



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

#23

Cat = Sales

Loose Ends



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
LOOSE ENDS

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LOOSE ENDS

I'm not an unreasonable man.

If there's something I'm not understanding, explain it to me.

When I didn't know about escapes, I learned.

When I didn't know about climbing, I learned.

So if there's a reason the catsuit can't be hung on the hook built for that very purpose in the costume vault, why not just explain it to me instead of consistently leaving it on the bedroom chair, on the tallboy, or under the bed.

She says she's fastidious. She says it's a cat quality.

So explain that closet.

The hell-mouth.

She once lost a cat inside it.

I offered to help her get it organized. What did she say: "Why bother?"

Why bother. Kitten, you can't find anything in it. What's the point in keeping stuff if you can't lay your hands on it without rummaging for half an hour and losing a cat in all the clutter?

And then... I saw it coming... head tilt... eyebrow up... "Pffffffffft." Same way she'd answer "Crime doesn't pay." Infuriating woman.

"It's not a trophy room," she says, "it's a storage closet."

"And what's *THAT* supposed to mean?"

"Never mind."

"Selina, I'm not an unreasonable man..."

"Pffffffffft."

"...if there's something I'm not understanding, explain it to me."

"I just don't feel the need to have my old junk filed clockwise around the room in chronological order."

::brrzzzz:: The intercom interrupted.

"Yes, Alfred?"

::Sir, Ms. Barbara is on the line. I fear she sounds somewhat agitated.::

Dick's face was bruised, swollen, and blood seeped through the bandages that ran from his cheek down to his collarbone.

"That's a cut?" Selina was aghast, "Richard, this is serious; that could've opened your carotid artery."

"I don't need to be grandma'd right now. Okay, Selina?"

"*GRANDMA'D!*" she exclaimed before Bruce pulled her away from the bed.

Dick looked grateful.

Talking was painful, but what he had to say to Bruce and Selina—and to his wife—couldn't wait. When he spoke, he addressed the room generally, but seemed to be speaking more to Bruce.

"The one-night-a-week plan isn't working. Before the wedding, Nightwing spending one night in Gotham and the rest of the time in Bludhaven made sense. Gotham has a fulltime protector. But trying to work it the other way: living in Gotham, checking in at 'Haven once a week, it's not enough. Every time I go back, it's six days worse. Blockbuster chose Bludhaven to be the seat of his criminal empire because it didn't have a hero. I worked too long and too hard to stop him, to clean up the corruption there; I can't turn my back on it now."

"Dick," Barbara pleaded, "I can't leave Gotham. You can't ask me to do that."

"Then I won't," her husband replied simply, "but I won't leave 'Haven the way it is, either, under Blockbuster's thumb. We've got to end him."

The only response was from Bruce; Dick understood the grunt to be approval.

"I couldn't stop him before, not alone," Dick said in reply, still addressing Bruce more than the others. "But I have three advantages now he knows nothing of: Oracle, Batman, and Catwoman."

"Okay, now I'm feeling insulted," Robin complained. "I'm not invited to participate in the Battle of Bludhaven. Fine. I accept that. I'll stay in Gotham and mind the store while you're all away. No worries. No egos here like on some teams. I accept my assignment. But you've got to rub it in by having me *run the projector for your briefing!*"

"Robin, Tim, Bro!" Nightwing pleaded, "I need this. This is Blockbuster. This is the big one. If it were a briefing at Titans Tower, I'd be golden. But it's not. It's in the cave. It's in *his* cave, and he's made a hundred little tweaks to the system since my day. If I go in there without you, I'm going to hook up my laptop to the big screen, I'll launch my slideshow, and it will crash the system. And there goes my credibility right there. Goodbye forever to my chance of running this thing."

"Alright," Robin sighed, knowing he was beaten. "I guess I can be there for half an hour and click a mouse for you."

The next day, Tim Drake drove out to Wayne Manor after school. Instead of going straight to the cave, he walked the long way around the house, to the kitchen door. He knocked and entered.

"Hey, Alf," he called as he went through to the elevator entrance in the butler's pantry, "Going downstairs."

Alfred Pennyworth knew his duty. Tim was the only Robin that didn't live at Wayne Manor in his civilian identity, but Bruce still wanted him to treat the house as his home. And Tim had always done so. He didn't need to check in the way he had just done. The only reason for Tim not to let himself in the front door and go straight through the grandfather clock passage to the cave was to pass by Alfred and make his presence known. And the only reason to do that, Alfred knew, was to get fed. Mrs. Drake was on another health food kick.

Alfred prepared a plate of sandwiches and brought them to the cave in time to see Tim, already changed into Robin, helping Nightwing move a long conference table into the main chamber.

"There," Nightwing declared with a satisfied grin, "now everybody will have a clear view of the overheads. Robin, you can sit there and run the slides off the laptop. Now where are those binders?"

Catwoman took her seat in the Batcave. She took one look at the glossy black binder before her - with a Nightwing emblem emblazoned on the cover - and drove a claw into her palm to fight back the smile.

Without turning her head, she stole a glance at Batman, staring down at an identical binder placed in front of his chair.

"Don't say it," he signed. "Just don't say it."

"Chip off the old block," she signed back.

"Stop it."

"It's cute."

"I mean it. Stop."

"Shall we start then," 'Wing began, and the projection screen lowered silently down. A Nightwing symbol appeared on the giant monitor that loomed over the cave.

Barbara, on the other side of Batman's chair, sitting before a third black binder, voiced the comment Catwoman would not.

"Nice logo, Sweetums."

'Wing glowered at her.

"Shall we start?" he repeated.

"*Un film di* Nightwing," his wife sang out.

"Says the gal who normally comes to meetings dressed as a hologram," 'Wing shot back in Dick's voice.

"And this is the crack team that kept me from the Katz Collection," Catwoman muttered.

"That, and a henchman who couldn't keep his mouth shut after a couple boilermakers," Batman noted under his breath.

"Leon was a fence, not a henchman," she corrected.

"I'll say, glass jaw."

"Alfred," Robin hit the intercom, "are there any chicken strips left? It looks like I'll be here for a while."

After the snack arrived, Dick removed his mask and rubbed his eyelids.

"Bludhaven briefing, take two," he said.

"A lot of alliteration from nervous Nightwing," Barbara chided.

"Here we go again," Robin mumbled.

Batman cleared his throat, "Can we get started here?"

Just like Batman did, Nightwing cleared his throat before speaking, "Uh, yes. Yes, I think we're all set now. You ready, Robin?"

"Sure thing, Bro," answered a too-cheery voice.

"Blockbuster is Roland Desmond," 'Wing began. He nodded to Tim, who clicked the mouse as instructed. A surveillance photo flickered simultaneously on the laptop and the huge projection screen. It showed a well-dressed but unremarkable man entering a car. Then the same man's mugshot appeared on the screen. "He is the numero uno criminal in Bludhaven."

Nightwing paused, looking at the others in the room, trying to judge their level of interest. Batman already seemed bored.

A third slide came up, showing the same man's face on the body of a behemoth. It had a huge balding head, but long grayish-blond hair flowed from the back, down past the shoulders.

"WHOA," Tim exclaimed. "What happened?"

"Experimental steroids. In prison. Roland is now 8 feet tall, weighs 825 pounds, and fights like something out of *Lord of the Rings*."

"That's not even human," Tim winced.

"Bullseye," Barbara said, "Ten points to the Boy Wonder."

