I wasn’t something connected to this event, would I even consider draping myself in yellow ruffles?

He waved me through and I parked in the garage between the Daimler and the Porsche. I don’t usually do this. Usually I leave my car in the drive, but today, god knows, they needed the space in front. Still, it felt funny.

Was I “the family,” Napoleon had asked? What kind of question was that? How was I supposed to answer something like that: “Well, I’ve known them all a long time, but it wasn’t too friendly, unless you subscribe to the theory that all the fighting was

just sublimated sexual tension and we've really been stuck on each other since day one. And I did watch the kid grow up, although I never knew who he was 'til last year. Oh, and the bride and I once had to fight our way out of a training camp for a splinter group of Syrian terrorists and, even if you're technically on opposite sides, that creates quite a bond."

This was stupid.

Was this the kind of crap this day was going to rake up?

When Napoleon asks "Oh, but wait, are you in the family?" I should smile and say "Yes."

Right?

9:30 a.m.

Bruce returned to the Great Hall to learn what he could from Constance "of Constance Catering" as it said beneath her nametag and those of all the khaki-clad workers. She seemed as friendly as a woman can seem holding a clip board, a palm pilot, and a walkie-talkie, but she was clearly too efficient for the playboy approach.

"Morning, Mr. Wayne," called Sly.

"Oh, you're Bruce Wayne," Constance eyed him warily. She had been warned by every society hostess on the Upper East Side not to *ever* be alone with this man. She had been reassured by his butler that those stories were wildly exaggerated. *But*, Alfred had added, while Constance should not fear Mr. Wayne as a lothario, she should certainly not let him converse, distract, or interfere with the preparations in any way.

Batman's reading of body language saw her shut down to him. But in case he had missed it, another voice provided narration as Constance "of Constance Catering" walked away.

"Shot down, Hotstuff! Pink Team: 1, Fop: 0"

He turned. Naughty grin... Twitch-smile... And a perfunctory kiss hello. (Was it his imagination or was the kiss a little strained? She couldn't still be mad about Ivy?)

"Morning, Miss Kyle," called Sly.

But before this interruption could remind Bruce of his investigation, he caught a glimpse of color in the bag over Selina's arm.

9:35 a.m.

"Yellow?" he asked. And unless I'm very much mistaken, it was exactly the same voice: 80 percent disapproval/20 percent disbelief, that once asked about the Rothchild Rubies.

I wanted to remind him how fetching he looked wrapped in a bedsheet toga, which was at least in the privacy of my apartment while he waited for clothes to be delivered, not paraded in public before a garden full of strangers.

But before I could say anything, Mr. Corry appeared and insisted—and I mean *insisted*—that we come look at what was going on in the garden. Mad Hatter, complete with hypno-chip, would be easier to say no to.

"Look at this," Corry demanded, waving his arms like a South American dictator.

I looked. It was a sight that, frankly, invited one of those minimalist, dogmatic bat-declarations: "Going down" or "Don't try."

Unfortunately, Bruce didn't say a word, and Mr. Corry was looking at *me*. Why? 'cause I was the woman? I wasn't the bride here, it hadn't come to that. But *somebody* needed to say *something*. This couldn't be allowed to just *be there*, looking like that, and get away with it. It was time for justice. It was time for the truth to be spoken:

"It's the wedding from hell," I said flatly.

And it was. Six rows of little gilt chairs faced a clearing with a kind of non-descript altar, and arranged around that were fourteen candelabra of different heights. When they were lit, it would look like Dante's Inferno up there.

"That's what I say," Mr. Corry huffed. "The candles should be at the end of each row of chairs!"

"Okay," I answered.

Bruce's lip twitched.

"Then you can tape a little ribbon on each," Corry explained, pointing.

"Okay," I repeated.

Another twitch.

"Ribbon and perhaps a flower."

"Absolutely," I said.

And—wait for it—yep, there was the twitch.

Mr. Corry stormed off, ready to convey my opinion on the Dante Hellfire Altar to whoever it was that set it up this way. In my peripheral vision, I noted yet another lip-twitch.

"Can I help you?" I turned, fed-up with his smarmy condescending amusement.

"I was just thinking, that's all," Bruce said innocently.

"What?" I demanded.

"You. Just now: 'Okay, okay, absolutely'... That's just how you sound humoring Joker."

I stared. I didn't think that's what he was smirking at, but you can never be sure with him.

9:40 a.m.

"Are we sacrificing somebody?"

Dick emerged from the Garden Maze and eyed the altar with horror. Bruce and Selina turned and said in unison: "You're not supposed to be here."

Dick looked at them.

"You two are scary," he said, then turned back to the altar, "But not as scary as that... That looks like - You remember that voodoo guy? Cult in the sewers?"

Bruce (who, by his own admission, nobody ever called "Mr. Sensitivity") returned to the house, so Dick told Selina about it:

"There was this voodoo guy, staged these ritualistic human sacrifices—releasing the power of the ancient gods to possess the dead bodies or something—real black arts shit - this is what it looked like." He pointed to the altar.

Selina took pity on him, forcing her embarrassment with the wedding details into a corner.

"We'll change it," she promised cheerily. "The candelabra are supposed to go up the sides, at the end of the chairs."

Dick looked skeptical.

"Just two at the altar," she assured him.

He continued to look skeptical.

"With ribbons attached... and a flower... It'll be nice. I promise. I'll make sure they fix it... Dick, stop looking like that. I will *personally* make sure they fix it, okay? Now get out of here. Scary altar is nothing compared to the scary bad luck if you and Barbara see each other today."

10:00 a.m.

Still no Barbara. Which was odd. No sign of Mr. Corry either since he left to chew ass about the Fire Altar of the Damned. No sign of Bruce, which was just as well cause every time I thought of him—who remained stone-faced in Riddler's redecorated Hatter/Two-Face/Roxy/Ivy/Penguin lair but twitched at a little peek of yellow silk - I got an itch to claw something.

