



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

#26

Cat \equiv Sales

Blonde Jokes



by Chris Dee

CAT-TALES
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BLONDE JOKES

“Selina... Kitten... I’m not saying it’ll always be easy, but, no matter what happens, we’re different people now. We could never go back to that, even if we wanted to. Whatever happens, we’ll have to work through it as we are now, who we are now...”

That’s what I said. She was upset about the fight with Dick. Barbara told her it was a return to the norm. Fighting was the norm for us ever since he’d become Nightwing and the few months of getting along was an aberration. Selina was afraid that might mean the same thing for Batman and Catwoman. So I reassured her.

We’re different people now. Whatever happens, we’ll work through it as we are now.

We are different people. Since the fight about Two-Face and the protocols, we’ve come through Christmas, Hell Month, the wedding, Bludhaven. We’ve grown closer than either of us would have thought possible when it started. If it happened today, she would know. She would know I wasn’t trying to use her; it was just business.

Besides, Joker isn’t her friend. She said so the night I discovered the Rogues’ IM network. I said I hated that she was friends with those people, and she answered “The Joker is not my friend. He’s a homicidal maniac.”

Eddie, yes. And Harvey. But not Joker. “Joker is not my friend.” That’s what she said.

So she really should have no objection. A few innocent questions is all I’m asking.

I looked back at the monitor. A map of Gotham with red circles denoting the Joker sightings of the past week. No comedy clubs. No clown tie-ins. No laughter, smiles, grins, teeth, or lips. No wordplay on Ha-Ha. No discernable pattern whatsoever. There had to be a logic to it, just had to be. It would be insane logic, like making a fish that smiles, and therefore look like him, so he should be allowed to copyright it and collect a royalty... Insane logic, but still logic.

One crime spree, if you connected the dots—literally, on a map, drew a line connecting the locations where he used SmileX—it made a grin over the lower half of city. The sites where he used regular, non-lethal laughing gas were the eyes, and the intersection where he attacked a homeless man with a crowbar was the nose. A smiley face. Sick bastard. But still it was a pattern—an insane, twisted pattern, but a pattern.

No deaths yet.

And no Harley.

Active for a week and not one fatality, and not once was he accompanied by Harley Quinn.

It had to mean something.

It had to mean something, and I had to figure out what before the killing started. She’d understand that.

Or maybe she wouldn't have to if Barbara came through. I touched a button on the console, and a new window opened with the videofeed:

"Oracle, any leads?"

...:Sorry, Boss. I've interfaced with every database I can think of going back to 1990. There is no common thread. These places have no connection that I can find...:

"Batman out."

So that was that.

Joker walked casually into a midtown Sharper Image, stationed a henchman at the door with a machine gun, and nonchalantly connected a canister of laughing gas to the Ionic Breeze air purifier. He then marched to the Mr. Karaoke display and started playing Surrey with the Fringe on Top.

"Your attention, please!" he announced through the microphone, "Here's a funny story. A guy goes to the grocery store to buy some Spam. He sees a blonde in a car parked next to him. Her eyes are closed, and her hand is behind her head. It looks like she's sleeping. He shrugs and goes into the store to buy his Spam. When he comes back, she's still there. Hand is still behind her head, but now her eyes are open. She looks very strange, so the guy taps the window and asks 'Are you okay?'

"The woman says 'I've been shot in the head, and I am holding my brains in.'

"The guy calls 911, and when the paramedics arrive, they have to break into the car because the door is locked. When they get in, they find that the woman has bread dough on the back of her head and all over her hand.

"A Pillsbury biscuit canister had exploded from the heat in the car, making a loud explosion like a gunshot, and hit her in the head. When she reached back to find what it was, she felt the dough and thought it was her brains. She passed out from fright at first, then when she woke up, she tried to hold her brains in."

Joker turned back to the machine, switched off the music, and left the store.

Tim was aware that the dangerous life of a crimefighter could make you paranoid. Batman said paranoia was useful, almost a prerequisite for the life they'd chosen. And Nightwing offered the less-than-comforting truism: "Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you."

But if crimefighting made you paranoid, it also honed your awareness. And Tim's awareness was setting off alarms lately. It might be paranoia, but he didn't think so. He was feeling... hunted.

If he went to the library, Linda McVitty just happened to be there.

If he went to the arcade, it was Amanda Gardiner, "Wow, Tim, what a surprise.

Haven't seen you for a while."

If he went to the mall, Nicole Renssalaer, "Early Christmas shopping!"

If he stopped at the 7-Eleven, Cathy Lawrence, "What a coincidence!"

It was not a coincidence. He was not paranoid. He was being hunted.

Joker and his henchman worked their way through the tables at the posh restaurant, Lutece, distributing small slips of paper to each man seated with a fair-haired woman.

“Q: Why did the blonde scale the chain-link fence?” one read,

“A: To see what was on the other side.”

Poison Ivy returned to the greenhouse she’d neglected since establishing a new lair in Riverside Park. Much as she loved the open air of the park, the controlled climate of the greenhouse could support many more species. Exotic specimens like these blood orchids that could never survive the intemperate Gotham winter.

She sighed—providing a rich stream of carbon dioxide for the orchids—while she mixed a pitcher of their special plantfood.

The dalliance with Edward Nigma was a mistake. It was that simple.

Perhaps she was lonely. Not that it’s possible to be lonely in a glade full of clematis and trumpet vine.

Still, however it happened, it had happened. A moment of weakness, and she, as queen of her particular realm, chose a consort for the night. That was her prerogative.