"The human heart Roland was born with couldn't accommodate his new body. Somehow, he got himself a transplant... from Gorilla City. Physically, it's his only weakness that I know of."

Batman stifled a yawn.

"Ok, we get the picture," Selina put in. "He's a velociraptor in a good suit. What else has he got going for him?"

"Smarts," 'Wing answered. "The first Blockbuster, his brother, was a muscle-bound ox. Not Roland. Roland is a genius. In addition to his sheer physical bulk, we've got to contend with, in my opinion, an unmatched criminal intellect."

Batman spoke up, "Yes, yes, he ousted Bludhaven crime boss, Angel Marin, and was able to fend off Black Mask's minions to keep a stranglehold on Bludhaven. Right, Wing?"

A clearly flustered Nightwing looked down and shuffled his notes.

"Uh... uh... yes, of course, that's right."

Batman spun his hand around a few times as an indication to speed up the briefing.

"Uh, Blockbuster operates a highly sophisticated criminal enterprise in Bludhaven. The largest of its kind, in fact," Wing said as if he were reading from a script.

"Old news," a bored voice rang out.

"Hey! Who the hell is running this briefing anyway?" Dick shouted.

"Apparently, you are," Batman replied. "So tell me something I don't know."

Shuffling his notes again, Wing said, "Okay, okay, I will." He looked up to Robin to change to the next slide. "The chief source of Blockbuster's cash is a gang, the oldest and largest in Bludhaven. About fifteen years ago, this gang was started by Angel Marin. It originated in Bludhaven's fourth police precinct on the South Side, and later spread its tentacles into almost every community in the city."

Nightwing looked up and saw everyone in the room was staring at him. He continued.

"Originally, this gang developed as a traditional street gang. Their main desire was to protect their neighborhoods or turfs. Occasionally, they would do battle with rival

gangs from other neighborhoods. During these battles, they developed a reputation for violence and brutality. That reputation is still with them today.”

Feeling more confident, Nightwing said, “Their criminal activity entails...”

“Narcotics,” Batman cut in, “drive-by shootings, intimidation, graffiti, burglaries and related thefts.”

Flustered once more, Wing could only say, “Uh, uh... that’s correct.”

“Of course it’s correct. I’m Batman.”

The room erupted into laughter. The only one that wasn’t laughing, other than Batman of course, was Nightwing.

Trying to regain control of his briefing, Nightwing ignored the laughter and continued.

“And he’s got the cops in his pocket. From Police Chief Francis Alexander Redhorn—slide—on down.”

Robin sobered quickly and clicked for the next slide. A publicity shot came up that was obviously from a City press kit: a middle-aged man in uniform, brown hair, built like a football player, a cigar clenched in one hand as he stood behind his desk, leaning over a tidy stack of papers and files.

“And this photo is trying to make him look good,” Nightwing remarked sourly. “Just about all the scum in ‘Haven work for Blockbuster too. He gets fifty cents of every dirty dollar.”

“That’s good to know,” Catwoman noted. “He’s greedy. If he’s taking fifty percent, he’s not that smart. That’s your weakness number two right there.”

Nightwing met her eye. “We’ll talk later,” he said with a smile.

Batman grunted.

Catwoman gave a pleased purr. “Don’t be territorial, Dark Knight; it’s unattractive.”

“Actually,” Wing said with a strange twinkle, “a little marking of territory is going to be crucial to making this work. Robin, next slide.”

The next image that came up looked altered.

“That is Dudley Soames. Used to be called Deadly Soames before he upgraded to the more colorful handle: Torque.”

“It looks like his head is on backwards,” Robin observed.

“It is. Soames was the dirtiest cop around, and also one of Blockbuster’s lieutenants. Played all sides against the middle. Even gave me info on Blockbuster’s operations for a while. Roland found out, twisted his head 180-degrees. Soames blames me as much as Blockbuster. Wants revenge on both of us. That’s the key to him. Weakness number three.”

Batman grunted again. “Summing up any time soon?”

“To end Blockbuster, we’re looking at a three-tiered operation: One: find him. Two: physically taking him down. And three: neutralizing the corruption in the force. Otherwise, he’s free as soon as we take him in.”

PART 2

Batman removed his cowl and gauntlets, changing them for the protective gloves and goggles needed to fuel the Batwing.

That was why he didn't have a conference table in the Batcave in the first place. It was a simple equation: Conference table = Meetings = Waste of his time. Like the Watchtower: *Team this, team that, we're a unit, we need one another.* One of these days Diana would insist they all join hands and sing Kumbaya.

As a corporate executive, Bruce Wayne was more than familiar with what Nightwing was now experiencing, the dread horror of "the meeting after the meeting." Bruce could have warned him. But, of course, Dick didn't want to be warned. He cared nothing for the experience Bruce brought to the table, he'd made that more than clear.

Dick loaded the luggage into Barbara's wheelchair van and huffed. It had begun immediately after the briefing concluded.

Barbara was coming. She said she only needed ten minutes to pack.

"Oh but," Nightwing had sputtered before he even realized he was speaking, "I hadn't realized you'd want to come. Oracle can operate from anywhere, after all. When you helped in the past, it was always from your base at the apartment."

And BANG, it was just like after the honeymoon, she'd laid down the law: Of course she was coming. He'd be gone for a week minimum on this. She wasn't going to be left behind all alone. Of course she was coming. *OF COURSE* she was coming. She'd operate off her laptop from his safehouse or the hanger where he stored his car and plane. Of course she was coming. The Oracle had spoken - It would be so.

Well, he had figured she'd stay in Gotham but... "Okay, honey, if you feel that strongly, I guess we'll take your van then." He'd turned to Batman and Catwoman, who had each removed their masks but were still in costume, paging through the binders. "Bruce, Selina, leaving in an hour okay? Civvies. We'll take Barbara's van."

That's when the second hammer fell:

"Hell no, we're taking the Batwing," Bruce spat instantly.

Dick couldn't believe it. The Batwing? It'd be like taking a Lear Jet to the 7-11 to buy milk.

"The Batwing!" he exclaimed, "'Haven is thirty minutes across the river! We load up the van, we'll be there by dinnertime!"

"Batman's arrival in Bludhaven should be conspicuous for your plan to work. We're taking the Batwing. Catwoman will ride with me. If you and Barbara want the van, we'll rendezvous at the hanger *when you get there.*"

Yeah, Bruce, Dick thought acidly, when we get there the whole twenty minutes later. Make it sound like a week and a half.

And before anybody could question just how "conspicuous" Batman's arrival would be in a freakin' stealth plane, he was off to its hanger, leaving Nightwing alone with Catwoman.

There was a long silence.

"When we get to Bludhaven," Dick said finally, "I thought I'd take you all to dinner at this little place I know. Mario's. Great steaks. Selina, this is where you should stamp your foot and say 'No, we're eating Chinese and that's final.'"

He made a joke. That's his way. Bruce broods. Or turns into Psychobat. Or else, today's special blend: he launches into the control freak. But Dick jokes.

I left him there. There was really nothing to say as we stood there staring at each other after Bruce's departure. It was a quintessential Bat-moment.

I know from experience what all that bluster means: "You're a thief." Hard and cold and controlling. "We can never be because you're a thief." The battier he gets, the more is going on that isn't Bat at all. "Hell no, we're taking the Batwing." That's Bruce. That's Bruce hurting. Bruce having a spasm. Any emotion gets twisted into the usual one and dealt with the usual way: Batman. They say if your only tool is a hammer, you view every problem as a nail. Batman may not be Bruce's only tool. But it's his favorite. By a mile.

