

When Life Makes Plans



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A post TDK fanfic by Realmling

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Lenorah Soriss, Margorie Furin and other such characters not of the Batman universe are my own creations just along for the ride.

Author Intro

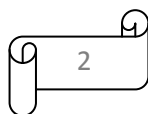
This is the original version of *When Life Makes Plans* as first posted on fanfiction.net between December 12, 2009 and March 8, 2010. Nothing has been changed from what was there other than formatting for a better reading experience and some images here and there. I have even included those author notes posted at the end of the story itself, just so you did not end up missing anything.

And with that, I will leave you to your reading. Enjoy!

Original intro blathering:

This story is rated T for implied adult situations (honestly, if you can't use your imagination to fill in the blanks after things fade to black, me spelling it out blow by blow isn't really going to help you a whole lot) and language from time to time.

And with all that out of the way, get on with your reading of the mindless drivel I've come up with here.



Chapter 1

Life is what happens when you make plans...and it generally goes and messes up said plans. Oh, certainly things that we want happen, but it is quite often the things we do not plan that make life more interesting. Sometimes these accidents leave us empty and thinking life is not worth a whole lot, yet sometimes, it is just the opposite. Happy little events that we did not plan on, that we never expected - yet they make our lives that much richer.

And so it was for the people in our tale here. But you do not want to hear me blathering on and on, You would much rather hear about them I am guessing - and so you shall.

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Lenorah Sorris came home to an empty apartment. It was the same as every night before, a usual routine she did not always like, but felt no need to change. Dating had never been high on her priority list, and having just moved to a new town two months previously, she had not had time to make many friends. Not that she was actively trying to meet anyone right now, or that she had been an overly social person before - but a large empty apartment was just that - empty. Working long hours negated the option for a dog or cat, but there was that nice bare wall in the living room that might look nice with an aquarium.

"It's a Friday night, and I'm debating on getting fish or not. I need help." she muttered to herself.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she hastened to change into her comfy lounge clothing. Her life was not totally boring in her estimation at least. A few nights ago, she had spotted something as she sat up late staring out at the view she had of most of the city. The first time she figured it for a late night, sleep deprived hallucination. Seeing it again the next night shook that idea out of her and she had spent her nights with the lights out just staring out the large picture windows that made up most of the living and dining areas. As tonight was a Friday, she allowed herself a bottle of wine as she settled in for her nightly watch.

Most people would have considered her pathetic, and just a little crazy. But Lenorah had never really cared much what other people thought. And as it was in the privacy of her own home, it was not causing any harm in the first place. Given the city she now lived in, it was actually a pretty safe hobby. Gotham City was not known for always being the safest of places to live, not that any big city really was, but things just seemed to happen more often in Gotham. She was still learning her new home, but she actually felt like this was finally the place she could stay a while. Bonus evenings of bat watching were simply icing on the cake.

She had certainly never expected to see the costumed man who guarded the city. Sure, she had heard about him, but a sketchy newspaper photo was nothing compared to seeing that glimpse for yourself. She had only caught a brief glimpse twice, but it was worth it if for no other reason than to feel special in her own mind. Her friends would never believe it - simply thinking she had finally gone completely crazy (because moving to Gotham in the first place had made her insane enough in their estimation).

"My dear, I do believe the weather is fine enough to brave the great outdoors."

She kept the thought that she was talking to an unopened bottle of wine to herself. Not having another person in the house meant she talked to inanimate objects quite often. Talking to herself caused some fun issues at work on occasion, but the other researchers in the lab were rather quick to accept her quirk right along with their own. The habit of watching for a grown man in a costume amongst the rooftops of Gotham was one she kept to herself though.

The evening was oddly clear for once, and a few stars could be seen through the lights of the city. Half a bottle later, and no bat sightings, had Lenorah considering calling it an early night. But she did not quite feel like going back inside and staring at the ceiling waiting for sleep to come. So she stayed on the rooftop balcony and let all thoughts leave her head. A flicker in the left of her peripheral vision pulled her mindless gaze away from the lights of the neighboring building. In the slight breeze that had picked up, something was flapping in an almost lazy way.

Focusing her vision, the flapping piece of fabric was joined by a body, and a head topped with a dark cowl with pointed ears. Though she was careful to show no external reactions, she was considerably surprised to see him closer than she ever had before. He could not be more than six feet away, perched on her own rooftop. She could see how people could be afraid of such a sight, darkness looming over them complete with cape. The one feature she really wished to see was not much more than a pair of glints shining in the darkness. Lenorah dearly loved to study people's eyes - the color, shape and what they may have shown in them or attempted to keep under guard. She would probably never get the chance to look the Batman in the eyes. The history behind why he did what he did had not ever really interested her. Just the fact that a man took it upon himself to do it was enough for her. Not that she had ever had any desires to be a vigilante by night and a programmer by day, but it was at least a more interesting hobby than most people had. Lenorah could not tell if he was studying her or just the general area, but a certain amount of courage came with the consumed wine and she decided to make a move.