Speaking of which, Steve arrived. This was the winner who had brought Poison Ivy to the bachelor party, and only Aunt Kate believed his story that Ivy got to him as soon as his plane touched down in Gotham. I know what Pammy is capable of, and she's certainly capable of that as far as foresight and seduction. But if it were that simple, it would have been only the women's side of the bridal party that was pissed at him. But the guys were freezing him out too—and that meant they knew something. "If he was completely innocent from the start," Barbara declared, "they'd stick together. But they're not. They're mad at him for getting them in trouble. Q.E.D. he was in full control of himself when he decided to bring Dick a red-headed stripper."

Steve, I should mention, was already wearing his tuxedo. He was, I learned, afraid to change clothes with the other groomsmen—not because of their presumed hostility after the Poison Ivy Affair, but because of a grand tradition of pranks in his and Dick's college dorm. Pranks involving Bengay and jockey shorts.

That's Bengay! And jockey shorts!

When I think of the times Nightwing has put on that sanctimonious tsk-tsk act: harming your fellow man, having a little compassion for other human beings! Bengay in jockey shorts, Richard! Find me *ONE ROGUE* who has *EVER* come up with *ANYTHING* that perversely wicked!

Well, much as I would have loved to sit around and learn more guilty secrets from ol' Stevo, I had a guest to smuggle in.

On my way through the kitchen, the chef from next door with the funny name I can never remember (Anatole! that's it, Anatole) stopped me. He said Mr. Corry was busy with Mr. Jose (of the House of Shri—originator of the yellow ruffles—speaking of the itch to claw someone), and of course he couldn't ask Alfred for help (What the deal is with those two, I don't know - and as Harvey once said when the subject of Batman and Catwoman was raised: I don't need to know, I don't want to know).

So anyway, Anatole couldn't ask Alfred; so could I please show him where the dinner would be served because he needed to set up the cake? I took him to the Great Hall where they were just about done setting the tables. He had a high-pitched hissyfit about something so important that mere English was inadequate: the traffic patterns—guests wouldn't be able to see - waiters upsetting his great creation—and all in a rapid-fire patter that made you think THIS is what Gilbert and Sullivan would have sounded like if they wrote in French.

The sixth sense quivered, and I perceived a familiar, silent, unassailable (but benevolent) force of nature standing behind me, watching, waiting, listening - and poised to come to the rescue.

"If I may, Miss," Alfred intoned quietly, "A display of the gifts is set up in that alcove. If we place the cake on a table beside it, all the guests will surely be able to admire it on their way in and out of that room."

Salvation. I left Alfred and Anatole to work out the details (still no Barbara?) and returned to the kitchen...but there was *DICK*, letting in my special, secret guest.

"Mr. Kittlemeier! What are you doing here?" Dick asked, bewildered.

"Ze better queztion is vat are *you* doing here, Young Man. Eet iz very bad for groom to zee bride before vedding, everyone knows thiz."

"Everyone except Mr. The-manor-is-cursed-and-we're-all-doomed," I interjected. "Dick, what are you still doing here?"

Dick turned to me.

"It still looks likes the Well of Souls out there," he announced, pointing out the door towards the garden.

"And I said I will get it changed. DICK, WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING HERE?!?"

"I need my suit," he answered. "It's up in my room."

The kitchen door swung open and Bruce peeked in, telephone in hand.

"It's Reverend Geoff," he announced, "Did we reach a consensus on 'obey?'"

Now, you see, in the past week, as this "happy event" loomed closer and closer, it had swallowed up every spare minute of, shall we call it, "non-bat conversation" in, around, and below the Wayne household. I'd done my best to avoid these conversations—and that little trick was right up there with avoiding the heat sensors at the bullion depository—but I had at least managed to remove myself from anything that could be construed as a *decision* about the process of spiritually and contractually joining two previously free and independent souls into one binding unit 'til death do they part—and I had especially avoided this subject matter in Bruce's presence, let alone, god forbid, actually talking *TO* him—and if I didn't take a breath soon, I was going to pass out...

Breeaaaatthhheee.

I had, as I said, avoided this—particularly with Bruce. But some things you don't let pass. The man inside Batman and I were finally going to have a conversation about a wedding issue and that issue (what did I do to deserve this!) was the blessed vows!

I turned as coolly as possible and pronounced my view:

"I think we can omit that part. And hey, if that goes well, maybe one day women will be able to vote and own land."

10:30 a.m.

Tim tripped, spilling the change across the parking lot of the 7-Eleven. This was so embarrassing. In a tuxedo at ten in the morning, bent over picking up nickels and dimes.

Everybody told him his job as Best Man was to hold onto the ring and make sure Dick was wearing pants.

Nobody said (a) pick up the minister and (b) call to remind the bride's father to pick up (c) the dress otherwise somebody has to (c-1) drive back to the city. But (a-1) the minister had to run out and see a sick parishioner and (b-1) the door to the church office was locked, but (b-1.2) even Robin can pick a lock but then (b-2) the phones didn't have any power, and (b-3) he didn't bring his cel from home cause (unnumbered Tim-rant) where do you put a cel phone in a tux, but (b-4) there was a payphone down the street, but (b-4.1) no change, so (b-4.2) 7-Eleven to break a bill and (b-4.3) spilling the change all over the parking lot and god this was embarrassing...

10:45 a.m.

Dinah and Barbara arrived at the Wayne Manor drive at the same time as Tim with Reverend Geoff, and Maurice Wilson the photographer. The Napoleonic parking attendant assumed this was the first rush of guests and began waving them into the receiving area on the south lawn. Rather than just explain that she was the bride and driving straight up to the house, Barbara explained with some eloquence (and at some length) the difficulty of maneuvering a wheelchair over two acres of grass—hence the very concept of the handicapped parking space. By the time she had finished, Wally West and Lucius Fox joined the queue of cars behind them at the front gate.