I followed Batman into the hanger. He was fighting with the fuel hose like a stubborn snake.

"The Batwing will have us there in minutes," he said, by way of acknowledging my presence without looking at me.

"Barbara and I were talking," I fibbed. "We think Nightwing may have missed one of the challenges of this mission."

"Just one?" he muttered.

Bat-prick. Same attitude he had at the briefing. I ignored it.

"Yes, three challenges," I said. "He listed one: finding Blockbuster, two: physically apprehending him, and three: neutralizing the corruption. He missed four: without letting the testosterone levels reach toxic proportions."

The glare was one I hadn't seen aimed at me in a very long time. It gave me a chill. But it also gave me direction. That look frightens everyone off. No one ever stands up to it. Nobody except me...

"I thought you and Dick were okay," I said softly. "You were over it; you worked together that night. New baseline. New partnership."

"Tell me something," he blurted, fiercely agitated. "I'm supposed to be the 'World's Greatest Detective,' right? Explain to me what was up with that table?"

"The table?" I sputtered, "I think they brought it in from the lab."

But he wasn't listening; he talked right over me...

"Why did he go about doing it this way? And those binders? Why does he hate me?"

"Hate you? Bruce, he worships the water you walk on."

"So why didn't he ask *me* to brief and conduct the meeting, hmm? I'm the senior crimefighter, I have the experience, I have all the data on Desmond. I thought he'd value that."

A year ago, I brushed off JLAers that warned me Batman was a high-handed, domineering autocratic control freak. They were smarting from the protocols, I told myself. I knew him better than anybody. I knew him at his worst and his worst wasn't

that bad. His worst *wasn't* this bad. Something was happening to him. *Bruce, what's going on in there?* The question kept echoing in my head.

"Blockbuster is Nightwing's enemy," I stated the obvious as matter-of-factly as I could. "Bludhaven is *his* city. Of course he'd brief, of course he's heading the team--"

"He's heading the team," Bruce interrupted me. He looked stunned. Like this was just dawning on him. I didn't know if I should speak or leave it be. If this was reason dawning at last, then it was a fragile, delicate thing. A breath could collapse it.

"If it was Gotham," I said finally, "If it was Joker, would *ANYBODY* but you be in charge?"

He looked at me like the answer was obvious, which, of course, it was.

"Would you not run the entire JLA out of town on a rail if Krypton so much as suggested a mission here you didn't lead?"

"Drop it, Selina. I'm running a pre-flight check. We'll be ready to go in ten minutes."

"Four bags, four of us, a laptop and a wheelchair. It's twenty minutes across the river. Are you honestly telling me there's any reason to take this thing other than it's going by air when Dick said ground, going in costume when Dick said civilian clothes, and taking your vehicle instead of his?"

There was a long, long pause.

"Fine," he spat, "You want to go too. Go. Leave. Take the van. Just go. Just go and leave."

Ah. I might not be the world's greatest detective, but I didn't need to be to put that together.

"Like he did?"

"Enough. Selina, that is *enough*."

The soft hiss of a pressurized air gauge was magnified as it echoed off the walls of the cavern. Finally, Batman spoke:

"You're saying, since it's Bludhaven and Blockbuster, I should let another yard or so out on the leash?"

"I'm saying that he hasn't been on the other end of that leash for a long time. Not since he was Robin."

That brought on another look I haven't seen in a while. The look that says ABSOLUTELY UNACCEPTABLE information coming in. Penthouse, 3 AM, emeralds. My little joke "I don't look on it as stealing; I look on it as practical socialism." Then comes *that* look. I decided a different approach was necessary.

"Did you know Dick and Barbara had a big fight after their honeymoon?" I asked.

"A fight?" the compulsive fixer replied, "Should I have a talk with them?"

I ignored this and continued.

"It was because Barbara said they'd be living in Gotham. She didn't ask, she told him. Assumed it was understood from the getgo." I paused, hoping he'd make the jump on his own. He didn't. "He left her too, you see. When you clipped his wings as Robin, to continue being *what he needed to be*, he became Nightwing. And he went to Bludhaven. And she felt abandoned."

"I know Dick loves her very much," he said after a pause.

“Yes. But he still left. And that hurt her. So now she’s laying down the law, taking control of the situation, so he can’t do it again.”

There was the slightest hint of a mouth-twitch as he said, “She lays down the law?”

“Dick is wondering why I seem to be the only one willing to take his lead on this. I can’t help wondering the same thing. I can’t help wondering if it isn’t because...”

C’mon, Bruce, I mentally cheered him on, last chance. FINISH THE THOUGHT. You see it there, I know you do. Greatest detective, my ass. SAY IT.

“Because you’re the only one he didn’t walk out on,” he growled, choking the life out of the gas hose. “Because you’re the only one he didn’t abandon for that stinking cesspool of crime marinating in guns, drugs and graft!”

It was at this point the gas hose he was strangling began to choke and gurgle. The tank was full. He disengaged it from the Batwing, replaced it in its harness, removed his gloves and goggles, and then took a deep breath.

“Who would drive the van?” he asked abruptly.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

“I do love you,” I told him. “You need therapy. But I love you.”

The road sign read: **Bludhaven 20 miles**

Without taking his eyes off the road, Dick glanced at Barbara. She was pulling traffic reports on a PDA. In the backseat, Bruce and Selina were becoming more engrossed in their argument and less aware that they had an audience.

“I’m saying that I would never put my costume in the same suitcase with Bruce Wayne’s clothes. It would be like keeping Batarangs in a briefcase; anyone could stumble over them.”

Dick downshifted and changed lanes. He couldn’t figure out what Bruce was getting at. He was happy enough when Bruce and Selina showed up, bags in hand, having decided the van *was* the better alternative after all.

And Bruce was making an effort, Dick couldn’t help but notice: He hadn’t claimed the driver’s seat, dictated the route, or even grumbled when Dick gassed up with 87 octane instead of 92. In Bruce’s case, Dick noted, “making an effort” manifested itself in things *not* said.

Junction: US-61 8 mi

“Kitten, I’m only saying that these men are dangerous criminals, so it would be a good idea to get their attention at the beginning by making it clear you’re there to bring an offer that’s profitable for them.”

The puzzle was, as much as Bruce was improved with Dick, he’d been laying into Selina since they had pulled out of the parking garage: He was surprised she could pack so quickly considering the state of her closet. He questioned keeping the catsuit with her other clothes. He was giving notes on her part in the Bludhaven operation. That would be: talking to crooks. And he was giving her notes!

Bruce, I don’t think she needs a flowchart, Dick thought silently, flicking his turn signal, I really don’t.

“Sweetie,” Barbara interrupted, “This time of day, traffic is pretty heavy in downtown ‘Haven. Better to take the bypass, even though it means overshooting your exit. It’ll be faster to minimize the drive through town.”

"Babs, I have driven this route a few times before, y'know," Dick objected.

"Not at this time of day, Dearest," was the all-seeing Oracle's reply.

Dick flicked off the turn signal. He knew when to drop it—which was more than he could say of Bruce.

"Were you not listening back there? Blockbuster is over eight hundred pounds. If you should find yourself in a situation, you need protection. A nine hundred pound bodyguard with sharp teeth is not an unreasonable precaution."

Dick could only surmise that Selina was holding her tongue as long as she had because they were in a closed car with two other people. There was a limit, however, to how long Selina's politeness would contain Catwoman's temper—and that limit was reached, Dick sensed, at the suggestion she bring her pet tiger, Shimbala, down from its preserve for use as a bodyguard.