"I'd offer you a glass, but I suppose you don't drink while on duty."

She kept her voice low and even, but still loud enough to carry across the rooftop. The only response was a slight shifting in position in her "companion". Shrugging, she pored herself another glass of wine, raising it in a slight toast towards the nearby man. Turning away, she decided to count it as a small victory he was on her roof and called it good for the evening.

"Thank you for the offer, but you are correct."

The voice was pitched deep and rather scratchy - not his normal tone of voice she figured.

"A rain check then, for an evening when you won't be on the clock - so to speak." Lenorah offered.

"You've been watching me for a while now."

"Gives a girl something to do on a Friday night. Apparently you've been watching me watch you." Lenorah paused. "I should feel flattered probably...this is the closest thing I've had to a date in...well...a long time. How pathetic was that. I should probably put a cork in it."

"If you think the bottle needs to be closed, then by all means."

"You have nothing better to do than talk to some crazy woman on a rooftop on a Friday night? No bad guys to take down?"

"Not tonight."

"Oh...well...I have things to drink that don't have alcohol in them, can I get you something?"

"Thank you, but no."

"I'm Lenorah by the way, if you needed a name to go with the face." She turned back to face him again, noting that he'd moved a little closer. "Is it just Batman, or with 'the' out in front?"

It was faint, but she was pretty sure she heard him chuckle.

"Just Batman."

"You've been in the neighborhood quite a bit lately, something going on or just routine patrolling of the city?"

He could not quite keep the slight smile off his face. No one had ever taken the time to make small talk with "The Batman" before. Not that many people got the chance really, but as much of a distraction as it was, he had to admit it was a refreshing change. It was especially nice that she was not treating him any differently than she probably would if he was out of his costume. She did not appear to be afraid of him, and he did not think it was related to the wine she was drinking. Not when she took pains to keep the lights in her apartment off when she sat up nights watching him.

"There was something, but they've moved out of the area now."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good that they've moved on, except I haven't been able to track them."

"Left the city then?"

"Perhaps."

"And the extra hours spent watching me?"

He paused at this one. He was not all that sure as to why he had spent a little extra time those evenings watching her in her darkened apartment. At first it was just to see who was now living in the apartment that had been empty for so long. From there it had simply progressed into something different to do - even if her habits seemed to be rather boring. He felt it was a little strange that an attractive woman would choose to spend so much time alone, talking to the inanimate objects in her apartment rather than people. He remembered only a small handful of phone calls having occurred during his watches - and the majority of them had been work related. It had been something nice to look at, for lack of a better thought.

"Ah...caught you in the act did I? Indulging in a little guilty pleasure...seems we're both guilty then."

"You're surprisingly blase about this."

"It's not like you can see into my shower." Lenorah replied with a shrug. "And if you can, you've got your surveillance equipment setup in the wrong location. Nothing illegal going on in my shower...that takes more than one person. And as you can tell, it's just me."

If that surprised him as much as it did her, Lenorah was not quite sure where the rest of the evening was going to end up. She had just mentioned shower sex in an odd casual conversation with a man in a bat suit. Perhaps she should stop drinking for the rest of the evening...it was only serving to make a rather embarrassing mess of things.

"I uh...I can't believe I just said all that. I either need to get laid or stop drinking." she muttered to herself.

Unfortunately, her mutterings went overheard. But he made no outward sign that he had heard. Perhaps it was time to go...he did not need to complicate things by sticking around. Though it was a rather interesting turn in the conversation.

"While it has been a pleasure, I should be moving on."

"Uh, yeah...sure. Well, you know my schedule here, so drop by any time. Except next Friday. I was the lucky winner from our department at work to go to some charity ball. I love going dateless to overdressed dance parties where people don't dance well and the food isn't all that great."

A nod was all she got in reply as he launched himself off the roof, and she ran to the edge to watch him glide to the streets below. It had turned out to be a most interesting evening...even if she had ended up making a slightly drunken ass out of herself.

"Next time, no wine." Lenorah muttered as she went back into her apartment.

# Chapter 2

"Alfred, did we get an invitation to the Thompson's Ball next week?"

"Yes. I suppose you're asking because you've gone and changed your mind about going. I have already confirmed you would be attending, without a specified plus one."

"There won't be a plus one."

"No?"

"No."

"The great Bruce Wayne, billionaire playboy, is going to one of the biggest social events of the season without someone on his arm? Oh dear, what will the neighbors say?"