The bride's arrival in the manor's main foyer created flurried ripples through the quiet efficiency of the final preparations. Alfred stood formally to welcome Ms. Gordon, Ms. Lance, Mrs. Fox, Mr. Drake, Mr. West, Reverend Geoff and Mr. Fox. He indicated the room in which the ladies would dress, the room where Mr. Drake could find Mr. Grayson, and that to which Mr. West should escort Reverend Geoff before seating Mr. & Mrs. Fox. If everyone had taken their cue from Alfred, things would have progressed smoothly.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Fox couldn't help but notice the beautiful shade of aqua peeking out from the couture bag on Dinah's arm. Mention of Dinah's dress led to talk of Barbara's.

"Where is it, dear?" Mrs. Fox queried.

"Oh it's not with me. Dad brought it," Barbara answered.

"He hasn't arrived yet, Miss," Alfred informed her.

"But Tim did call and remind him, didn't you Tim?"

"He never answered the phone; I figured he'd already left."

"Look if there's any delay, I'm only booked 'til 2."

This last was Maurice Wilson, the photographer. A fool.

Dinah, Wally, and Tim stepped back imperceptibly, clearing a path between Maurice and Barbara—or more precisely, Oracle. This was a personality to whom, when she

said “Do it now,” the most powerful beings on the planet said, “Yes Ma’am with a vengeance.”

10:55 a.m.

Bruce looked into the mirror and straightened his tie for the fourth time.

Dick... married. Little circus kid, lost, crying... so lost, and so angry, and so alone. And now he was grown up and getting married. To Barbara Gordon, that upstart little girl that put on a cape and cowl and took on the night. Tim was Robin now; Cassie was Batgirl. Little Dick and Little Barbara were grown up and getting married. They could have children? Would that be possible; Batman a grandfather?

Forcing the thought from his mind, Bruce straightened his tie for a fifth time and resolved to work out what Penguin’s bartender was doing here.

He crossed from his dressing room into the hall and did a doubletake as, for a half-second, he thought he saw Kittlemeier disappear into the far doorway.

Bruce shook his head in disbelief. His inner-critic spoke in Batman’s voice: *You’re using crime—thoughts of Sly & Kittlemeier—to detach from this. Today’s not my problem. It’s yours. Go deal.*

Downstairs. Find out what Sly is doing here, don’t you think?

I’m the detective here, and the simplest explanation is always the best. Gotham’s an expensive city. Lots of working people have two jobs. Rogues are lousy tippers. The man picks up extra bartending work with a caterer—and you’re only saying go downstairs because you don’t want to go in there and talk to Dick.

Bruce sighed his defeat, walked to Dick’s room, and then stopped, hand on the doorknob. The thought that stopped him was Batman’s “Today’s not my problem.” But what if...

I might know what to say to Dick if Dad was still around.

In his mind’s eye, Psychobat assaulted Bruce with the most petrifying deathscowl ever delivered:

You DARE? You dare use their memory to get me to do this for you?

Unworthy of you, Son... Psychobat morphed into the image of Thomas Wayne. You’re 35, Bruce, and if I was still around, we still wouldn’t have had the wedding day talk, now would we?

Dad! For godsake!

Okay, never mind. Just get in there and tell the boy you love him and you’re proud of him. Doesn’t take nearly as much courage as addressing the stockholders, let alone the other things you do with yourself.

But it does, Dad. For me, it’s a thousand times worse than facing an army of Jokers and Crocs and Ra’s al Ghuls. I don’t know why. Selina once said there’s a difference between the risk facing a hail of gunfire and risking getting your heart broken. I guess...

Bruce, you’ve lost a lot of the people you’ve loved. And I know that was painful. But you can’t never take that risk again. No risk, no return. If you don’t recall that one, I hate to think what’s become of the company under your stewardship.

Banner year, Dad, we just posted record earnings, okay?

It occurred to Bruce, that he sounded very much like Dick just then: "Lay off, I've got it under control. Just stuff your advice and let me do this my way."

You love him. Whether you want to take the risk or not, you love him. You may as well go tell him so.

At that moment the doorknob was yanked from Bruce's hand and Dick's face appeared before him, bleeding at the chin.

"Styptic," he croaked. "I forgot how to shave. I need a styptic pencil."

Tim called from inside the room, "Here, got one."

Dick turned back and closed the door in Bruce's face.

Bruce blinked for a minute, then opened the door undeterred.

"What time is it?" Dick asked.

"1 minute and 20 seconds since the last time you asked me," Tim answered.

"You have the ring?"

"I have the ring."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Dick, I'm sure."

Tim turned to Bruce and talked as though Dick was not present, "He's been like this since I got here. I don't know what to do, it's like Scarecrow gas except the focus keeps jumping around."

"Blood. Did I get blood on the collar?"

"It's fine, Bro."

"What time is it again?"

Bruce stepped in, thinking perhaps, for once, it was he and not Batman that was best-equipped to deal with the situation.

"Richard," he said, "Calm down. It's a ceremony, that's all. You love her, so you say so, out loud, in front of everybody. A ritual. It's not like swinging on a flyline forty stories above street level. The worst thing that can go wrong here is—"

"Is I forget my line!" Dick realized with horror, "or her name—what if I forget her name! Or lose the ring—Tim, do you have the ring—Hold on to that ring - It's an heirloom..."

Bruce left. He was sure now he could clap his son on the shoulder and tell him he loved him and was proud. But he may as well leave it until after the ceremony, when Dick might actually hear him.

Back in the hallway, Bruce heard a voice in one of the rooms:

"It was idiot who did dis. Dis ruffles is for stick woman. Your proportions very deerferent. Need smooth lines, show where you curve in and curve out, not poofy-flouncy like dis yellow."

Bruce opened the door without knocking -And yes, there was Kittlemeier, signature tape measure around his neck, kneeling before Selina, adjusting the ruffles.