So it was not a mistake; it was simply the whim of a moment. Edward would have to accept that—once his head was clear.

“There’s just one snag,” she told a tiny flytrap as she held out a bit of hamburger on a silver babyspoon. “These Rogue men aren’t that bright, particularly when it comes to the concept of the one night stand, the meaningless tryst, ‘just sex.’”

The flytrap closed over the hamburger, but otherwise gave no response.

“Just look at Penguin,” she went on. Rogue men might not understand, but the flytrap was a plant, and surely any plant should be smart enough to grasp it. “Just look at Penguin still mooning after Roxy after that one ludicrous fling at Christmas... Roxy Rocket.” Her tone turned dark on the name. “Now that I think of it, this is all Oswald’s fault. If he’d been man enough to keep the little tramp satisfied, Harvey never would have strayed.”

The announcer at the Meadowlands Sports Complex cleared his throat into the microphone before making the requested announcement at gunpoint:

...:Ladies and Gentlemen, your attention please,;... he began, looking to the psychotic clown for approval.

...:The management has been asked to read the following announcement: What’s the blonde’s cheer? “I’m blonde, I’m blonde, I’m B-L-O-N... ah, oh well... I’m blonde, I’m blonde, yea, yea, yea!”...:

“You didn’t sell it,” Joker said, disappointed. “Try again.” He handed the terrified announcer another slip. “And this time make me believe it.”

There was a curious mix of onlookers outside the Iceberg Lounge—or rather, outside the two story husk of vegetable matter and vines that had sprung up around the Iceberg in a matter of minutes. A-list rogues like Mad Hatter stood alongside Zodiac

Master and King Snake, nameless henchmen, a camera crew from WCBX, a crossing guard, the people waiting for the Lexington Avenue bus, and, eventually, Robin the boy wonder. They all stared at the hardshell green mass of vegetation that completely enveloped the bar. Finally, it was Robin who found his tongue:

“What the hell?”

It was, in Jervis Tetch’s opinion, the least stupid question any vigilante had ever uttered. So he answered it.

“‘It seems very pretty,’ said Alice through the looking glass, ‘but it’s rather hard to understand.’”

“Word,” Robin answered by way of agreement.

“Somebody honked off Red bigtime,” Harley Quinn chirped.

“Ya think?” King Snake snarled.

“Croc think so.”

These words were uttered by Killer Croc himself, hanging upside down, ankles ensnared by a particularly vicious tendril when he tried to punch through the husk.

From inside the Iceberg, there was a sudden hum, and abruptly the vines stiffened. The hum shifted up an octave and the husk turned from a healthy green to a pale yellow. Then a pounding began. It grew louder, until bits of the husk began to crumble, finally revealing a hole through which figures began to emerge...

Oswald Cobblepot, poking an opening through the now-brittle husk with an umbrella...

“This way, lads, to the egress.”

...Ventriloquist...

“My w-w-word, that f-f-freeze ray c-certainly is effective.”

...Scarface...

“Wait’ll I get my hands on gat gitch!”

...and Victor Frieze.

“See how the icy hand of liquid nitrogen cools the hot rage of a broken heart.”

Hugo Strange said nothing, but he did help Magpie step over the chipped-away bits of plant carcass.

“Oracle, you’re not going to believe this,” Robin called in the incident. “The call at the Iceberg, I don’t know what all should be dispatched to the scene.”

“Someone cut Croc down,” Croc asked politely.

“But a firetruck and a tree surgeon would be helpful.”

Joker looked up happily at the nine foot banner draped over the Washington Square Arch:

“Q: Did you hear about the blonde coyote?” it said on the north face, while the banner on the south face read:

“A: Got stuck in a trap, chewed off three legs and was still stuck.”

So I had to talk to her.

Step one in devising a successful strategy is to marshal the known facts. I was going into a situation very similar to one I’d experienced before, one that went badly. So consult the log, analyze what went wrong before, make a plan to avoid those pitfalls this time.

Unfortunately, I stopped logging encounters with Catwoman long before the protocols fight.

I accessed the last entries I had for her. All were from the week after she closed Cat-Tales:

CW – Art Museum, Egyptian Wing – as expected. Cat’s back in business.

Entry through climate control system, 12 minutes. Targeting jeweled statuettes. Fled with one. Recovered statuette with batarang to wrist during chase. Statuette suffered minor chip.

Foundation \$ to cover repair.

C Escaped.

Banter.

I winced. Banter? Was that any way to describe what happened that night? The night I smiled at her... the night everything became possible... Banter?

I scanned ahead to the next entry.

CW – Cartier’s. Emeralds.

CW – Penthouse. Surprised her.

CW – Playful tonight.

CW –

I sat there for an hour, remembering. I sat there looking at four log entries consisting of seven words. Eventually realized I’d completely lost sight of the objective.

I had to talk to her.

In celebration of the de-husking of the Iceberg, Oswald Cobblepot declared an open bar. He’d only done this once before, when Two-Face claimed to have finally and forever offed Batman. Such claims were not uncommon at the Iceberg and Oswald had been justly skeptical. But then a day passed. Then 30 hours, then 36, and there were no bat-sightings whatsoever. So he’d relented... Only to wake the next morning to headlines of the JLA quashing an uprising in Kurdistan. Batman was there. Batman was alive. Batman was alive in Kurdistan, and Oswald’s inventories were depleted by two hundred cases of premium spirits.