A small wry smile appeared on the younger man's face. It had perhaps not been the best of ideas to go so far into the reckless playboy image as he had - but it was still the perfect cover to keep prying noses away from his other activities. Sure he was taking a more active roll in Wayne Enterprises, but was it really enough? It had not been enough to save his heart, that he lost a few years ago and there would be no getting it back. Loosing Rachel had been a driving force to further push his nocturnal activities, and he had not taken much time to stop and smell the roses since then. At least, not until last night.

The lonely woman on the rooftop intrigued him, and after the first few nights of watching her, he had done a little digging to find out more about her. He had known her name before she had introduced herself, but it would have been bad form to admit such. Lenorah Sorris was a new addition to the ranks of Gotham, working at Hawthorn Labs as a software engineer. Her specialty was designing applications to assist with theoretical research with various projects. The current one being associated with the bio-engineering lab. What had been most intriguing was the fact that the building she now lived in that had been empty for so long now belonged to her.

He had been rather impressed with how well she had hidden her own wealth. Nothing underhanded, but done in such a way that would not raise any flags unless someone did some extensive digging. And as he was no stranger to doing clandestine investigations, Bruce had uncovered just about everything. Lenorah did not flaunt her wealth - spending more effort in making herself seem as unassuming as possible. It was a stark contrast from most wealthy people, but one that he could certainly respect. There were times he wished he could do the same, but there was no changing who he was at this point in time.

Their conversation last night had been rather enjoyable, even her embarrassing moment that nearly ended in an invitation for a rendezvous in her shower. Such an offer would not have been turned down, Lenorah was an attractive woman - of that no one could have a doubt. But the rest of the package was even better. Intelligent, witty, and he guessed that even sober she would still be one to speak her mind - though probably with a bit more restraint depending on

the topic. So for the first time in a long time, he was actually looking forward to attending one of these tedious social events. He just had to hope that nothing would pull him away next Friday - at least, not before he managed his second introduction to one Lenorah Sorris.

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"Franklin, what day is today?"

Lenorah scowled at the ceiling of her apartment as she tried to remain patient with the man on the other end of the phone. It had been a long week, but they had been nice enough to give her Friday off since they had all elected her as their representative at the fund raiser that evening. So she had made sure everything would survive her absence...but that apparently had not been enough.

"That's right, it's Friday. I have the day off, and I'm not coming in. If you follow the four pages of easy to read, step by step instructions I left for you, you'll do just fine. I'm hanging up now - and if I see a work number again on caller ID, I'm going to ignore it."

With a sigh, she slid her cell phone shut and continued her study of the ceiling. There were still two hours before she had to pick up her dress and get her hair done. Then her nails, finished off with a trip to the bank to see which jewels she would take out of storage for the evening. It was something she did not fully enjoy doing, but she could certainly play the part as she was supposed to for an evening.

It was not that she was ashamed of what she was or where she had come from, just that she had gotten rather fed up of the fake "friends" that large amounts of money seemed to attract. Her parents had put up with it, seemed to enjoy it even at times. But Lenorah never had. She could count the people who had been real friends on one hand alone. They were the people she had not wanted to leave behind, but after her parents had divorced and moved themselves to separate countries, there had been no reason to stay on at home. Besides, she had a large enough apartment if anyone ever decided to visit.

It had been a little boring the past week, without any evening conversations, and only the normal "fun" of work. The guys in the lab had nearly driven her nuts, nice enough though they were. She did enjoy her job - just that some days it did not seem worth it. Not that she needed to work; Lenorah just could not stand to sit around the house all day. And the life of a socialite was one she certainly did not want at all.

She only shopped when she really needed something, rarely just going into a store to browse unless it was a bookstore. Clothes were of no interest other than the fact that she could not very well walk around naked - no matter how fun it might seem on any given day. Spending money just to spend it was the stupidest thing in the world, and she did pride herself on her intelligence most of the time. She also did not see the need to collect things for the same reason. If she saw something she liked, then certainly she would consider purchasing it. But she was not going to shell out money on a painted piece of canvas or other item simply to say she had bought it. Bragging was a pointless exercise that served no purpose other than making an ass out of one's self.

Getting up from the couch, she decided to see a movie, or at least have a nice long meal at Wong's before getting herself all dolled up for the fund raiser. Indulging in a two hour Chinese feast sounded very good indeed.


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Lenorah held back a sigh as she exited the cab and looked up at the building looming in front of her. It was the Grand Gotham Hotel, all glamed up for the evening - complete with a red carpet on the front stairs that was not usually there. An attendant held open the door as she entered, and an overly cheerful girl was behind the coat check counter when she left her jacket behind. The large central staircase in the middle of the lobby led her up to the main ballroom where she hesitated before entering.

"You can always run away early." she muttered to herself.