"Dere," Kittlemeier pronounced with satisfaction, "Now when dis one falls..." he draped a particular ruffle, "it draws de eye to—yes, when you move, dat will flutter and bounce in very becoming manner. You try now, in front of mirror, you knock their eyes out now."

He knew it. Bruce always knew they plotted against him this way—Kittlemeier and Catwoman. It couldn't be an accident that she looked like that, the purple, and the

gloves and the boots as black as her hair, escaping out the cowl in little wisps and curls, and the line of that costume wrapping her curves in leather—they did it to him on purpose. Of course they did.

“Do you mind?” Dick’s Aunt Kate appeared and pushed him towards the door. “This is a ladies’ dressing room.”

But none of the ladies present were shy in front of Bruce, and Barbara in particular wheeled up to him—wearing little more than a slip and bustier, which made Aunt Kate gasp. Barbara slapped a bouquet of flowers into Bruce’s stomach and a roll of tape around his wrist.

“Go down,” she ordered, “and tape one of these to the end of each row of chairs, and one on each candelabra...”

Not wanting to tape flowers to anything, Bruce started to object: there was something he needed to keep an eye on, there was... this bartender from the Iceberg...

The no-nonsense OraCom voice that said “do it now and argue later” bored into his very spinal column with the words “*then hide the tape in this.*” And a roll of white ribbon joined the tape around Bruce’s wrist.

11:15 a.m.

Rosa began playing the specially selected walk-in music with the arrival of the first guests. But Mr. & Mrs. Fox had arrived so early, Rosa soon ran out of prepared material. Steve and Wally, stationed at the garden entrance to seat guests as they arrived, noted this.

“If I were her,” Steve said, “I’d grab a hymnal.”

At almost the same second, the synthesized chords of *A Mighty Fortress is our God* droned through the garden.

Wally looked at Steve. Steve looked at Wally. Both stifled a laugh.

Faith of Our Fathers was next... There was a pause, then... *On the River Jordan* and a longer pause.

“Can’t keep that up forever,” Steve observed.

“How many hymns are there?” Wally asked.

Then came the *Ave Maria* followed by the longest pause yet, and *We Gather Together*.

“Running out of hymns,” said Steve.

After the Thanksgiving song, the pause continued on... and on... and on...

“Now what?” asked Steve.

“Improv,” Wally answered.

On cue, Rosa began a jazz exploration of Greensleeves.

Steve and Wally looked at each other, eyes locked, then sprinted out the back of the garden, doubling over with laughter, only to run smack into-

“Bruce!” Wally sputtered, his whole face red with mirth suddenly paled to pink with embarrassment. Then Wally saw the tape, the ribbon, and the flowers Bruce carried, and mirth-red returned.

Bruce glowered the best glower he could manage without the cowl.

“I’m looking for one of the bartenders,” he growled. “You see him?”

11:30 a.m.

Okay. A lot has been written, concocted, and speculated about that day at the Watchtower. Here's what really happened:

There was a bad guy: Prometheus. He had a gadget. He took control of Steel's armor, reduced Martian Manhunter & Plastic Man to a state of spastic paralysis, hit Green Lantern with some neural chaff making it impossible for him to use the ring, set up motion detector explosives to keep Flash from moving above normal speed, hypnotized Huntress into immobility, and beat Batman within an inch of his life.

Well, what was I supposed to do? You can't just stand there and *WATCH* that kind of thing spinning further and further out of control.

So I abandoned the disguise I'd snuck in with and interceded. I drew focus with the whip just long enough that the heroes were able to get the upper hand.

My point is: there was Kittlemeier, agreeing to look at Dinah and Kate's dresses since he'd finished with mine, and Tim in some panic about losing the ring in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven and maybe he could ask Wally to zipzap over and look for it. Mr. Corry, Constance, *and* Anatole came up the stairs as a bickering set! Then Bruce came back with the tape and the flowers, asking if I knew how much Sly made at the Iceberg, while Barbara started chattering behind me that if he ran out of ribbon there was more on the gift table. I heard a door open down the hall and Dick's voice calling for Tim...

Well, what was I supposed to do?

"You," I said to Mr. Corry, "tape the flowers to the candelabra. You," I turned to Tim and continued round the circle, "find the ring. You, fix the ruffles. You, stop stalking the bartender. You, get back in the room before Dick sees you. You... I don't know what your thing is. And you, go guard your cake."

And they did it. Every one of them. Even Bruce!

I took a deep breath, clapped the imaginary pixie dust off my hands, then settled them on my hips—where Kittlemeier had indeed tamed the ruffles into submission. That was really much easier than I would have thought possible. Almost like the first time I went up against Batman—the giddy realization that *I can do this*. I can really do this!

11:45 a.m.

...:Detective, I wished to call and convey my respects to the young ones on this special day.....

Bruce was expecting this. There were only two villains with the crucial information to know Dick Grayson's wedding was an opportunity to strike at Batman. There was Hugo Strange, for whom such an event would hold little appeal. And even if it did, Hugo was too afraid of Catwoman at the moment, since her payback for Riddler threatened removal of some internal organs he'd rather not lose, through bodily openings not intended for ad hoc surgical procedures.

And there was Ra's al Ghul, who would not shrink from using the occasion for some nefarious purpose if he had cause, but was far more likely to pull a stunt like this: making a show of his ability to use the event and even bigger show of not doing so.

“Give it up, Ra’s,” Bruce growled into the receiver, “You want to play ‘Aren’t we Civilized,’ pull those six DEMON agents out of Chinatown. Their arrival didn’t go unnoticed.”

...:Detective, you wound me, truly. I called to wish your family joy, and you answer me with threats.....

“I haven’t threatened you yet, Ra’s, but I...”

...:Oh, for godssake, boys! ...

Bruce and Ra’s both stopped as Selina’s voice, a curious mix of silky, amused, and pissed off, broke in on the extension:

...:Just unzip, whip’em out, and let’s all get on with our goddamn lives!:... -click-

12:00 noon

Martin Stanwick was, for all intents and purposes, the Batman of Gotham High Society. He had an almost frightening eye for detail, an equally formidable gift for deduction, and he even had a secret identity: he was Hermoine, the society & gossip columnist for the Gotham Times.