But that was last time. This time, there was just cause to celebrate. No false alarm: They had all seen Poison Ivy apprehended after her hysterical descent from the rooftops on witnessing the “murder” of “her baby,” the husk. The deranged harpy

erected a vegetable husk around his bar, trapping a dozen of her fellow rogues inside, and then had a screaming fit because they had the wherewithal to cut themselves out!

And what a screaming fit. Such sounds had not been heard since the famous Clayface-Secret Santa-potpourri incident of '99.

"I almost feel sorry for the lad," Frieze had said, as they all watched the Redbird drive off. "It is a long drive out to Arkham with a hysterical Pammy screaming obscenities." They'd all been thinking it, but no one else said anything. Now Victor Frieze reintroduced the subject.

"To Robin," he toasted. And Oswald bristled.

"Beware the Jubjub bird, Victor," Jervis cautioned. "Toasting a vigilante in the Iceberg is... well, it's a topsy turvy world! But to do so with liquor Oswald himself is paying for! O frabjous day; It's rude, I say."

Victor considered the rebuke, then said, "No. I will pay for the drink. I still say 'To Robin.' Deathtraps are one thing, but having to drive any distance with Pamela like that, that is simply... *cold*."

Everyone remembered that Victor was the designated driver the night of the Christmas party and had to take Poison Ivy home after Clayface gave her potpourri, so they sipped their drinks and said nothing.

There was a click from the jukebox and a moment of tense silence... then a collective sigh of relief as a hard rock beat began pounding and Bryan Adams told of a *One Night Love Affair*. Edward Nigma ambled to the bar, ordered a Glenundrom, and pulled a leaf from his costume.

Sly served the drink with his usual air of genial unflappability.

"Why do you have dandelion in your waistband, Mr. Nigma?" he asked with a friendly air.

"Don't I wish I had an answer to that one," Eddie grumbled, downing the shot.

"You'll be happy to know that Lady Weed was just taken up the river," Hugo informed him, "so we should be all be pheromone-free for a while."

For the first time since his breakup with Doris, Edward Nigma indulged in the kind of free, rocking laughter you'd expect from the Riddler.

"She's gone to Arkham!" he cackled, "Well set me up with another, Sly, my good man! And riddle me this, my fellow Rogues: Who else was just captured, only last night? Two-Face! And Roxy too! All three together at Arkham. Now that should be some quality dinner theatre!"

"So the blonde calls to her husband that the tiger jigsaw puzzle is really hard, and the husband says 'Honey, put the Frosted Flakes back in the box.' HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAaaaaa. Don't you get it? PUT THE FROSTED FLAKES BACK IN THE BOX!!! What's the matter with you people??? It was Tony the Tiger!!! HahahAHAHAHAHAAAAAAA!"

"So you bagged Poison Ivy," Dick asked with a note of envy.

"Wasn't much of a challenge," Tim answered, "She sort of went to pieces after this thing she was doing at the Iceberg went bad."

Dick shrugged, spinning himself off the vaulting horse to land smartly before the cooler. He chugged a chilled bottle of water, then tossed another - unopened - over his shoulder, where Tim caught it neatly.

"Actually, the tussle with Poison Ivy is the least menaced I've felt all week," Tim admitted. "It's the girls from around school that are starting to creep me out."

"Oh my god, Bro, your senior year. And holidays are coming up. Deb season. Ha! Hadn't realized your number was up already." Dick chuckled like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

"Deb season?"

"Yeah, debutante balls. All the related parties. You know how it is, they need escorts."

"I don't think that's it," Tim insisted. "This is the feeling like closing in on a villain's hideout: You know it might be a trap, there might be cameras, you get that feeling you're being watched, any second the floor could drop out beneath you."

"Yep. Deb season."

"No."

"You're a nice looking boy, Timothy."

"Stop that."

"I'll bet you look smashing in a tux."

"Not funny, Dick."

"You're a marked man, Tim. You can fight this, or you can just accept the inevitable."

"That's the kind of thing Ra's al Ghul says."

"Heh, heh, the Demon's Head should be half so determined as a debutante hunting for an escort."

"Okay, now I'm scared."

"Bruce and I both went through it. You'll live."

"That's what you said about Zogger."

"Heh, heh, heh."

3:53

Leland Bartholomew watched the minute hand flick upwards, another tick closer to four o'clock. How he was dreading four o'clock. Dreading it with a dread bordering on absolute detestation...

"Miss Vicens?" he said into the intercom, "Please schedule me for a routine blood test at day's end."

"Are you alright, Doctor?" his assistant asked, concerned.

"Perfectly sound, Miss Vicens. There is a remote possibility of exposure to fear-gas, and I wish to run a tox-screen before anything develops."

It would do no harm. It was standard operating procedure at Arkham if even the mildest symptoms manifested themselves. But Bartholomew knew his dread of the coming hour had a natural, non-chemical explanation. And Jonathan Crane's remark was not planting a suggestion; it was a simple observation: Bartholomew had looked at the clock fourteen times during Jonathan Crane's session. In 50 minutes, between

3:00 & 3:50, he'd looked at the clock fourteen times, and his patient had noticed. He did it with a look of distaste, Crane had said, as if something was to occur at four o'clock that Dr. Bartholomew was not looking forward to.

It was: Harvey Dent's session.

He'd had Pamela Isley at one o'clock, Roxy Rocket at two. It was a lot to take.