Stepping into the ballroom, she was surprised at the understated elegance to the decor for that evening. She had been to quite a few such events in the past, and they had always seemed to be gaudy over-done things with garish decorations that seemed to jump out at you. But this might very well turn out to be an alright evening - especially if the bar had more than house wine. Lenorah did feel a little self-conscious at not having a date for the evening as she watched all the seemingly happy couples fluttering around the room. A young girl at a table right inside the door handed her an auction paddle, and explained about the silent auction that would end right before the dinner started. Wandering around, she did not see anything that caught her eye, and she could always just leave a check for a donation if she did not end up bidding on anything. Making her way towards the bar, she bumped into an elderly woman she had met once with her parents.

"Why, Lenorah Sorris! What are you doing here in Gotham?"

"Mrs. Furin. It's good to see you again. I've just recently moved here, new job and all."

"It has been so long, just look at how lovely you've become. Your parents are well I hope? I haven't seen either of them in...well, since the last time I saw you."

"I believe they're doing well. I haven't heard much from them since the divorce."

"Oh...oh dear. I'm so very sorry."

"It's alright. I believe they're much happier now."

"Well, that's good I suppose. Do you have a table already dear?"

"No, I just arrived and was looking at the auction items."

"I didn't find anything I wanted there either. Why don't you join Harold and I at our table, I believe there are a few seats still empty. And if not, well, I'll make sure there's room."

"That would be nice, thank you."

"I should thank you, with you there we might actually get some intelligent conversation going." Hooking her arm through Lenorah's, she continued the conversation. "Do you know anyone else here?"

"I've only been in Gotham for a few months now, and I have been avoiding the social scene for the most part."

"Yet you're here tonight."

"I drew the short straw at work, and here I am."

"Well, I'll introduce you to a few people worth knowing...and probably a few that aren't, but we can't always help that. Oh, now there's a good one."

Lenorah turned her head slightly to take a peek at the man who had just entered the room. Dark hair, brooding eyes, and either a smirk or a scowl (she could not really tell) all dressed up in an expensive looking tuxedo.

"And which category does he fall in Mrs. Furin?"

"Oh, please call me Marge dear. That is Bruce Wayne...and I still haven't decided which category he belongs in honestly. He's rich, and was wasting his time doing nothing but showing up at places with a couple of glitzed up airheads on his arm. Hasn't been doing much of that recently though. And tonight it seems as if he's on his own for once."

"Wayne Enterprises, correct?"

"Yes dear. Inherited his family's company. He's made plenty of large donations here and there so most people ignore his antics most of the time. He seems nice enough, but I've not spent any large amount of time around him before."

"He's headed our direction."

"Your first introduction for the evening."

Lenorah watched as he made his way across the room. He moved with a practiced ease, though it was very controlled - almost like a panther out stalking its prey. His eyes constantly scanned the room, but only someone who made a study of it would notice.

"Mrs. Furin, nice to see you again."

"Mr. Wayne, you're all alone this evening."

"I wasn't sure I would be able to make it until the last minute, and most ladies prefer a bit more warning to prepare themselves. Or so I've found anyway."

Lenorah found she liked his smile, slightly snarky though it seemed.

"I know my husband could share some tales along those lines, I'm afraid to say. But where are my manners. Mr. Wayne, this is a good friend of mine that has just recently moved to Gotham. Lenorah Sorris, Bruce Wayne."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Wayne." Lenorah smiled and held out her hand to shake.

"Miss Sorris, the pleasure is all mine."

A quick maneuver turned her offered hand shake into a gentlemanly kiss on the tops of her knuckles...something she had not honestly expected.

"Please call me Lenorah. Miss Sorris sounds like a mean spinsterish teacher or something along those lines."

"Bruce is fine with me as well."

Margorie Furin looked on, slightly wondered at the two young people before her. She had heard so many wild stories about Bruce Wayne, she was certain he would be someone she would warn any young woman away from. Yet, she hated to judge people on gossip alone, and he was certainly acting as a proper gentleman right then. She would certainly keep her eye on him, for Lenorah's sake at least. The girl had obviously been through enough the past few years since she had last seen the Sorris family, and Margorie was not going to let anything happen to her friend. It was going to be enough to keep the jealous cats away if Mr. Wayne kept giving his attentions to Lenorah.

Margorie took the time while the two conversed to give Lenorah a look over. It had been a little over ten years since she had seen the Sorris family. Lenorah would have been in her early twenties, and she had been a lovely girl then who had bloomed into a very attractive young woman. There was a certain hardness around her eyes Margorie did not remember from

before, but a lot can happen in ten years to change a person. She had been glad to see that Lenorah had not given into temptation and dyed her hair. Margorie had always enjoyed dark brown hair, being blonde herself before the gray came in.