But Martin was known to the Gotham social scene as Marty Stanwick, a “novelist” in theory, but hostesses learned fast that inquiries about his literary output were never encouraged. One simply learned to not ask, to smile when he called himself a writer, and to generally humor the silly goose. He was always available to round out a dinner party, he was always charming and funny, and he never seemed to notice if he was a last minute replacement. Nor did he mind escorting deaf Grandma Wensis.

Martin / Hermoine sat in the East Garden of Wayne Manor, in the last seat of the back row, taking mental dictation:

The bride appeared in a full-length gown of imported peau de soie and alencon lace, fashioned with a portrait neckline, bracelet-length sleeves & fitted bodice with alencon lace appliqués re-embroidered with seed pearls... Who’s that coming in? Mr. and Mrs. Wigglesworth (back together?)... Being seated next to Mr. and Mrs. Fox... Interesting ...The full princess skirt and chapel-length train with which such a dress would have been originally designed, was modified, gathered into graceful twirls to accommodate the wheelchair... His editor would object to his mentioning this, but Martin would fight for it. It was a dignified solution to a reality of this bride’s circumstances, and it damn well should make it into print...

On the bride’s side... Good lord, what a mish-mash. That fat cop and the pretty Hispanic one that guarded the baubles at all the charity balls. Why couldn’t they dress them more uptown? The man was impossible but that woman could pass if someone put her in a decent frock and taught her how to carry herself—GOOD LORD, they were sitting next to the Father! They were guests! How frightful...

Her fingertip veil, Martin resumed his mental note-taking... cascaded from a mother of pearl tiara.

For Dick, the reality of the situation began receding the moment he turned to the back of the garden and saw Barbara at the top of the aisle.

He’d been standing at the altar, where Tim had led him like an invalid, standing him on his mark. The organ stopped, then played a note -that sounded like all the other

notes as far as Dick could tell- except it triggered a rustling noise behind him. Tim poked him, then he felt a nudge on his hip—ah, turn. We turn now...

His mind dimly registered 5'1" of yellow, topped by Aunt Kate's face. She walked up to him, smiled, then stepped to the side.

Selina did the same thing—except she winked.

Then Dinah—smile, no wink, and her dress was aqua.

And then... there she was. His Barbara. Reading from top to bottom—fiery red curls that used to peek out from below her cowl—fiery blue eyes that also peeked out from the cowl, always demanding to be taken seriously even though... progressing down farther...the way those apple lips pouted and the bat-emblem stretched across her costume did not inspire "serious" thoughts—at least not for him.

That's how he first saw her, and that's how a part of him would always think of her—bright yellow gloves that matched the emblem and the belt—but also gave her away. She put on a brave show, but she was new to being in costume. She wasn't comfortable and it showed. That first meeting, while they talked, she had no idea where to put her hands. Kept striking those little poses, then readjusting. Yellow here, yellow there. It was SO CUTE...

...gathered here in the sight of God and this gathering, to join together this man and this woman in holy wedlock, an honorable estate...

He was afraid she wanted to hone in on his position as Batman's sidekick—it sure looked that way from the outfit. But she didn't. And she was this incredible, irresistible mix of "better than me" and "clueless"...

...and not by any to be enterprised lightly or wantonly...

Then they found out Batgirl was Barbara Gordon. The commissioner's daughter – wasn't that something! It seemed to make it better and worse as far as Bruce was concerned. As Gordon's daughter she had a legitimate claim to the fight on crime; it wasn't a wound like Batman's or his own, not back then, but it was a tie to this shadow world. That was something.

But Batman was also worried that he could learn her secret at all. He thought it meant she had no idea how deadly this world could be. How could she know? How could any of them?

...but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly and in the fear of God, duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained...

How was it possible they were standing there now? Did he make this happen? The memory of that first sight of Batgirl, in a "superhero" stance on a rooftop while he pulled himself up on a Batrope, vanished like a reflection in still water hit by droplets of rain, each drop forming a new image:

Barbara in Oracle-mode at her keyboard, the image from her monitors flickering off her glasses, oblivious to his presence.

...for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other...

Giving her the locket... Getting the diamond for her ring...

... both in prosperity and in adversity...

...into which estate these persons present come now to be joined...

Barbara found it impossible to control the smile which was surely too wide and undignified for the occasion. Happy was good, but the bride should be serenely happy, not cat-that-ate-the-canary happy.

And now she owed herself twenty dollars. Because the moment she named Dinah and Selina among her attendants, she knew someone would have to use that expression sooner or later, and she figured it would be the original punster himself, Dick.

Look at him.

What happened to that infuriating little brat that couldn't leave a bad pun alone, who had to make it so clear he was Batman's second, trained by the master, handpicked—Look at him now.

Look at him looking... like she was the center of the universe.

What could he possibly see?

That couldn't be right, could it, being that focused on another person, even at a time like this? Didn't even look like he knew where he was...

"I do," Jim Gordon intoned. And the words snapped Barbara into her reality.

Her father said... then... that would have been in answer to "Who gives this woman?"

Oh my, Barbara thought, speaking of staring into his eyes like Svengali, not knowing where we are...

Do you, Barbara Louise, take this man, Richard John...

Yellow ruffles or not, I was awfully glad now that Barbara forced me to do this. Standing safely up there, turned a comfortable 60-degrees towards the happy couple, he couldn't see my face from Father of the Groom position.

Shouldn't be looking my way anyway, Bruce, I thought, should be looking at your son. Look at that smile—like he can barely hold in a laugh—isn't that priceless. He didn't get that from you, Stud. From day one, what the kid feels, you can see all over his face.

For better for worse, For richer for poorer, In sickness and in health...

Does she think I can't see that?