At four o'clock, Bartholomew swallowed two Advil with a swig of Maalox and opened his door. Dent went through his usual rigmarole, flipping his coin to determine if he would speak in today's session or sit in silence. Feeling a traitor to his Hippocratic oath, Bartholomew prayed it would come up scarred, indicating silence.

"A lot of estrogen in the rec room today," Harvey began, and Bartholomew slumped in his chair. "Since last night's arrival of, you know, the Queen of Green. Miss I-am-nature-incarnate-and-all-must-worship-my-leafy-beauty."

"She's just going by Pam now," Bartholomew said dryly—and then stared in horror at his unprofessional remark.

Harvey Dent stared as well. Then, after a beat, he roared with laughter.

"You're okay, Bart! We like you!"

It was a thoroughly inappropriate outburst, completely unprofessional, but it opened up Harvey Dent as nothing ever had. For the next half hour, Harvey (and Two-Face) told, at length, the convoluted but fascinating tale of his, or "their," cough, love life.

"Of course, we're glad we are with Roxy now. We're quite over Ivy. Of course we are. We can't help yearning for her now and again—despite the bad times (of which there were many) outnumbering the good times... Well, like the old nursery rhyme says, when the good times were good, they were very, very good."

Harvey rose from his chair and Bartholomew scrutinized the move. Such a gesture could be threatening, or it could mean the patient had decided to terminate the session early and leave. This appeared to be neither. It almost seemed that Dent was... oh dear... it seemed he stood in order to adjust himself. Bartholomew looked to his notepad, then thought the better of it. He wouldn't want Dent to think he was making a note of the action. But Harvey merely paced as he resumed talking, and didn't look at Bartholomew at all.

"Do you know why we are here now, Doc? Roxy pulled the alarm at the Second National Bank. Two perfectly satisfying jobs went off smooth as you please, and that was *boring*. So she pulled the alarm. Women! Then, while she was all wired from the chase, she decided to buzz the Iceberg. Thrills are one thing. We don't say we didn't enjoy certain aspects of that ride on the rocket, but to buzz the Iceberg! And then when it came to a confrontation with Batgirl, she baited the little beast. That Batgirl is ninety-eight pounds of hurricane, and Roxy flat out baited her. That's why we're banged up from here to here, Doc! It's Two-Face, mind you, Two-FACE. The acid only scarred those parts our suit didn't cover—and *WE'D RATHER KEEP IT THAT WAY!*"

At the batting cages in Gotham Central Park, Joker stood in one cage and his henchman in the one beside it.

"What does a blonde owl say?" the henchman asked, swinging at a fastball.

"What, what." Joker answered. "Why did the blonde have tire tread marks on her back?"

“From crawling across the street when the sign said DON’T WALK,” answered the henchman. “Why did the blonde tip-toe past the medicine cabinet?”

“So she wouldn’t wake up the sleeping pills.”

The Sensei said effort was a trap.

I'd anticipate an attack, compensate accordingly, wind up overcompensating, and find myself slammed into the mat, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling. Then the Sensei's face would come into view. "Effort is a trap, *Wayne-san*. Do not anticipate. Be. Then whatever comes, react like the water, fluid, of the moment."

I wasn't going to repeat the mistakes of the Protocols fight—the Two-Face fight. When Selina and I became close, I asked if Catwoman had inside information to take down the rogues, "protocols" like I made up for the JLA, just in case. Then, when she was still smarting from that, I asked her to help me against Two-Face. It was the worst fight we ever had, and it nearly split us for good. I wasn't going to repeat those mistakes. That night, I went to her as Batman. So tonight, I went as Bruce. That night, I showed up unannounced. Tonight, I called ahead.

It was too much. It was overcompensating. And I wound up slammed into the mat, staring at the ceiling.

"Aren't we a little past having to call before you drop in?" That was how she opened the door. Suspicious, right off the mark. She knows me too well.

I fibbed, said I was making up for trying to cancel on her last night.

The Two-Face fight began with my asking about protocols. That whole mess began when I came over for a date, as Bruce Wayne, as I was now. I had said I wanted to stay in and talk instead of going out. So this time, I did the opposite.

"Let's not order in, let's go out."

And, I figured, instead of introducing the subject over dinner, we would talk in the morning.

"I don't feel like getting dressed up tonight. Why don't we stay in?" This while she practically crawled into my lap, playing with my tie like the insignia. Stay in... she asked it with a purr... like it was some vault and she really, *really* wanted to keep that diamond.

...whatever comes, react like the water, fluid, of the moment...

"Okay, Kitten," I kissed her cheek, "whatever you want. We can stay in."

After all, it's not like it was a stolen diamond in the vault. She just wanted to stay in. Maybe she was tired or, more likely, playful. We could still talk in the morning, I told myself.

...Effort is a trap, Wayne-san. Do not anticipate...

That's when it happened. That's when it all went to hell. A simple phonecall and I wound up slammed onto the mat, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling.

There was "a situation" in Atlantis. Not a *crisis*, Arthur stressed, a *situation*. Political. It would be 'imprudent' for him to leave. He went into more detail than he needed to: A scandal involving one of his ministers. If he left, the viceroy who would act in his absence was the minister's brother... Arthur didn't need to tell me all this. It was guilt that made him do so. He couldn't take his shift at the Watchtower, would I please fill in?

Arthur never misses Monitor Duty. Never. He is 100 percent dedicated; excuses are for those who don't make Duty a priority. That's why he was asking me to fill in for him. He didn't say so; he didn't have to. I knew the reason. There were many in the league with whom he's on friendlier terms, but he wasn't asking them. He didn't want

them to see him slip—King Orin had a conflict of priorities. If they knew, he wouldn't be able to grumble about their constant shift swapping. He knew I didn't play those games. He knew I wouldn't hang it over him. So I agreed; what else could I do?