Tonight, Lenorah had it done up in a simple French twist, with no annoying extra hairs floating around her face. Barely there makeup gave the look of almost having none on while still looking polished, and Lenorah's dress was simply stunning. A strapless black gown with a slim skirt that flared out into a small train at the back accented curves without throwing them in the viewer's face. A trailing pattern of dark blue gems started in a star burst on the left side of the chest down and around the lower cut back. In a room full of rather flashy, over-beaded dresses, Lenorah was the true gem.

"Marge? You still with us?"

"Oh...oh yes, I'm still here. I apologize, I don't usually don't zone out like that."

"Quite forgivable. Shall we head to the table?" Lenorah asked with a smile.

"Can I get you ladies anything from the bar?"

"I believe I would like a glass of champagne, if it's a decent brand. Never can tell sometimes what people will serve." Margoire answered.

"Scotch on the rocks. I trust you know what's good."

"Madame trusts me to pick out a good drink?" Bruce asked in reply.

"I trust you've had an education in the finer art of alcohol." Lenorah replied with a wink before she turned away to follow Margorie to their table.

A bemused grin appeared on Bruce's face as he moved towards the bar. Lenorah was certainly just as entertaining as she had been last week. Though it was apparent he would have to meet the approval of Mrs. Furin - something he was pretty sure he could manage eventually. Although why this worried him he was not sure. It was not like he was interested in romantically pursuing the lovely Miss Sorris (he had to agree that was an awful pairing of words). He was merely interested in having a friend, someone to talk to that had not judged him immediately as a crazy man in the suit that night on the rooftop. Well, perhaps she had, but she had been nice enough to not say it or show it. Besides, it seemed he had a hard time ahead of him if he was to shed the playboy image and be taken seriously by a more intelligent type of woman...something Alfred had mentioned quite often over the past few years. Returning to the table with the requested drinks, he was happy to see that he and Lenorah were the only two younger members in the group at the table. He rather disliked being the center of attention to other men's young ladies (and it was not always his fault either, contrary to popular belief).

"Ah, young Mr. Wayne here is to put us all out of a job it seems." Mr. Furin stated with his customary laugh tacked on at the end.

"Just the first round Mr. Furin." Bruce replied as he set the drinks down in front of their respective ladies.

"Thank you." Lenorah said softly with a small smile.

"Not what I would consider the best scotch out there, but hopefully passable." Bruce replied as he took his seat next to her.

"It's not bad, so I suppose I'll let you live."

If anyone else at the table was shocked at how Lenorah was talking to the great Bruce Wayne, they managed to keep it to themselves. A couple of Margorie's friends at the table thought it was about time he met a woman who could keep him in line - the thoughts every

mother hen seems to have towards wayward young men. Though they had just met Lenorah, she was a very refreshing step up to some of the other women they had seen hanging all over the young billionaire. It was a reoccurring topic at most lady's luncheons...something they never seemed to tire of discussing for whatever reason.

For the gentleman in question, he was very pleased to find that Lenorah was no different in the company of others as she was when it had just been the two of them. Not that she knew it was him that night...but he could almost see himself telling her the truth and having her accept it. It was a rather scary thought, but for some reason it kept creeping up on him every now and then. Her gray eyes sparkled in the lights of the room, and he was not sure he wanted to admit how enjoyable it was to sit there watching them - even when she was not looking directly at him.

# Chapter 3

Dinner arrived not too long after they had all given up on the silent auction portion of the evening - your typical choice of beef, chicken, fish or the usually bland veggie platter. Nothing to rave about as it was pretty much the same meal one got to eat at all the other such events before and after this one. But pleasant company and decent conversation can distract anyone from such fund raiser dinners. And it was enjoyable, at least until someone brought Batman into the conversation.

Bruce had plenty of practice in keeping himself relaxed and easy going when talk turned to such topics. There was always a brief moment where his body unconsciously tensed up, but never long enough for anyone to notice because no one generally paid that much attention to him in that way. It was hard though to judge how people were going to react to the topic. He decided to sit this one out unless they specifically asked for his opinion, and was not paying full attention until Lenorah spoke up.

"I don't think it's that at all." her voice was steady.

"You don't think such a man is mentally unstable?" one of the other women asked.

"Not at all. I don't think he's any different from any of these other people in the news. I doubt that everyone in Metropolis thinks that Superman is as great a wonder as the Daily Planet makes him out to be. Granted I don't know either man personally, but I wouldn't be one to judge in such matters."

"That is one of the best arguments in favor of Batman I've heard in a while." Mr. Furin stated. "But still, why choose a bat as a personal mascot?"

"You always ask that question dear." Margorie added.

"I have yet to receive a convincing answer." her husband quipped.

"Well, think about it. Partially thanks to bad vampire movies, and general misinformation, the average person is afraid of bats. Although most of them are harmless and only eat things like insects or fruit, people fear them. They're generally nocturnal animals, so night and darkness adds to the whole thing."