Selina, how long did I know you in that mask? A few inches of cheek and mouth to work out what the whole face was doing? Do you think I can't see you, Kitten? Smiling at my son and his girl.

With this ring...

The sixth sense never lies.

You're watching me, Dark Knight. I know it. What you can possibly see from there, I can't imagine. But I feel your eyes on me. Like the museum. Or a rooftop.

You know where they got that ring? Cartier's. Our first rooftop. First time it got interesting, anyway. First time you let me get so close. I found I could do more than just scratch you at that distance. I could kiss you. And you let me. You didn't seem that surprised, either, not even the first time. Is that why you let me get so close that night...

You may now kiss the bride...

...your arms slid up around my neck, like it was perfectly natural. I could never figure out how you did that. How you could be so casual about it? Like this was something that happened all the time between crimefighters and thieves. Your eyes were the most astonishing things I'd ever seen, and the taste of your lips... That does not happen every day.

You didn't blush that night, Catwoman. But your cheeks are coloring now.

Ladies and Gentlemen...

Look at me, Kitten...

I present for the first time...

Don't look, no, just for a split-second...

Mr. And Mrs. Richard Grayson

12:45 p.m.

"Hiya, Mr. Nigma," Sly greeted the man he recognized as the Riddler, Edward Nigma, despite his conservative suit and false mustache.

Nigma shushed the bartender, but took two glasses of champagne off the tray.

"Sly, you ever see a movie with Harrison Ford and Melanie Griffith crashing a wedding?"

"Working Girl, Romantic-Comedy, Mike Nichols, 1988."

"The part I'm thinking of," he said, with a glance at a blonde guest a few feet away who stood with her back to them, "Ford realizes the girl dragged him to this thing to meet some business hotshot, the bride's father, but they're not invited and says: 'You're like one of those psychotic cops that nobody wants to ride with cause all their partners wind up dead!'"

"Yeah, I remember that," Sly said with a laugh. "That was funny."

"I used to think so too," Nigma said, turning away from Sly and handing the second glass to the blonde.

"Tell me again, why we are risking this?" he asked, "This place is full of cops!"

"I told ya, Eddie, think of it as a puzzle."

"When is a puzzle not a puzzle, Harley? When it is a *SUICIDE MISSION*. This is like hitting a donut shop."

"Eddie, you don't have to stay. I thought it'd be less conspicuous coming in as a couple. I'm in now so if you want to go, *GO*."

Harley Quinn had finally achieved what the Joker's homicidal reputation, right cross, and the torture of 76 Trombones could not: scared Riddler off the idea of pursuing her romantically.

He made for the door. As he went, eyes on every policeman he recognized and not on where he was going, he collided with a table - and then with a very irate Frenchman.

"Watch where you are going, you silly man! Cake is for eating, not for wearing."

"Cake?" Nigma sputtered.

"But of course, this is the wedding cake that you nearly toppled into."

Nigma looked at the table he'd nearly bumped—it was a waterfall. The cake was a waterfall. He looked back at the Frenchman.

"The cake is a waterfall?"

"*Mais oui*."

Nigma smiled.

"That's very...enigmatic. I like you."

"*Tres bien*. But don't upset the cake-table, Sillyman."

Nigma tried again to leave, but having again not looked where he was going, he suffered another collision. This time it was a familiar voice that told him to "Vatch vere you are going - Meester Nigma? Dat is you under dat silly moustaches? Where you get that thing, Halloween shop? You come to me next time, I make you one that match your haircolor. Not look so silly as dis."

Nigma backed up from Mr. Kittlemeier directly into Jim Gordon, who excused himself looking past both men towards the table.

"Why is the cake a waterfall?" Gordon asked no one in particular.

Nigma bit his tongue as a dozen answers to the riddle suggested themselves.

12:50 p.m.

Harley Quinn detached herself from the party. She set her champagne glass on a tray and wandered out of the Great Hall, presumably—so it would look to anyone watching—in search of a powder room.

She passed the door to the powder room, however, continued past the next door, then the next, and finally opened the double doors to the library. She sighed. Right there was where her precious Puddin' kicked the cameraman in the nuts when they invaded that food festival.... And right over there was where he threw a pan of scalding oil at her.

And over there was the door to that little room where she hid when all hell broke loose. She opened the door to the little annex and began rummaging in the moss beneath a potted palm tree. She bent on all fours and looked under the booktable, then behind that little loveseat where - she stopped. Looking through the legs of the loveseat she saw silk shoes dyed a bright yellow to match - she looked up - ruffles.

"Hiya, Catty. Heh heh. Nice color on youch ouch ouch."

Selina grabbed hold of Harley's ear, and pulled her to a standing position.

"Explanation?" was all she said.

"I, ah, ah, lost something last time I was here."

Selina raised an eyebrow.

"I need it back," Harley added.

Selina said nothing.

"It's not like this place is open to the public every day, Catty, I need my bra-ack. I need to get *back* the *thing* that I lost."

Selina felt a tug on the corner of her lip. Rather than permit it to turn into a bat-twitch, she let it relax into a full, natural smile, then composed herself and became matter-of-fact.

"Harley. You were on the Riviera recently, correct?"

Harley nodded.

"With a French count."

"Mhum," Harley confirmed, chewing on her lip.

"François de Poulignac?"

Harley nodded again. Selina sighed, looked around the room with a knowing eye, then moved to a shelf that looked to be the right height. It displayed a variety of ancient artifacts. She picked up an Alexandrian oil lamp that seemed the right size, looked inside it, and extracted a ball of fabric. She handed it to Harley.

"Your bra. Now get out."

"Catty I..."

"I won't tell Joker. Just. Get. Out."

2:30 p.m.

The banquet was being cleared and strains of music called the guests into the large drawing room where a dance floor was laid. To the casual observer, Alfred's

appearance was as dignified and impassive as ever. But those who knew him well could see he relaxed considerably now that the meal was successfully completed.