"First," she began in a voice that became more feline with each sentence, "I packed in under five minutes, so obviously the state of my closet was not an impediment, Mr. It's Results That Matter. Second, I've been carrying the catsuit around with me for quite some time without any hints from Gentleman's Quarterly, so how Batman does or does not choose to carry his costume around is of absolutely no interest to me. And P.S., if we were to make a list of all the things you would 'never do' that I would, we will not only bypass Bludhaven, we'll be a hundred miles across the Canadian border before we even get into Spandex. Third, the day I need tips, hints, notes, or direction of any kind on how to get a man's attention, criminal or otherwise..."

She sputtered, clearly unable to come up with a sufficiently ludicrous scenario. Dick offered, "They'll be pork in the treetops!"

In the rearview mirror, he saw Bruce and Selina staring.

"You know, like 'when pigs fly,'" he explained sheepishly.

"Don't help me," Selina snapped. "And if, by some fantastic stretch of the imagination, I actually thought I *needed* advice on how to talk to or handle men, you, my precious, would be the *ABSOLUTE LAST* living person I would be talking to. In fact, 'living' is irrelevant. I'd get a ouija board first and ask the dead."

Dick eyed the road signs:

US-61

Bludhaven Next 4 Exits

Bypass 261 – 1 miles.

"Fourth," Catwoman concluded her rant, "A tiger is a living thing. It is not a weapon. It is not a bodyguard. A tiger is a force of nature, and those that try to tame forces of nature invariably find themselves at the bottom of the ocean with an iceberg up their ass."

That's when the checkbook came out. In disbelief, Dick heard Bruce's voice saying something about the Catitat being a nice enough preserve as it was, but it could always be larger.

"Barbara," Selina cooed, "what would it do to the resale value of your van if I got bloodstains on the upholstery?"

"HEY," Dick improvised, "Here's our exit."

Barbara started to correct him. She had said to take the bypass and circumvent the midtown traffic, but Dick shushed her with the husband-eye. They needed a diversion and they needed it now, not 4 exits from now.

In the rearview mirror, Dick saw Bruce watching. Barbara snapped off the PDA and changed the subject. Dinner at Mario's.

Bruce looked envious.

PART 3

"Another night," Dick said, pulling the van into the turnaround behind Rabe Memorial Hospital, "Expect the unexpected."

His peripheral vision caught the twitch before Bruce answered: "Always."

Another night. Always expect the unexpected. It was the formula of words Batman repeated every night, once they were suited up and seated in the Batmobile, right before they pulled out of the cave as Batman and Robin.

The foursome had dropped off their bags at Nightwing's safe house near Rabe Memorial, then headed to Mario's, his favorite restaurant near his old apartment on Parkthorne Avenue. He missed the old place, Number 1013, Apartment 3A. But it would have been foolish to keep up the lease once Dick Grayson was known to have gotten married and moved back to Gotham.

The safe house was better. Anonymous. Nondescript. Like the Caernaervon Garage they were headed for now.

After dinner, Barbara was so anxious to set up her laptop system and get to work, the men dropped her and Selina back at the safe house. Now they were on their own, and Dick knew the corner of Bludhaven he most wanted Bruce to see.

Speeding under the Woolridge Overpass into the Caernaervon Section of industrial parks by the waterfront, Dick finally came to a dark carport, parked the van, and nodded for Bruce to follow on foot. He punched a code into a security panel beneath a sign reading: Caernaervon Garage, Storage by Week/Month/Year.

"A rental place," Bruce said flatly as they entered.

"You taught me better than that," Dick said, "I own the building - through a dummy corporation. On the books, there are nineteen tenants. All deceased, mostly BPD Police Officers killed in the line."

"Nice touch," Bruce murmured. "So this is where you store all your gear too big to be carried with the costume?"

Dick beamed. It was approval. It was pride and approval. Bruce expressed it the only way he could, letting an appreciative eye linger over the surveillance equipment, weights, exercise mats, scuba gear, metal detectors, and assorted weaponry.

And of course... the car: The Nightbird.

"Aluminum alloy McLaren engine - modified, 6,064 cc, 672 horsepower at 7,400 RPM, 0 to 60 in 5 seconds; 0 to 100 in 9."

"Nice," Bruce conceded, caressing the front bumper, "This is an old Camaro body?"

"It's a shell. I have four interchangeable bodies: muscle car, taxi, police cruiser, and a truck cab. Sort of urban camouflage."

"Bulletproof?"

"Of course. Oblique glass. Onboard CPU. Video, sat, and com links. OraCom, of course. Perimeter defenses."

"You ever consider a theme chassis just for you—no camouflage, black, insignia on the grille, headlights and hubcaps tinted to match?"

"The Tim Allen caveman grunt, ooh-wooh-wooh, that's what they're doing right now, Selina, I'll bet my life on it." Selina laughed. But Barbara insisted: "Really! I will bet you anything; what do you want to bet? They're circling the car, making happy man-grunts."

"Bruce?"

"Hell yeah. Around hot cars, it's what guys do."

"I can't picture it. It's too normal."

Barbara smirked. "Aren't you the one who wrote the book on 'underneath the mask and the bat-bluster, he's a man like any other man.'"

"Guilty," Selina admitted.

"And the best part is, if you ask, they'll say it's for us: 'Chicks love the car.' But, c'mon, who cares? It's a *car*. Four wheels, takes you from A to B. Big whoop. They want to think we love the cars, because that gives them a grown up reason for having the silly things, instead of admitting they're nothing but toys for big boys."

"Nah. Nope, now you're stretching. It's shoe shopping. It's the flipside of shoe shopping."

"What's wrong with shoe shopping?" Barbara asked with arched brows.

Selina rolled her eyes.

"Okay, your laptop is hooked up to the portable generator," she said. "I still don't understand why you needed this thing."

"Oracle is accustomed to a certain degree of untraceable anonymity."

"So is Catwoman. Which is why I wore a mask when I removed this from the hospital's storage closet. Nevertheless, when the boys get back and see this thing, they're going to have a pretty good idea who brought it here. And when they ask why, I'd like to have a better answer than 'Oracle is accustomed to anonymity.'"

"You do get worked into a lather, don't you? Dinah never wants to hear this stuff. All right, I'll explain, but you don't get to roll your eyes and say 'technobabble.' To keep my logins anonymous, I go through several satellites, most of which are operated by government agencies that don't like hackers hitchhiking on their datastreams. So every now and then, they'll send a pulse that will cause connected computers to draw more power. It would drain my laptop battery in minutes."

Selina's eyes glazed slightly.

"Did we just slip into a Tom Clancy novel," she asked.

"Remember," Barbara retorted, "You may not say 'technobabble.' So, to stay online, I need current. But if I just plug into the outlets, I'll draw more power in the precise pattern of the satellite pulse. It's like a signature, and they could trace it."

Selina held up a weary hand. "Tell you what, when Bruce and Dick get back and they ask what the generator is doing here, you take it from there."

"Deal. As long as you make the tea."

"Tea?"

"When I work as Oracle," Barbara said, happily completing her untraceable login, "I always drink tea."

"When I work as Catwoman," Selina called from the kitchen, "I always get paid, but you don't hear me complaining."

"You could have taken Bruce's check," Barbara joked, "To - what was it? - enlarge your preserve? What was that about anyway?"