"See, now that's a good convincing answer. Not that any of us will ever know, but I could believe that." Mr. Furin raised his glass in toast.

The conversation was interrupted as the announcement went out that the live auction would be starting in just a few minutes. This sent most people scrambling for the brochures and paddles they had stashed under their seats when dinner had arrived at the tables. Thankfully there were only six items up for bid, and Lenorah was actually interested in the sculpture donated by a local artist. It was an abstract piece, but the picture intrigued her. She would have to see how the bidding would go however, because she set a spending limit that she loathed to go over. It was second to last, so she could space out until her turn.

Things moved fast, and before she knew it the piece she wanted was up. Bidding went faster than she had anticipated, and soon had to quit when she reached her highest limit of a million dollars. It kept going before it started to slow around 2.5 million to a smug looking woman a few tables over (though that could perhaps be attributed to Lenorah's slight feeling of jealousy right then). Her eyes roving the room, she did not see Bruce raise his hand until the slightly startled auctioneer announced bidding had jumped to five million to the man in the front.

Her head whipped around to stare in wonder at the back of Bruce's head. His actions stopped the auction cold, no one quite wanting to make such a large jump in their bids. The auctioneer recovered soon enough and quickly moved on to the last item. Bruce turned back to the incredulous looks waiting for him around the table.

"You must be one hell of an art lover son." Mr. Furin chuckled, with a shake of his head.

"That's as good an excuse as any other." Bruce replied with a slightly sheepish grin.

"You do realize I may decide to not speak to you for the rest of the evening." Lenorah muttered.

"You could always come visit and see it."

"Now that's just grinding the salt into the wound, you evil man."

"I am truly sorry. Does this mean I have to dance by myself now?"

"There's dancing involved? I thought this was an evening of mediocre food and humiliation by auction." Lenorah very nearly stuck her tongue out at him, but decided that might not go over quite so well.

"Now now children, if you can't play nice..." Margorie scolded.

"Would saying he started it be too childish at this point in time?" Lenorah smiled.

"Probably, but I don't think any one here will mind." Bruce said.

"If I wasn't impersonating a lady of society this evening, I would stick my tongue out at you, taunt you and douse you with a glass of water. But the dress and the jewels say I should behave myself."

"Remind me never to get on your bad side young lady...I have a feeling you could turn out to be particularly vicious." Mr. Furin said.

"Harold!" Margorie exclaimed through the laughter going around the table.

"What did I do now? And can I distract you from it by asking you to dance my dear?"

"Sometimes you are the most impossible man I have ever met. And yes, you can distract me with a dance."

Lenorah and Bruce stayed at the table a while longer after the other couples had moved to the dance floor. He was slightly worried she was honestly a little mad at him, seeing as how they did not know that much about each other yet.

"You're not sitting there thinking I'm really mad at you...are you?" Lenorah asked.

"Ah..well..."

"I sometimes don't know when to shut off the connection between my brain and my mouth. It usually gets me in trouble."

"I have to say it is refreshing when a woman with something interesting to say does speak her mind."

"You've experienced a shortage of women with interesting things to talk about?"

"I've done some stupid things on occasion. They were all really nice girls...just not always ones for talking."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Earlier, when they brought up Batman, you seemed a little tense. And you tried to show you weren't interested in the conversation..." Lenorah trailed off, not quite sure where she was going with this train of thought.

"Rather observant, aren't you."

"It's something of a bad habit I guess. I have a lot of those."

She chose to ignore his deflection of the question that had not really ended up as a question and turned her attention to the glass sitting on the table in front of her. Someday she would learn to shut up before she ended up with her foot halfway down her throat. A great way to start out when she had just met a man...being herself usually lost her the majority of interested parties.

"It's nothing against the subject. Just something that's been discussed and picked apart over and over and quite often ends up with angry people. Tends to ruin one's evening."

"That is completely understandable."

"Do I get a question now?"

"I'll give you another one, since you just asked one."

"Would you like to dance?"

"I would like that very much."

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"You do realize this is not considered proper. I have just met you after all."

Bruce smiled as he followed Lenorah through the door of her apartment. It was indeed rather improper, but it seemed as if neither of them wanted the evening to end just yet. Seeing her place from the inside was a nice difference. The decor was comfortable, clean and had a slight modern look. Nothing cold and impersonal though. This was a comfortable space a person could actually live in. From the few pieces of art he could see displayed, he could see why she was interested in the piece she had bid on. There was even a corner in the living room it would look ideal in. Which made him that much more glad that he had given them her address for the delivery instructions. What she would think when it arrived he was not sure, but he felt it would be worth it either way.

"You are rather trusting in someone you just met today." Bruce said with a smirk on his face.