Selina in particular, sensitive to barely perceptible changes of mood in stoic, inexpressive men, decided to acknowledge this as she would with any other stoic, inexpressive man: by playfully tweaking his nose.

"Alfred," she whispered, hanging back as the guests migrated out of the hall, "later we must talk about the clean-up after these big events. You won't believe what I found stashed in the oil lamp in the library..."

This was all Martin Stanwick overheard or needed to hear. He had already seen the cook, the caterer, and the wedding planner coming to her with questions. He'd seen her receive what looked very like a sarcastic "Yes, Dear" from Bruce. And now she was giving instructions to the butler.

She might be wearing a bridesmaid's dress, Martin thought, but his Hermoine-sensibility recognized the "mistress of the manor" when he saw her. She might not be Mrs. Wayne officially—but in this day and age those distinctions had little to do with legal names. She was the one to be courted if Hermoine was to be invited to all those Wayne galas in the future, and he would lose no time in doing so.

Unfortunately, this was easier said than done. As a member of the wedding party, Selina seemed occupied with duty dance after duty dance. And when free, she and Wayne gravitated towards each other in a way that obviously wouldn't welcome Martin's cutting in.

He danced instead with the Maid of Honor, a stunner, certainly. Beauty, Brains, and (Martin was certain) Breeding (although she denied any connection to the Lances of Newport or Palm Beach). At the conclusion of their dance, Martin asked to be introduced to... he looked around, but Selina didn't seem to be in the room. "Bother," Martin said aloud, "where did she go?"

"Who?" Dinah asked.

"Mrs. Wayne," he answered absently.

Dinah chuckled at this and politely told him she assumed he meant Miss Kyle. She pointed: "She's dancing with the groom."

2:40 p.m.

"You're in trouble, Richard, there's plotting in the air."

It was a mock-serious tone with which Selina spoke, and Dick played up to it with a deadpan.

"I'm shaking."

"I'm serious, I've been dancing with several of your old college buddies, and I must say, you have not guarded your secrets well."

Dick stalled their dance and looked at her, curious.

"Oh?"

Selina nodded grimly.

"Bengay. Jockey shorts. There's payback in the air, my friend. And they all seem to know you're in the bridal suite at the Carlyle tonight. If I were you, I'd sweep the room for microphones and strip search the guy who brings room service."

Dick laughed.

"You had me going for a second."

"Just consider this, so far you've already had Stevo bring Poison Ivy into your path *by accident*. Can you imagine what he might come up with *if he really tried?*"

"I'm done imagining. Selina—we did it! We beat the curse!"

Selina laughed and sighed.

"Cocky. I've always said that'll be your undoing one day."

2:47 p.m.

It began with Martin's distracted misstatement to Dinah:

"Mrs. Wayne" ...Overheard by Mrs. Wigglesworth, who then saw Dinah point to Selina...

"Dancing with the groom" ...Mrs. Wigglesworth told Mrs. Ashton-Larraby she'd already heard talk of who's next, mouthing the words "Mrs. Wayne" and pointing, as Dinah had, towards Selina.

Mrs. Ashton-Larraby said at last her lips were unsealed! She'd known for months, but didn't want to spread idle gossip. Mrs. Ashton-Larraby told Mrs. Helbrook, who told Mrs. Ford, overheard by Mr. Upton. Mr. Upton told Mr. Drake, who told his wife, who told Mrs. Fox...

By the time Selina returned to her seat, there were four separate accounts of the engagement being circulated. Hearing one of these, Aunt Kate sought out Selina to offer her congratulations.

2:48 p.m.

"Excuse me?"

I couldn't have heard that right.

"Congratulations! Oh right, that's the wrong way round. You only congratulate the man. I should congratulate Bruce, and I compliment you."

"Come again?"

"Selina! Don't be coy. I just heard you're engaged."

E-e-e-en-ggggg-aged???

"Engaged to do what, exactly?"

Anyone 'in the family' would know the tone. It said "as you have blood in your veins that you want to *keep* in your veins, think carefully before you speak next." But of course Kate wasn't in the family, neither family that knows Catwoman's voice or what it means. She went on as if the answer was obvious:

"To get married."

My next question, to intimidate her into backing off should have been "To whom?" But I couldn't say it. If I asked the question, she'd only *answer it*, and I didn't need to hear that.

Instead I opted for: "Engaged in what sense of the word?"

Kate smiled now, and she used the tone I use with the cats when it's time to get them in the carrier for the vet.

"There's only one sense, dear. Weren't you listening earlier: 'For better for worse, for richer for poorer.'"

I turned away. I didn't need to hear it again. I didn't need to snap at the silly woman. I did need to find out where she got this monstrous idea, but before I could calm down enough to know where to begin, Stephie bubbled up with a note from one of the catering staff "For Mrs. Wayne" she giggled, she guessed that meant me!

I don't happen to know ClueMaster, Stephanie's daddy. He's a 2nd class rogue, and we've never moved in the same circles. But I made a mental note that if I ever did meet him, I must mention that, in my opinion, this giggling little twit is not too old for a spanking.

I grabbed a bottle of champagne from the nearest cooler, and scanned the room: Barbara was busy, obviously. Dinah...Lois... Perfect. Who else? I spied a blonde head ducking behind a planter. Harley. Still lurking. Okay, fine. For this, she could stay.

2:49 p.m.

Clark Kent's super-hearing picked up the story in its earliest stages, and he shared it with his wife with some amusement.

Lois only smiled for a moment, then looked disapproving. She said it would be very awkward for both Selina & Bruce to be the subject of rumor and innuendo and if Clark had even an iota of sensitivity he might appreciate-

"Darling," Clark cut her off, more amused than ever, "neither of them are new to rumor and innuendo. Think about it for a minute."

Lois delivered one of those looks that say "Enjoy the pull-out sofa." If after the bachelor party, the Diana stories, and the whispers still going around about his own bachelor party, he couldn't understand how distasteful it was to have people talking about...