I turned back to Selina, knowing she'd heard my half of the conversation. Monitor Duty. The night the Protocols fight started, I had Monitor Duty. To change the subject, I asked her to come along. I was standing right here on this spot. This was a very bad omen.

"Want some company?" she asked.

I couldn't have heard it right. She was offering to come?

"Monitor Duty, right? You said it gets pretty boring if it's a slow night."

Almost the exact words I used that night. Hell. Could there be a worse omen?

"Sure," I said, "it will be nice to have the company."

What else could I say?

...slammed into the mat, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling...

Jason liked working at the Shakespeare and Company Bookstore between acting jobs. They understood his need for flexible hours, and manning the help desk gave him a chance to meet a cross-section of Gothamites and tourists. Many had interesting accents, and when he heard a new one he would practice it for the rest of the day—a useful skill in getting acting work.

Jason just left the help desk for a moment to get a skim-latte from the coffee bar. When he returned, he could see a customer was waiting. A customer that looked familiar—more than familiar - Famous. Jason had seen famous customers in Shakespeare and Company before. He wrote up the encounters and sent them in to David Letterman in hopes of getting invited for a "Brush with Greatness" segment. This customer he could not write up as a "brush with greatness"... assuming he even lived.

"HAHAHA-Hallo," Joker said with a terrifying grin, "Personal Growth, please?"

Jason stared.

"The personal growth section, would be where?" the killer clown repeated.

Jason found he could not speak. He stared in horror, then, finally, he pointed.

"Thank you!" Joker said, and disappeared in the direction indicated. A moment later, he returned.

"Say, do you know why was the blonde upset when she got her driver's license? Because she got an F in sex! HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Last time Catwoman accompanied me to the Watchtower, we were relieving Plastic Man. Tonight, with fate conspiring to remind her of that incident any way possible, Eel was, of course, in the Monitor Womb when we got there. Not his regular shift. He must have swapped with J'onn.

Last time was right after the protocols. He hated me. All that was behind us now. We're teammates again. With the unfortunate byproduct that he'd resumed his usual infantile banter around me.

"I taut I taw a puddy-tat," he announced, turning himself into a yellow bulbous creature. Then he switched back to his regular form and added, "Hiya, Miss Kitty."

Rather than rolling her eyes or staring him down, Catwoman smiled warmly. She could never resist the chance to reduce a hero to his basest instincts. Even Plastic Man, who I would have thought was too easy to bother with.

She smiled at him, called him 'Stretchy' and blew a kiss. His reaction took a second to process... it was as if the kiss actually took a moment to travel across the room... and his expression, when it hit, looked like the time Prometheus reduced him to a state of spastic paralysis.

I asked Selina to get us some coffee. The moment her back was turned, Eel "blushed" his whole body to the color of her costume. I gave him the death scowl, although it never has much effect.

"Careful," I cautioned.

He just looked at me. For once, no wiseass backtalk.

"I figured you were using her," he said finally. And it was Eel O'Brien talking. Plastic Man doesn't have a special voice but his manner is distinctive. This wasn't it. But it wasn't the Eel I know either; but then, I suppose I don't really know Eel. "When you brought her up last time, I figured you were just stringing her along, had some case you wanted her help with, taking advantage... *Taking*, like you do."

I didn't even process the insult. I was too shocked. Even O'Brien was talking about that night. Were we all going to have to rehash every word and nuance of that night? Word by word, bit by bit, until it all exploded into another knockdown-dragout-we're kidding ourselves-it's over?

"I hope you know how lucky you are."

I didn't answer him. By the time I realized he'd actually spoken, that the words I thought I heard weren't a chimera from inside my own head, Selina was back. Eel had resumed his regular color scheme and, instead of leaving, sat himself on the arm of her chair, like he was planning to stay a while.

"I was just telling Batman how the last time you were here, it caused quite an uproar. None of us realized, of course..."

He was still talking about that night. And he was drinking my coffee.

"...until those news stories started about Selina Kyle dating--"

"I certainly hope you people know better than to believe everything you read," she interrupted—predictably—the calumnies of newspaper gossip is one of her favorite topics. "If you don't, well, let's just say you're in for quite a shock when you go home to Graceland and see what's happened to the place."

O'Brien laughed, morphed into an Elvis impersonator and sang a few bars of *Hound Dog*, complete with pelvis-grinding choreography. I never saw the tabloid piece alleging that Plastic Man was Elvis Presley, but it's one of Selina's favorite examples to slap down gossip-mongers.

I ignored the pair of them. They both react to the death scowl like it's encouragement, and I obviously didn't want to feed this nonsense. Instead, I busied myself with the newsfeeds. Two channels needed adjusting, which is typical when relieving O'Brien. I tuned one to pick up the AP feed out of Gotham, and that's when I

saw... Six more Joker sightings. I held my breath as I skimmed the report... still no fatalities... I breathed... but a new development...

::American Airlines Passenger Harris to the white courtesy phone... The yellow zone is for loading and unloading only... Excuse me, sir, you can't come in here... that microphone is for official airline announcements—ugh.... **Attention K-Mart shoppers, Joker here! Know how you confuse a blonde? Ask her to alphabetize a bag of M&Ms! Know why it works?::**

The announcement continued in a sickly falsetto:

::“Does 3 come before E, or does it go between M and W?” ::

then concluded in Joker's normal voice: ::**HAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!**

Thank you for flying Air Joker! ::

“O'Brien, get out. We need to work.” I turned to Selina, “Six new sightings, all today. He's telling blonde jokes now.”