"The return of the control freak," Selina hissed. "I'm not sure what's behind it. But if he doesn't lay off about my tiger..."

"I know. That tiger-as-bodyguard was too much. I mean, look, you're not going to be running into Blockbuster face to face, but if you did, Roland considers himself a ladies' man."

"You *can't* be serious."

"He flirted with Black Canary."

"You *cannot* be serious! He looks like Ra's."

"He's a sharp dresser, Selina."

"He looks like Ra's al Ghul crossed with a mutant Viking."

"No desire at all to be on the receiving end of the ol' Blockbuster charm?"

"He looks like Ra's al Ghul... crossed with a mutant Viking... sucking on a lemon."

"So any interaction would definitely have to be kept at the 'wanting each other dead' level."

"Absolutely. I have standards."

"Besides," a deep-throated growl sounded behind her, "you're taken."

As always, Selina and Barbara gave no indication that the trademark Bat-appearance from the silent shadows was in any way remarkable.

"Why is there a stolen generator in my living room?" Dick asked.

"A little more care with our adjectives," Barbara chided. "It's not stolen; it's been re-localized."

"Retroactively displaced," Selina corrected.

"Ah, okay, what's the bullshit euphemism for a stolen generator doing in my living room?" Dick repeated.

"Enabling Oracle to complete Phase One—Finding Blockbuster faster than any of you thought possible," Barbara smirked.

"You... Finding Block... You *FOUND HIM*?" Dick stammered, "Already?"

"Selina, I think I'd like another cup of tea," Barbara remarked with exaggerated casualness. "Would you be a dear and heat up the water?"

"*Already*?" Dick repeated.

Bruce stood back and watched. This was one of those occasions where the older, more experienced crimefighter would have liked to warn his partner. Bruce had made this very same mistake once. He'd chanted his incredulous request for confirmation five times on learning that Selina Kyle could cook.

"You found him already?" Dick repeated, "I mean - already?"

"Richard," Selina cut in, "your expression of wondering awe is noted. But if you don't stop repeating 'already,' we'll never get to the 'how.'"

Bruce thought it sounded like a cue. They were to ask how Barbara had done it. Clearly they were expected to ask. *Dick, it's your cue*, Bruce thought. Bruce was still on his best behavior, making an effort to respect Nightwing's position as head of the team... And it was clearly the *team leader's* prerogative to ask for the report... But if Dick didn't get it together and ask the question soon, there was a limit to how long Bruce could restrain himself...

Selina could feel it building. In her mind's eye she drew on the mask—she could see it. He was ready to blow. It was quite sexy.

At the last second, Dick cleared his throat, Bat-style, and spoke.

"Um, okay then. Yes. How did you locate him so quickly?"

"Operation Walgreens," Barbara announced happily.

The men looked at each other.

Barbara waited a full minute for some expression of *something*, then when nobody said a word, she went on to explain...

"Blockbuster has a gorilla heart. He had an organ from another species transplanted into his body. Bodies can reject organ transplants. And to minimize the risk of that, they give you anti-rejection drugs."

"For a few weeks after the operation," Bruce interrupted.

"Normally, yes, a patient only takes those drugs for a few weeks. But, at the risk of repeating myself, this is a freakin' gorilla heart. And he weights 825 pounds. So I hacked into the local pharmacies and found--"

"Prescriptions for a hippopotamus dose of anti-rejection drugs," Dick completed her sentence and her thought.

Barbara nodded.

"He's still on Cyclosporin and Tacrolimus. He's due for a refill in ten days, the Stark Avenue Pharmacy. Plant a homing device in the bottle or follow whoever picks it up, and there's your man."

"That is so F-ing slick," Dick whispered in awe.

Barbara smiled.

"Which gives the three of you exactly ten days to lay the groundwork for Phase Two."

PART 4

Mick, Joey Bluehat, and Switch waited nervously for their audience with Blockbuster. They had successfully hijacked a truck. They thought it contained microwave ovens. Instead, it contained DVD players. That meant more money. Lots more money. It wasn't likely word would be on the street yet, but they weren't taking chances. Blockbuster would have his cut before he even heard about their score.

Better safe than sorry.

Remember Deadly Soames? Remember Little Eddie? Remember Blade Walski? And Nickie the skunk. Bad things happened to guys who crossed Blockbuster. "He didn't rewind" was the way they spoke of it on the street.

Inside the de facto throne room built in a gutted strip club, Blockbuster readjusted himself on his specially made, titanium-reinforced chair. The difficulty was not in finding a material that would hold his enormous bulk, but in making it comfortable. The chair frame was hard as a rock. Placing mere cushions under his ass did nothing but press the padding flat within seconds.

He had finally found the solution, bladders of industrial polymer inflated with pressurized air. But he was still working on the right psi.

Blockbuster was pleased at the tribute Mick, Joey Bluehat, and Switch had rendered. More than pleased. But the news they delivered with it was troubling. No, not troubling. Troubling implied fear, and Blockbuster feared no challenges to his criminal empire. But it was... perplexing.

The Bat was in Bludhaven. On what business, no one knew. There were reports of confrontations between Batman and Nightwing. Indeed, "arguments" would not be too strong a term for the scenes his informants had witnessed. If the scouts were not exaggerating, it would be fair to say a *fight* was what occurred between the two vigilantes.

The development would require some thought. And Blockbuster resolved to apply the 45 minutes prior to his dinner to a strategic analysis of Batman's appearance in Bludhaven.

Every day at 7:15 precisely, Blockbuster's cook, Akira Gomasuri, hired from a Japanese Sumo stable, would enter and bow greeting to *Desmond-san*. Blockbuster would nod and dispatch his man, Riley, to help the cook carry the four bags of groceries Akira brought with him. Riley would stay with the cook and observe the preparation of his master's meal.

At 8:00 Akira would enter again, bow, and present a great pot of *Chanko-nabe*, a hearty stew of vegetables, meats, seafood and tofu made to feed entire teams of Sumo Wrestlers. Riley would eat a portion of the dish in Blockbuster's presence, and then the criminal kingpin would commence to eat.

Whenever Blockbuster had a problem of some importance, he devoted that time between Akira's first bow and his second to the full study of it. Blockbuster knew he

was the greatest criminal mind of his generation. Any problem he gave his full attention in this manner would be quickly disposed of.

This night, as Blockbuster ate his *Chanko-nabe*, he was confident. He had thought through every possibility and permutation of the Batman problem. He could find no special opportunities in the Bat's arrival, but neither could he see any particular danger, either to himself or his operations. Whatever Batman's business was in Bludhaven, it originated in Gotham City. It was not one of Blockbuster's minions, then, that Batman was chasing. If whoever or whatever it was succeeded in evading the Bat, they were here now and would have to pay tribute like anyone else. If they didn't, they would learn. He would make an example of them: like Soames.

The anatomical anomaly that was once Dudley Soames took his usual route to BLUE, a third rate watering hole with a first rate crap game. He took his usual route because it was dark, unpopulated, and he wasn't likely to be seen. Soames could navigate well enough, thanks to the special glasses that let him see "behind" him, i.e. in the direction his feet were walking. But being able to walk from point to point, aim, and fire a weapon were not the real challenges of his life. The challenges were getting through day-to-day tasks like walking to his hangout without the stinking mass of mouth-breathing morons pointing at the freak "walking backwards." Then he'd have to stop and teach them some manners, and there goes another evening of craps. So it really was best to stick to the back streets where he wouldn't be noticed.