"Well, I don't figure you for the maniac killer type. And I do know how to defend myself if the situation calls for it."

"Self defense class?"

"Four older brothers." Lenorah replied with a grin.

"Ah, yes, I could see that."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"No, just me."

"Yet another thing for me to be jealous of. I'm always jealous of only children."

"Not all it's cracked up to be."

"The liquor cabinet is over there Help yourself to whatever you want. I really need to loose this dress, if you'll be alright on your own for a few minutes?"

"I'll be fine."

Lenorah returned a few minutes later, clad in jeans and an over sized hooded sweatshirt. Bruce found himself feeling very overdressed at that point.

"So, are you secretly wealthy or something?" he asked taking a seat on the couch.

"Something like that. I don't really like what money does to people, so I try not to advertise that I have it. I don't need a million fake friends."

"You had some interesting observations on Batman earlier. Most people don't take the time to defend him like that."

"It's not like I know him any better than I know you, but I have met and talked to him. He didn't seem like a nut job to me. Course, I'd also had most of a bottle of wine by that point. Poor guy probably thinks I'm some crazy ass woman with nothing better to do than get drunk on Friday nights."

"I've only known you a short while, but I doubt you're that much of a crazy drunk."

"Oh, ha ha. You're a funny man. So what does the great Bruce Wayne do when he's not in a board room or escorting young models about the town?"

"Nothing much, I'm a pretty boring guy."

"Somehow I don't quite buy that."

"Really, I don't do anything all that exciting."

Lenorah kept any further comments to herself, but Bruce could tell she certainly did not buy his "boring guy" routine. Most women did, but they were generally more interested in his bank account than they were in anything else. Lenorah though had no need for his money, so that just might mean she would be interested in him for who he was. But could she really reconcile his two halves into the whole? There was a faint glimmer of hope, yet it was certainly too soon to say for sure. He also was not sure how he felt, or could feel even, towards her. It would be an interesting trip getting to know her though.

Chapter 4

"I take it you had a good time last night then sir?"

"It was a very good night Alfred."

"And will we be seeing more of the young lady?"

"I'd like to hope so. I think even you would like her."

"Not much of a glowing recommendation, but I shall wait and see for when you happen to bring her by the house."

Bruce smiled as Alfred left the room. Granted he had slept in a bit, but as it was a Saturday, there was not any pressing business he had to attend to and could afford to be a little lazy. He and Lenorah had stayed up talking until around four in the morning. Neither were quite sure what they had learned about the other, but plenty of information had been shared. Though the major topics had been left for another day. He was considering making a call, but did not want to make it too soon. Nothing would be gained by scaring her away, that much was certain. A nice long shower helped clear his head, and he suspected something waited in the kitchen for lunch. Alfred met him halfway as he was headed down the stairs.

"There is a young lady waiting for you just inside the front door. She appears to be a little agitated."

"Did you check her for weapons?"

"I am not paid to frisk your dates Master Bruce. I leave that job up to you."

The question of whether to call or not was answered by Lenorah being the one waiting for him in the front entryway. Alfred had indeed been correct that she seemed rather agitated, and even a little angry - and Bruce suspected he was the target.

"Lenorah..."

"You...you...I honestly don't know if I should kill you or kiss you."

"Perhaps if I knew what I'd done in the past few hours..."

"I'm running on about two hours sleep. Because there was a pounding on my door at around eight this morning. Two men with a crate were waiting outside. They were kind enough to bring it inside and unpack it. Do you know what was inside the crate?" Lenorah's eyes flashed as she finished her tirade.

"Oh, I did mean to mention that...but I didn't think they would do next day delivery. I figured I had the weekend to come up with some excuse."

"It's not that I don't appreciate it. I'm very grateful, and it was a wonderful surprise...but I'm not sure we know each other well enough for me to accept it. I mean, I know what you shelled out for it. And...hell, I don't know."

"I felt it should go to someone that actually wanted it. The reason your bidding friend went so high was to punish you because I was sitting next to you. She was someone I said no to a while back..."

"And the lady didn't like being rejected. I still can't...it was a wonderful gift."

A slightly nervous silence fell between them for a moment. Lenorah was attempting to decide if he had other motives for having the sculpture delivered to her home, or if it really was just a nice gesture - albeit from a man she had only known for less than a day.

"Would you like to join us for lunch?" Bruce asked suddenly.

"Lunch would be great. Thank you."

Lenorah followed him through the house to the grand scale kitchen in the back. Everything looked so new to her in what appeared to be a fairly old house.

"Have you done a lot of renovations lately? Everything looks so fresh and new, but this house has been here for quite some time hasn't it?"

"Well, actually, there was a bit of an accident a few years ago and the original Wayne Manor burnt to the ground."