“Blonde jokes? Hey, did'ya hear the one about the blonde skydiver?”

“O'Brien, I said GET OUT.”

“She missed the Earth!”

“NOW.”

I was prepared to physically stuff him into the transporter tube. Selina had a better way. She stopped paying attention to him. He left.

“Blonde jokes?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I swiveled my chair around to face her, then turned hers to face me. “Look, I had wanted to ask before, but I didn't know how to bring it up. I really don't want you flying off the handle like last time.”

“Flying off the handle?” she interrupted.

Don't turn into Batman, I told myself, not like last time. You're just a guy whose girl is giving him a bad time. Just a guy. Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat.

“Look,” I swallowed, “It's Joker. Could we stay focused on that, please.”

“Flying off the handle—like last time?”

Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat. Don't go Bat.

“Selina, please. I'm asking for help. You want to just listen and maybe give me shit some other time.”

I heard my breathing, I heard my heart beat, I heard the hum of the uplink matrix running raw data through a multilevel contextual filter sorting the information by location, category and urgency indices. But I didn't hear any interruption from the chair opposite me.

I took a deep breath, and resumed.

“I can't work out what he's doing. I've been trying to get inside his head for days, which is not a pleasant exercise and I don't recommend it. He keeps showing up at these locations, occasionally he commits a crime, usually he just acts out in some way and leaves. So far, no killing, and no Harley. She hasn't been seen with him once. That's why I thought, maybe... maybe you could ask around. The rumor mill. Jervis. Ivy. I don't know who she'd confide in.”

"Confide in about what?"

"If they had a fight. Broke up."

"You think..."

"It was just a possibility before, now I'm sure Harley is the core of this. He's telling blonde jokes. 'Why did God create blondes? Because sheep can't bring beer from the fridge.' That seems pretty hostile."

"Compared to when he plopped her off the Hudson Bridge, shoved her out of a blimp, flung hot oil at her, slammed her head against a vending machine, or dropped her into a shark tank?"

"He was in a good mood when he did those things, now he's pissed."

"Ok, I'll help you. 'Cause that was just scary."

"Huh? What?"

"I said I'd help. But you are to spend no more time 'trying to get inside Joker's head,' cause 'He was in a good mood then, but now he's pissed,' that is just SCARY. Don't do that again."

And she left. Just like that.

You see, a little advanced planning, a little intelligent strategy, and any situation can be finessed.

Dr. Leland Bartholomew made his apologies to the occupants of the Arkham Visitors' Lounge. They were short staffed today, and Miss Isley had quite a number of visitors. He was sorry they had to wait. There were a number of magazines and a television to keep them entertained while they waited.

"Short staffed," Jervis turned to Edward Nigma and Selina. "You know what that means?"

"Green Flu," Eddie answered knowingly.

Jervis nodded, but Selina, who had never been caught, let alone incarcerated at Arkham, looked confused.

"When Ivy is being particularly temperamental," Jervis started to explain.

"Or just 'mental,'" Eddie added bitterly.

"They have a lot of call ins," Jervis concluded.

"Better to call in sick, than to really be sick," Eddie completed the thought.

"We may therefore conclude," Jervis said happily, "there have been developments since the terrible trio were all sent here."

Selina continued to look confused, so Jervis filled her in on what was known of the Harvey/Roxy/Ivy triangle. By the time he was finished, Dr. Bartholomew returned and said he could go and see Miss Isley now. When the door closed, Eddie looked at it for a long time, then turned to Selina slowly.

"Mad Hatter, heh, he should go by Gossip Gertie if you ask me. That's why he's here, making the rounds. He's going to see the three of them, get the dirt, and go trotting back to the Iceberg with 'reputable sources'... 'straight from the flytrap's mouth.'"

Selina smiled. "Okay, that's why he's here. Now why are you?"

"Went to see Harvey first," he explained, "I had an, er, encounter, with Ivy. And after that Joker business earlier this year with..." he hummed a few bars of 76 *Trombones* and gestured with his hand as if playing the instrument, "...I wasn't going to take any chances. So I told Harvey everything. The bloom is off the rose, so to speak. She's not my type. Contrary to popular—and Pamela's—opinion: sans pheromones, she is not every man's type."

"Noted." Selina checked her watch.

"And Harvey said to tell her," Eddie went on conversationally, forgetting that it was Jervis who was the incurable gossip. "Clean break. Said it was your boy Bruce's advice. Tell her the truth. And do it now when she's in Arkham and can be medicated if necessary."

"Eddie, that advice got Harvey hospitalized for four weeks." Which, Selina made a mental note, may have been Bruce's intention the entire time. She'd never decided for sure.

The door opened again, and Dr. Bartholomew said Miss Isley was ready for another visitor. Nigma looked at Selina thoughtfully, then told her to take his place in the queue.

Joker and his henchman returned to Gotham Central Park, this time to the ice rink, and gleefully told the clerk at the skate rental the connection between a blonde and a halogen headlamp is that both get screwed on the front of a Ford Escort.

They then made the rounds of all the skaters, took aside each man accompanied by a fair-haired woman, and told him a blonde tried to steal a police car because she saw 911 on the side and thought it was a Porsche.