BLUE was named for the Blue Line, under whose tracks the seedy establishment was located. And if the beer was swill and the whiskey was watered, it was at least the kind of place they knew not to give a man shit just because his head was on backwards. At BLUE, the regulars all knew (and the newbies would be told soon enough) that the guy in the neck brace has the barstool by the wall. He comes in and sits, twists around, and he bends his elbows backwards to drink. "Dunno how, don't ask. Maybe he's double jointed. Point is, don't stare. Guys get ventilated who stare." The same held true in the men's room. Whatever he was doing, Soames's head faced behind him. You got a problem with that, take your leak in the alley.

The crap game was slow getting underway tonight. The guys were excited about the fresh meat. Soames could see why. She was hot. Not seven-come-eleven hot. Hardbody-wrapped-in-leather hot.

"You're on the wrong side of the river, Pussycat," Soames sneered, by way of introducing himself. He didn't turn from his beer and he spoke loudly, as if addressing the room at large. He saw the feline rise and walk to meet him with a viciously round sway of her hips. Something cold and sharp bit into the divot under his chin and pulled him by it, causing the barstool to swivel until he faced two eyes of piercing green ice.

"Whatever side of the river I am on," the vixen purred, "is the right side... Mr. Torque."

He swiveled the stool back around to face the bar and pointed an invitation to the seat next to him. The feline sat, and Lou - who never waited on customers himself - sat an icy martini before her in seconds.

"*Pint a' catnip*," Soames quipped in one of his trademark palindromes. "The name's Dudley. So, what do you want, Alleycat?"

"From you? Nothing," Catwoman replied dryly. "I do have a message to interest several in this dreary little 'burb. You're not one of them."

"Tell me anyway," Soames pressed, his soft tone meant to seem both menacing and seductive. "Villain to villain, tell me. Let me decide what interests me."

"A party in Gotham wants it known that Oswald Cobblepot only takes a thirty percent piece of the action. Blockbuster, I understand, takes fifty."

"A 'party in Gotham' wants that known here, eh," Soames chuckled. "Cobblepot wants to muscle in? Change protectors, keep an extra twenty cents on the dollar?"

"I didn't say that," Catwoman purred. "But you see now why this matter doesn't concern you. You're no longer on Roland's payroll, now are you?"

"I want him dead, that's not a secret. And I want it to hurt." From his flowing overcoat Soames produced a vintage weapon, caressed its barrel lovingly as he held it out for Catwoman to see. "That's a vintage Thompson .45 caliber machine gun, commonly called a Tommy Gun. Made by Colt. 100 Rounds. That's what Al Capone used to kill Frankie Yale. First time a machine gun was used to commit a homicide in the city."

Selina fought down her nausea and answered with the cool detachment of a business woman: "Vengeance is fine, Studley, if that's what gets your juices flowing. But there isn't any money in it. You and your vendetta are of no interest to my associates."

"What about the Bat," Soames hissed. "He's 'of interest,' isn't he? Word is, he's in 'Haven. Even bet he's here for you."

Catwoman tossed her head.

"Batman is not a concern. Haven't you heard? He's far too busy squaring off with Nightwing to bother about little ol' me. Take a tip, Studley, villain to villain. Bats and Nightwing are fire and gasoline. Something bad went down there. Lot of bad blood. If they're going at it, you can consider the coast clear for...whatever."

"My only 'whatever,'" Soames said, throwing a bill onto the bar, "is seeing Nightwing suffer as much as Blockbuster."

He slipped on his glasses and left the bar. He was bitter at the feline's cool dismissal of the mission of his life. But not so bitter that he was unaware of his surroundings as he walked home. He knew he was being followed. His route home was darker than his route to BLUE, and from the black beyond the dim streetlight, the shadow of a vigilante fell over his features. A shadow with pointed ears and more cape than is seen in Bludhaven alleys.

Bruce couldn't sleep.

He lay with Selina tucked under his arm on the pullout sofa in Dick's safe house. Dick and Barbara had the bedroom, but from the sounds seeping through the wall, they weren't sleeping either. It took him twenty minutes to work out what was going on—TV was on, CNN, then Letterman, then CNN, then TVLand. Remote war in progress. The remote, so deduced the World's Greatest Control Freak-Detective, was

kept on the nightstand on Barbara's side of the bed. It was she watching CNN and Dick changing to lighter fare.

Bruce thought about warm milk. He was reasonably sure he could heat milk without difficulty. But that would wake Selina. He looked down at her. Catlike, she could sleep anywhere.

The reason for his wakefulness was certainly not the Bludhaven operation. The plan was going well. The staged confrontations with Nightwing had been cathartic. And Catwoman played her part beautifully. After she'd laid the groundwork, Batman had no trouble manipulating Torque. He made the villain think it was his own idea: If it was *Batman* who took down Blockbuster, it would destroy Blockbuster, but it would also deal a crushing blow to *Nightwing*. The ultimate insult: this rival he despised from Gotham comes into *his* city and takes down his *great* foe.

Torque cared nothing for justice. But playing both sides against each other was always appealing. In the interest of injuring both his enemies, at little risk to himself, using this preposterous caped vigilante as his tool, he agreed to help Batman take down Blockbuster.

The plan was fine. It was working.

So why couldn't he sleep?

Well... it could be the hour. In Gotham, he would just be starting the late patrol. And there were the city sounds. Despite being the quintessential Gothamite, Bruce was used to the quiet of Wayne Manor. Besides, Bludhaven sounded different. There were fewer skyscrapers, the roads were a little wider, water traffic was everywhere. It sounded different—that was it. That would keep any Gothamite awake, surely.

Well.... He glanced at Selina again and stroked her hair absently with his free hand... any Gothamite but one.

Why wouldn't she go along with the tiger-bodyguard? He only wanted to keep her safe, couldn't she see that? It was the same reason he planted the tiny bat-shaped homing device in her costume—which Dick saw, and made him remove.

"You have no grasp of boundaries at all, do you?" Dick had said—a line taken from one of their phony rooftop fights staged for Bludhaven informants—delivered with real affection here in the safe house, instead of the venomous spite of the rooftop.

Through the wall, the hum of the television switched back to CNN. It was a comforting sound, it sounded like monitor duty at the Watchtower, a bore. Bruce closed his eyes, willing the sense-memory of boredom to lull him to sleep.

Then his eyes opened and he looked at the ceiling.

This was Selina's doing. No. Not quite. It was Catwoman's. The night's activities had stirred up old feelings. Trailing her—not Selina on some Girls' Night Out, but *Catwoman*: claws, whip and attitude—to underworld dens, consorting with a villain like Torque. No wonder he felt...

How did he feel?

Back when they were... as they used to be, adversaries... he wouldn't have just trailed her to Torque, there would have been an encounter. Then he would have gone home to his lonely bed and looked up at the ceiling, not this ceiling, but one looks much like any other... and he would replay it over and over, lingering on the more personal aspects that always worked their way in, no matter how much he vowed that this time it would be strictly business... He'd blot out the sting of fresh scratches and

wonder what if... what would it be like *if...* to hold her, to spend a night with no Gotham to patrol and no crime between them, only the warmth and softness of her in his arms...

And now she was here. The warmth he had imagined. The details that go with reality he never envisioned... the weight of her head cutting circulation in his arm, the way she managed to take half his pillow no matter how many others were on the bed... this was no fantasy Catwoman. It was real. In his dreams, he never figured on... loving her... on losing her.