"C'mon," Selina passed the table with Dinah and another woman in tow, each holding a bottle of champagne. "We're getting drunk."

Lois grabbed a bottle from the table, shot a parting look at Clark, and stood to follow. Clark stared in disbelief.

"Catwoman, Black Canary, and I think that other one is Harley Quinn just invited me to get boozy with them. I might want to write a book one day."

4:15 p.m.

"Okay, here's what I want to know," Selina slurred. "'Til death do us part'—Could we possibly come up with a more terrifying concept? We'd have to make up new words to top that one."

"I think," Dinah mused, "it was the same guy who came up with 'if I should die before I wake.'"

"I think it's nice," Harley said, shaking the last drops from her bottle into the glass.

"You would," Selina accused, passing Harley her own bottle, "with Puddin' around, you're always close to the escape hatch."

Lois took Selina's bottle from Harley and filled her own glass.

"It's not so bad," she declared, as the only qualified spokesman for the married state, "unless you've got the alsoran waiting in the wings, waiting for you to kick. She is, you know, just biding her time. Thinks I'm too dumb to know it. Smallville's too simple to get it, but I know. *-hic-*"

"Lois, it's just talk," Dinah whined. "There's nothing in it. Move on."

Selina squinted at Dinah critically. "That's not what you said when the talk was 'bout you." She looked at Harley. It was unfortunate they couldn't speak plainly. If Harley could know Dinah was Black Canary she would understand. The Gotham Post's ridiculous stories about Canary loving Ra's Al Ghul... and Harley would love Dinah's impersonation of Ra's. Well, Selina could speak plainly about one topic, the Post had written other lies:

"And it's not what *I* said when the talk was about *me* either. Arrested, brainwashed, streetwalker, *flat-chested.*" From her tone, it was clear she felt this last slander the most. Then she pointed at Harley... "An' can y'see me letting this tasseled twit make me her bitch?"

Harley did a spittake.

"Catty, honest, I never even dreamed of—"

"Oh, stand down, ya silly twit, I know you had nothing to do with that ridiculous story. You couldn't even keep track of your underwear with Count François."

Harley giggled, Lois and Dinah stared, and Selina concluded, "I don't see you as a mastermind."

9:00 p.m.

Once the happy couple left and guests began making their exits, Clark identified the room where he'd earlier heard the women's giggles, whispers, and heartbeats. He collected a barely-conscious Lois and agreed to drop an equally inebriated Dinah on their way out of town.

Harley Quinn was entrusted to Sly. She was still wanted for the last attack on the manor, but Bruce thought it would be impolitic for him to openly hand her over to the police. So Sly was instructed to drop her at the Hacienda and an anonymous tip would take care of the rest.

That left Selina.

As he watched her stretched on the sofa, eyes closed, lips parted, chest rising and falling as she breathed, a wicked glint came into Bruce's eye. It was the memory of her with which he'd started this day, taunting him back to consciousness in some alley. He leaned over her sleeping form and fingered her hair gently, where the mask would be, but wasn't.

"Catwoman." His voice was soft and seductive, but still Batman. "Catwoman, wake up."

Her eyes opened dreamily, then focused, boring into his—and the vaguely formed idea of payback fell to pieces as she began babbling woozily:

"You were no help... Can't just stand by and watch that kind of thing Napoleon in the parking lot and ruffles in the family ... and the altar with Dante's Inferno...and Tim!...ring at the 7-Eleven...Why'd he want t'send Flash to 7-Eleven to get a ring

anyway?... and somebody had to take French Gilbert and Sullivan to the dining room cause he won't talk to Alfred after something happened at Christmas..."

"Yes, Dear."

"Stop saying that," she muttered, as he steered her up the stairs. "You. You did this to me. I liked my life. Finally had it down to where it worked. I had a good little thing going, 'til that Carlton bitch at the Gotham Post says I'm in jail, flat-chested Jane Doe brainwashed by Harley Quinn! But I would've let it go. I let it go when that Miller asshole said I was a whore, what do I care? Let it go when they said Watchtower was a threeway with you and Black Canary..." She stopped leaning against the wall and pointed unsteadily. "...but you smiled. You did that fucking twitch smile. And that's how it all started."

"Yes, Dear."

Selina looked up at the ceiling, then around.

"Who keeps saying that?"

Bruce steered her into the bedroom, removed her dress, folded it neatly, and placed it in a drawer.

"Then came the museum, 'this isn't a crime it's a date' and the vault, and the demonspawn ... none of this was s'posed to happen? And, lil game with Catwoman breaks into the manor, fine, no harm in that, then the Cadaver's in love with Canary, ...and R-Word... and Pheromones..."

She wound down, and Bruce smiled.

"Don't stop now."

She removed the dress from the drawer.

"This is how it starts," she said, looking for a chair to toss the dress onto, "Kitten this, Kitten that, and before you know it your bra is stuffed in an Alexandrian oil lamp." There was a moment's silence, then she yelled, "THAT'S IT! THAT'S THE TWITCH. STOP DOING THAT."

Bruce laughed.

"I like you when you're drunk. You're cute."

"This is your fault! *THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT.*"

"Selina."

"WHAT???"

"Shut up for a second."

He wrapped his arms round her, then said gently, "Mrs. Wayne isn't that terrible a concept, is it?"

I felt naked—not because most of my clothes were in the drawer, draped over the chair, or on the floor—but because... this... person... Bruce, Batman, the guy inside Batman... was looking straight into my soul. It, ah, sobered me up in under a second.

I felt my arms lifting, settling easily around his neck, felt my head tilt back and my eyes close as I leaned in to kiss him... then I felt a jolt—He had my wrists in one hand and my chin in the other.

"Won't work this time, Kitten. You can't escape that way anymore. Answer me. Mrs. Wayne isn't that awful, is it?"

I didn't trust my voice, so I shook my head a little. He released my chin, then my wrists, and then he was holding me again.

"Good, I just thought we should settle that before we went any further."