"This is the first I've heard of a break-up," Pamela Isley declared when Selina asked about Harley and Joker, "but it's about time she dumped that... that... that...MAN. And such a man, really, of all the losers that crawl around this city after dark, could she possibly have done worse?! but, look who I'm talking to."

Selina's eyes burned at this blatant flouting of the cardinal rule: Thou Shalt Not Insinuate about Batman and Catwoman. But she said nothing, not wanting to interrupt the diatribe and possibly miss something valuable.

"But at least you came to your senses, Catty, not that Wayne's much of an improvement. Rich and all, but dumb as a post from what I hear...."

Selina let this pass as well, knowing that the real seed of Ivy's dislike lay in Bruce The Fop leering at every woman except her when they began the slumming ruse at the Iceberg.

"...And besides, Joker likes him. There has to be something seriously wrong with the guy if Jack likes him, you mark my words..."

Selina forgot her annoyance. This was an angle that hadn't occurred to any of them. Good old Pammy! If other inquiries proved fruitless, Joker would surely confide in his good buddy "Brucie." A slow feline smile crossed Selina's face as the thought of suggesting it to him—he'd probably burst a blood vessel.

"Although, now that I think of it," Ivy's tone changed once she'd vented sufficiently, "When Harley came to see me, she *did* complain that she and Joker were having trouble hooking up. Whatever Hacienda she was at, he wasn't."

"Avoiding me! My Puddin' is avoiding me," Harley wailed. "Oh Catty, it's awful, the man I love has gone missin', and the hyenas need walked, and I'm outta cortisone cream, and those videos need returned."

Selina gave an uncomfortable cough. This would not be easy to say.

"Well, I ran into Jervis at Arkham, and he did explain about the Poison Oak. So, um, well... Harley, this does not mean we're friends and it certainly doesn't mean I'm going to walk those hyenas. But if you're really in a bind, I'll run to the 7-Eleven and get you some cortisone."

"Oh Catty, you're the best," Harley whimpered. "Could ya drop the videos too? *When Harry Met Sally* is overdue, and Puddin' hates paying late fees, so now he'll have to kill the clerk."

"Harley, I am not returning *When Harry Met Sally* for you."

Harley sobbed.

"That was the last movie Puddin' and I watched together before he disappeared."

Selina looked thoughtfully at the videobox, then picked it up slowly.

"Really. Well, okay, just this once. As a special favor."

"1989, can you believe it?" Barbara exclaimed, sipping her tea. "*When Harry Met Sally* came out in 1989. If I'd gone back one more year, I'd have found it. All the Joker incidents have been at sites where *When Harry Met Sally* filmed on location here in Gotham. All I had to do was run a reverse-compare against the city permits database..."

"Or watch the movie," Dick suggested.

Selina looked from Barbara—who practically dove into her computer, typing like something not quite human, on hearing the new information—to Dick, who took the videocassette from her, popped it into the VCR, and fast-forwarded through the airport scene, the stadium, the batting cage, the restaurant, Sharper Image, the Shakespeare and Company bookstore...

"Thanks for bringing this to me before Bruce," Barbara said absently. "Gives me a chance to redeem myself."

"You haven't told him yet?" Dick asked.

"I called him on cell," Selina answered, "He was at Wayne Enterprises, couldn't talk. Said he'll come by as soon as he can."

"Cool," Dick grinned, "That won't be 'til 5. We can have this cracked by the time he gets here. So... *When Harry Met Sally*... avoiding Harley... blonde jokes... very hostile toward Harley... Oh my god."

"YES?"

"It's only the most famous scene in movie history," Dick smirked.

"Now you're abusing hyperbole," Barbara corrected.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! YES! YES!!!" Dick chanted, slapping the arm of the sofa.

"I'll have what she's having," Barbara quoted.

"Should I leave you two alone?" Selina asked.

Dick just smiled. Barbara smiled. Finally, after one of those you-go looks, Dick spoke.

"Selina, I don't think any of us have told you how happy we all are to have you in our little circle. Because, with something like this, well... Bruce has his accomplishments, we all know. But he isn't exactly in the mainstream. Pop culture, not his thing. And back in the day, it would be one of us that had to explain this to him. But now, hey, we have you!"

"Faking it?" Bruce looked incredulous.

"That's the theory," Selina confirmed.

"Your theory is that Joker is pissed because he saw a movie in which Meg Ryan fakes an orgasm in a diner, and now he thinks Harley Quinn has been *faking*, and that's why he's running around town telling blonde jokes instead of killing people?"

"I know it sounds insane."

"Not really. Not for Joker. If anything, it's a little too pat for the guy who couldn't kill people on his anniversary because he hadn't recited Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses* before he left the house." Bruce's eye flickered towards the kitchen door where Dick and Barbara had disappeared. Then he spoke louder, "It's not a bad theory. It doesn't explain why he isn't killing, but it's a start."

Dick and Barbara, knowing they were being addressed, peeked back into the room.

Bruce continued, "It's probably enough. Joker will want this kept quiet. We got him to check himself into Arkham once before. Batman will talk to him tonight."

After Bruce left, Barbara turned to Dick and asked, "Just confirming, 'Batman will talk to him' translates as..."

"Blackmail him."

"That's what I thought."

"Dr. Bart! Long time no laugh, HAHAHAHA! Did you hear about the blonde who shot an arrow into the air? She missed! HAHAHAHAAAAAaaaa but seriously, Doc, I do have an embarrassing little issue I'd like to talk about today. I seem to be having trouble killing people."