Bruce thought back to the hangar:

"You want to go too. Go. Leave," he had said, "Just go and leave."

"Like he did?" she had asked.

Like they all do. His parents. Jason.

What was so silly about a tiger-bodyguard, after all? If you have a nine-hundred pound carnivorous pet, why not leverage it for a little peace of mind? If your lover is the most dangerous man alive, Kitten, why not let him protect you?

Through the wall, the dull hum of CNN gave way to the carefree whistle of the Andy Griffith Show. Bruce sighed, and the sleeping cat in his arms murmured "judgmental jackass." His mouth twitched. If that didn't justify waking her to get up for some warm milk...

Batman and Nightwing trailed Blockbuster's man Riley from the Stark Avenue Pharmacy to a boarded up strip club in "The Spine." Batman brought this information to Dudley "Torque" Soames. Soames remembered Blockbuster's routine and timed his arrival just after Akira Gomasuri's first bow. Riley would be off supervising the preparation of Blockbuster's dinner. It was the only opportunity for an unannounced audience...

Blockbuster was suspicious, just as Torque knew he would be. When the former lieutenant you maimed for betraying you, who vowed vengeance on nine separate occasions, shows up on your door at dinnertime with information, *SUSPICION* is to be expected.

But Blockbuster knew Soames's track record. He'd sell anybody to anybody, everybody to everybody else. And what he had to gain in this case, Blockbuster could see, might be just enough to overlook the past vendetta—at least for now.

"Mutiny," Soames said, "Cobblepot, from Gotham, is offering 30 percent. Half the operators in 'Haven, from pimps to dealers to the guy running the three-card-monte by the stadium, are all ready to defect. You don't act now? By morning, you won't have anything left."

"Why tell me," Blockbuster asked with soft-spoken menace.

"*Doom an evil deed, liven a mood,*" Soames said reflectively, trying out one of his signature palindromes. "I like the thought of you owing me. B'sides, Roland, to keep what's yours, you gotta bust some heads. Anybody that don't live through the night, I take over their operations. And I'll pay you forty percent."

"I get fifty, Soames, and you know it."

"You won't get anything without me," Soames oozed. "*Egad, a base life defiles a bad age...* You don't change protectors like changing credit cards, Roland. All your scum-lapping minions know that. To go over to Cobblepot's camp, they'll have to remove you. They're having a war council—the men, the money, and the guns, all in one place - tonight. You want to stop this, there is one way only: You say 'Help me, Dudley, my friend and partner. Help me in my hour of need. Tell me where they're meeting, and I'll meet your price.'"

Blockbuster was suspicious, but he had no choice. Soames had made his ultimatum, and having made it, he would only answer "*No, it is opposition*" to all further queries. "*No, it is opposition*," a curious phrase, a palindrome, spelled the same way backwards and forwards, one of Soames's obsessions since Blockbuster had twisted his neck into Torque.

"Alright, it's a deal," Blockbuster agreed, "where's the meeting?"

If this was a setup, he was more than able to handle whatever waited from him at....

"The St. Eustace Mission."

And if it was not a trap, there would be plenty of time to eliminate Soames afterwards, once Blockbuster's empire was again secure.

Suspicion was lost in raw rage when Blockbuster reached the mission and found EXACTLY what Soames said he would find—three hundred of his operatives and their flunkies, gathering for war.

He had no time for subtle strategy and none was needed. This was a challenge to the dominance of the alpha-male and he met it as such: with a primal yelp and beatings of his chest. The five boldest of the challengers moved in on him and were quickly dispatched. Five more came and fell likewise. Then five more... Shampoo, rinse and repeat.

After the 20th group was thrashed, Blockbuster felt sure the others would submit. But the rest were sure he would tire soon. When the unconscious form of the 182nd man was thrown into 183, 184, and 185, those that remained fled.

Blockbuster had won. But he was tired. The physical fight was necessary—no guns—he had to *beat* them into submission. It was to prove a point, like when he twisted Soames's head around. Soames who, curiously, had told him the truth about this meeting.

Well, it was enough for tonight. He was tired. The matter of what to do about Soames could wait until morning. All Roland Desmond wanted now was home and bed.

Except... here was Soames again... Shit.

"That was very impressive, Roland," Torque twinkled with a strangely psychotic glint in his eye. "*Won Now*, you could say."

Palindromes. Freakin' palindromes from the freakin' freak. He'd just fought 180 strong men, did he have to suffer this now?

"Doesn't look like you killed any, though," Torque observed, glancing at the moaning thugs scattered around the mission, "That was petty. Don't want to pay my fee? Well, fuck you, Roland! I knew you'd try and stiff me, that's why I held back the real prize."

He took a clawed purple glove from his pocket and twirled it. *"Was it a cat I saw?"*

Blockbuster took the glove and examined it, then looked to Soames.

"I have her. Catwoman. She's been working the town for Cobblepot, his mouthpiece, organizing this thing. So before you go home to whatever retention pond a thing like you uses for a hot bath, I'd say you have one more stop to make."

"Give her to me, Soames," Blockbuster said dangerously, "Give her to me, and I'll send her back to Gotham in pieces. I'll send Cobblepot and everyone else a message about fucking with my operations. Give her to me, Soames, or it's you I'll be ripping apart. Piece... by piece... by piece."

The barrel of a vintage Thompson .45 caliber machine gun pressed into Blockbuster's throat.

"War, sir, is raw. You know my price, Roland. I take over the operations of everybody lying on this floor, and I pay you 40 percent."

"Fine," Blockbuster said, wanting only to kill the Cat, go home, and REST. "Where is she?"

"Basement of the Devin Building, in Melville. Take her under the cloverleaf before she wakes up," Soames suggested, taking back the glove, "and the noise from the Little Narrows Bridge will drown out the screaming."

Roland Desmond roared off with blood in his eyes, and Soames smiled as he toyed with the purple glove, his 'souvenir' of this episode. Blockbuster was depleted from his marathon battle, but had strength left, certainly, to kill one defenseless woman. Except, he wasn't going to find a defenseless woman. There was no captive Catwoman at the Devin Building. He was going to find Batman... waiting.

"You're a fool, Roland," Soames told the night sky as he left the mission and started for home. "The basement of the Devin Building! And what's on the top floor, hm? An elegant restaurant overlooking Melville Park—best view in the city, they say—and what's it called: *Top Spot*. A palindrome."

PART 5

When he sent Roland Desmond to the Devin Building, Torque thought Blockbuster would encounter Batman there. That, he had been led to believe, was the trap.

Blockbuster entered the Devin Building expecting to find a captive Catwoman. Instead, he faced—not cat, not bat, but instead... Nightwing—a riled Nightwing that was ready for him.

The vigilante stood alone, at the center of the room, lifting a pair of escrima sticks with gentle fingers, like a conductor raises his baton before a concert.

“You’re having a bit of a day, aren’t you, Roland.”

Across from the Devin Building, on the rooftop of the Melville Arms, Batman paced back and forth like the tiger, Shimbala, which Selina had refused to bring along as a bodyguard.

“Now I’m supposed to stand here, just stand here, while my boy takes on that monstrosity by himself?”

“You don’t have to stand,” Catwoman soothed while she inspected a ventilation duct with professional interest, “You can sit. You can pace. You can—”

“Damn it, woman, this plan isn’t sound.”

“You can pace, you can swear and, if you want, you can even complain about the arrogant crimefighter than runs this town insisting everybody play it his way. But the one thing you will not do is go inside that building.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

“That’s why I’m here. My job is to make sure you don’t make a move from this roof—You don’t make *a move* against Blockbuster unless he walks out of that building on his own power.”