Dr. Bartholomew took a handful of Advil with a swig of Maalox.

"And it's all Harley's fault, the demon blonde. Here all this time I thought she was faking like a good girlfriend should, and it turns out, she's really having that much fun! What's up with that? Is that any way to make a man feel like a man—like he's actually giving her pleasure? Yuck! I gag every time I think of it. Thrown my whole system out of whack. No confidence!"

I felt strong, knowing fingers kneading the muscles at the base of my neck.

This is why I used to tell myself there could never be a woman in Batman's life. At night... after patrol... waiting while I made log entries... impatient... entitled even.

I never figured on a woman like Selina, whose fingers rubbed little circles against my hairline. She knew exactly how long to wait. Somehow she knew when I was done with the vital work, and then...

"Watch you don't pull your shoulder, Stud, reaching to pat yourself on the back."

This taunting whisper breathed hot and moist into my ear... When I got back to the cave, I used to leave the cowl on while making log entries. I don't know why. Some idea of "thinking as Batman" maybe. No more. Soft fingers massaging my neck, hot whispers. Batman was quick to realize the cowl got in the way.

"What makes you think I'm patting myself on the back, Kitten?" I asked, letting those magical fingers relax me.

"You had this pleased little smile while you typed."

I told her the truth: "That wasn't for me; it was for you. Your part in this was huge."

She purred.

"Selina, I'm serious," I told her. "You've helped before, but not like this."

She just purred. She didn't understand. She had leveraged Catwoman's status among the rogues for information to help Batman. And she had no idea how significant that was. She's still a puzzle to me.

"Oh. Sorry, guys," an uncertain voice murmured, "I didn't think anybody'd be down here."

"Hi, Tim! Good to see ya," Selina called, in a voice that made it clear he was an unwelcome interruption. I gave her thigh a light smack.

He didn't seem to notice anyway. He'd removed his mask and was now stripping off the gloves, looking exasperated.

"Girls are confusing," he said finally.

I'd been waiting for this. Deb season. He'd already talked to Dick. Of course. Girl issues, he goes to Dick. Don't ask Bruce, Bruce is clueless. Bruce only dated the most glamorous *debutantes* and *supermodels* before settling down with *Catwoman*, what could he possibly tell you about women?

"Deb season?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah. The stalking has begun."

"The only defense is to have already committed to escort someone," I told him. "The Von Schlonicker girls are a good choice because the family travels. You'll have to attend the ball, but then they'll be off to Europe. No other parties."

Tim looked suitably impressed. Selina looked piqued.

"So in Bruce-world, the idea is to see as little of the girl as possible? This is your idea of advice?" She turned away from me and asked, "Timothy, why exactly do you not want to go out with these girls?"

He seemed stuck for an answer. I started to speak...

"Don't help him," Selina snapped.

"I didn't say a word." (And I hadn't.)

"You were about to." (Impossible woman.)

"I... I... they look like they fell out of a J Crew catalog," was what Tim came up with on his own.

"You don't want to go out with them for the sole reason that they want you to," she observed markedly, "Where could you *EVER* have picked up such an idiotic attitude."

Impossible woman.

"Listen. Tim. You're looking at roughly a four week period in which you can enjoy the best food, dancing, champagne, and elaborate entertainments this city has to offer, all at no cost to you, in the company of a lovely girl your age who's on cloud nine just being invited to the party - and all you have to do is show up, be male and wear a tux. Through what bizarre bat-lens do you look at that and see it as a bad deal? You two are crazy."

She went up to bed, and Tim looked at me like I'd let him down.

This wasn't the first time she'd sliced me up in front of a Robin and left me standing like that. It was the first time I found myself blaming the Robin. But for this interruption, I would have been upstairs with Selina by now, "thanking" her for her help, and instead I was still in the cave, pronounced idiotic, bizarre, and crazy, while she went up to bed alone. And Tim was looking like *I'd* let *HIM* down.

"Callooh! Callay! Jack Daniels, I say!" Jervis Tetch ordered happily. "This round is on, what was your name, my friend? Never matter, doesn't mind. Sly, another drink for me to be paid for by this fellow here, wearing the funny hat!"

It was the ninth round Jervis Tetch, aka The Mad Hatter, aka Gossip Gertie had enjoyed in payment for telling all the latest from "The Triangle at Arkham," as Harvey, Roxy and Ivy were now universally known.

"Anyone who hasn't heard it yet, gather round! Gather round! 'The time has come,' the Walrus said, 'To talk of many things: of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings—'"

"Well Selina, thanks to you, I'm effectively without a Robin until Christmas. Tim's decided to escort Cecily Grenville, and if she's anything like her sisters, that will be every party, afterparty, and after-afterparty, every night, 'til the end of the season."

She looked pleased with herself.

For a second, I wondered if, in her mind, robbing me of a Robin balanced her helping me against Joker. I was about to say so in payback for "Through what bizarre bat-lens... idiotic, bizarre and crazy" when, inexplicably, I thought of O'Brien. "I hope you know how lucky you are."

I rolled over and turned off the light.

"Kitten?"

"Hm?"

"You really came through today. It's not that I don't appreciate it. It's just that, well, Barbara and Dick, JLA, Titans, Young Justice, they have many long-standing wagers on this sort of thing, and I've already made Dick enough money this year. There's you, cooking, the bachelor party, Bludhaven, asking for help. If, on top of that, I say 'thank you,' I might as well buy Dick a Porsche, give him all my credit cards, and sign over the house."

"You're welcome."