“Selina,” Batman said softly, “if Blockbuster walks out of there on his own, it means that Dick is dead.”

Blockbuster had incredible power. The menace had slain and broken hundreds of men. He was a huge brute that could do as much damage with a casual swat as with a deliberate bear hug.

The goliath lumbered forward.

Nightwing started to move as well, springing and pivoting around the giant, using the escrima sticks to drive quick shots to the rear of Blockbuster’s knees. The rods struck flesh in a rhythm of sickly wet squelches, but Blockbuster kept coming.

Nightwing stopped short and Blockbuster lunged. Nightwing dodged and Blockbuster clutched. Nightwing wheeled out of the way and Blockbuster increased his forward momentum.

Nightwing whipped around and swung the sticks hard into the small of Blockbuster's back—his opponent arched back with a roar—that had hurt. But the arch countered the momentum Nightwing had hoped would carry the brute into the wall.

Both men kept moving. The terrible, massive arms kept clutching, crablike, for his much smaller foe.

"This is torture..."

"You're all torturing me, you know that..."

"You're killing me... You and Dick..."

"Don't you even care?..."

"Won't you at least answer me?"

He moved with the speed of a much smaller man. Every time Nightwing whirled to escape Blockbuster's clutch, the giant reacted faster than expected. Quick, weaving spurts on Nightwing's part brought him loss, not gain.

Nightwing was whirling to get behind the villain - taking another swipe at his legs with each turn. If he could get Blockbuster's hulking mass down on the ground, much of his advantage would be negated.

Against a wall, Nightwing stood a scant yard from the sweeping arms. Diving to the side, he barely missed a bear hug.

A massive hand caught his shoulder, and 'Wing felt as though his arm might be ripped from its socket.

Spinning as he reached the wall at the right, Wing found himself facing a human grizzly pounding forward for the kill. Nightwing sped along the wall, then made for the open center of the room.

"Won't you at least answer me?" Batman grabbed Catwoman by the shoulders. As she looked up at him with moist eyes, he realized why she was silent. It wasn't the silence of indifference or anger, but of choking back tears.

"Of course I care," she said finally. "Do you think I enjoy seeing you like this? I know where the control freak comes from, Bruce. It's helplessness. It comes from a little boy who was afraid and alone and made it so that would never happen again. Am I right?"

He looked at her for a long moment, heart pounding.

"It did happen again. It does happen. Dick was shot, I said 'No more,' he wouldn't listen. He came here, I couldn't stop it."

"I know you want to control things."

"*I couldn't stop him.* Jason got careless, I said 'Stop,' he wouldn't listen. He ran away, he got killed. I couldn't—"

"I understand that. You couldn't stop it. You felt helpless."

Batman turned and looked out over the city. The wrong city. He walked to another ledge of the building and looked towards Gotham.

"It would have killed you to bring the tiger?"

Once again, Nightwing was able to flatten the Escrima sticks into the rear joints of his opponent. The chase continued. 'Wing could see that Blockbuster was tiring. Nightwing - backing, springing, whirling - was engaged in trapped flight from a foe that now seemed, at last, to be tiring.

A ham-sized fist shot straight toward Nightwing's face. He blocked instinctively, swinging with his left hand. Only once his forearm hit Blockbuster's did he realize the mistake—he couldn't pit his strength against this monstrosity's right cross... except... at that moment... the impossible happened... the arm opposing his wavered. Blockbuster was weakening.

Nightwing kicked himself free. Then, with all his might, Nightwing delivered a terrific blow to the rear of his opponent's knees.

This time, Blockbuster went down like a felled tree. 'Wing delivered another smashing blow, this time into the back of the giant's neck. The stroke stunned Blockbuster for an instant, then he was down. If only Nightwing could keep him on the ground...

"Hey," Selina's voice was very soft, as was the ungloved finger that touched his lip, then his chin. "I'm not a Robin. I'm not a sidekick. I'm not going to grow up and leave you or go off on some adolescent rampage."

"There are still risks," he whispered.

"Of course. Those go with The Life. For you, too. I mean, let's face it, I'm hands down the only woman you've dated who wouldn't have a problem with how you spend your nights."

He answered with a half-twitch. "That's true."

"So we're okay?"

"Almost. We'll be fine... as soon as Dick comes out of there in one piece."

Nightwing delivered two quick, powerful punches into the villain's arms, blows meant to stun the upper portion of the body. The lower arms, however, shot out to clutch their prey. Another smash, with all of Nightwing's fury... Blockbuster turned slightly from the blow and 'Wing, diving sidewise, managed to elude another clutch of gigantic hands.

With one mighty heave, Blockbuster got back on his feet. But he looked unsteady. Another punch from Nightwing turned the giant toward him. The murderous opponent lunged, gaining momentum, and Nightwing leapt back to the center of the room.

An obviously tired Blockbuster started towards him. He was sweating profusely and his face was a deep shade of red. His breath came in gasps. Nightwing leaped and delivered a stunning dropkick to the face.

Whirling on his landing, Nightwing saw the final fall.

Blockbuster staggered... eyes wide... staggered... then the top-heavy body skidded to the floor.

The fight between Nightwing and Blockbuster had lasted six minutes. The fight between Detective Porpora and Chief Redhorn lasted forty.

Porpora, representing The Multi-Jurisdictional Task Force against Organized Crime, was to lead the press conference at Bludhaven City Hall announcing Roland Desmond's capture and the extraordinary catalog of charges for which he was being arraigned.

Porpora's aim was to place the Task Force seal over that of the Bludhaven Police Department on the podium. Redhorn was insulted. What did this say about the BPD?

Porpora's response was brutally frank: it said they were dirty. It said the Task Force was involved because it was the only way Desmond would see the inside of a courtroom. It said this is why we have federal racketeering laws in the first place, so corrupt locals couldn't shield a thug like Blockbuster, no matter how many he'd paid off.

The threats with which Chief Redhorn answered these charges were vivid and imaginative—both against Porpora and whoever was behind this slur on his department, and he would find out who it was, make no mistake.

But the only follow-through would be when four of Redhorn's dirtiest cops decided it might have been Grayson, and formed a posse to go into Gotham and teach the snitch a lesson. They would get as far as Englehart Square - when they got mugged.

Selina took her phone call out on the terrace, then returned to the dining room. Dick and Barbara had agreed to stay the night at the manor. After such a successful mission, a celebratory dinner seemed in order.

"Any news?" Barbara asked brightly when Selina returned, sparing Dick and Bruce the indignity of showing interest in rogue gossip.

"It's official," Selina announced. "Ivy has a new flytrap. She was at the pottery place last night painting the pot for Ivan-II..."

Bruce and Dick groaned, and Barbara chortled.

"...Doris got a tingle sabotaging the book signing. Keeps asking Eddie if it's always this much fun to be bad."

"Oh. My. God." Dick gasped, joining Barbara in discreet chuckling.

Even Bruce gave a mild twitch when he pondered, "Whatever did 'Eddie' say to that?"

"Jervis has hatted himself a White Rabbit - the whole Iceberg is talking about it," Selina went on.

"You mean an Alice," Bruce corrected.

"I mean a White Rabbit. She's too tall to be an Alice. 5'11" in her stocking feet."

"WHOA," Dick exclaimed.

"He measured her?" Barbara asked.

"It's good to be home," Bruce said with a contented sigh.