"Oh..I'm...I'm sorry."

"I tried to keep things as close to the original as possible, with a few changes and updates here and there."

"I would love a tour after lunch maybe."

"I think we can arrange that."

Alfred looked up as the two entered the kitchen, glad to see that things had been solved for the moment. He was also glad to see that she had not simply run off after giving Bruce a piece of her mind. She was not the first woman to come to the house since it had been rebuilt, but she was certainly the first to stay after having it out with Bruce. It was high time in his mind that the young Mr. Wayne moved on from past tragedies, though Alfred also knew that hearts did not always heal quickly. Still, it had been over two years since Rachel had been killed, and since the two of them had not actually been dating...well...there were things that would go with him to the grave as the young master had experienced more than his fair share of tragedy and adding the confessions of a now dead woman to them would only serve to rip the stitches out of a wound so very nearly healed.

He had thought that burning the letter would haunt him, but he still considered it the proper course of action. Knowing that she had chosen someone else over him would not have helped Bruce at that point in his life, so Alfred had let the false hope buoy him through that rough patch. It had also served to stem the tide of the type of girl he had been associating with to keep up with the playboy image. It was still something the two of them kept going, but now at least he could support a more intelligent version of the public alter ego.

"Are we having a guest for lunch?" Alfred asked.

"I hope you don't mind, Bruce asked me to stay...and I'd love to tour the house later."

"Wonderful! Although, I didn't plan anything special for the meal. I wasn't aware you were coming Miss."

"Please, call me Lenorah. And I'm sure whatever you fix will be delicious. I'm hungry enough that a peanut butter sandwich would be divine right now."

Even Alfred joined in with the laughter.

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After a simple lunch of sandwiches (not peanut butter though) and soup, Lenorah followed Bruce around the entirety of the mansion, and a bit of the immediate grounds. Though the landscaping was not quite finished in all areas (due to someone changing his mind a few times) the main flower gardens next to the house itself were finished and would look even better come spring. It had energized him seeing how delighted Lenorah had been to take in all the little details that most people did not take the time to study. She had been particularly in love with the gallery hall, even if they were mostly new pieces acquired after the fire, with a few that had been in storage elsewhere.

He could tell after the first couple of hours that she was slowly loosing steam, and had suggested she make use of one of the guest rooms before returning home. Lenorah had tried to resist at first, but after a giant yawn, she decided it was a good idea to not try and drive home right then. And so now Bruce sat staring at the blank screen of the laptop before him in his study, his mind distracted in a few different directions, while Lenorah slumbered in the east guest room directly above him. He was worried a bit that things were perhaps moving too fast...even if he did not know exactly what all those things were.

What did he want from this not quite yet a relationship? Did he just want a friend...or did he want something more? Was he ready for an honest, serious relationship for once? Would Lenorah even be interested in such a thing? And then, if something did grow deeper between the two of them, he would have to decide on when to tell Lenorah his "dirty little secret". Of course, there was always the idea that as observant as she was, she could very well figure it out on her own...and he might not have to do much of anything. Yet, how would she react to it? He was sure she would be fine with the whole Batman thing on its own, but he was not all that sure how well she would react to the duplicitous deception he engaged in to keep it under wraps.

It was a fine edged sword really, how to best keep his life separate without losing himself in either of them. After Rachel had died, he had nearly lost himself in the role of Batman. The struggle to balance himself out had been long, and he had only managed to pull himself back up from it rather recently. It had helped that events had calmed down and no major emergencies that truly needed his attention had come up. He was sure he had even tried the patience of Alfred, who had been with him through just about everything. But Alfred alone could not fill all the empty voids within him. His own activities could not even manage that feat, no matter how hard he tried. Only time would tell what would happen, and how it would all work out in the end - and time was something they both apparently had.

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Lenorah woke a few hours later feeling much better. She had little desire to leave the bed right then, finding it even more comfortable than her own mattress back home. Instead, she settled back into the pillows and took the time to study the room. The walls were a soft green color, with white trim and soft naturally colored curtains framing the large window opposite the bed. She was not a furniture expert, but the pieces looked a little like Victorian age antiques, though in a nice understated way. An attached bathroom was a nice touch she thought, having been in many a house where they had neglected such details.

It was not too flowery or overdone as many people of wealth tended to do. Something about showing off to the people visiting that they indeed did have money or something like that. Her own parents had done such things, for reasons she had never quite understood. It was not that she had hated money, or being part of a rich family. To fully hate her station in life would have been stupid. She just hated how crazy people seemed to be about it, or the fact that those that had large amounts of it felt they were better than everyone else around them. She had been treated different in school because of it - and she had been sent to a rather costly boarding school through her primary schooling, and a private high school after that. So while she had been around her "own kind" while growing up, but it had not been a fun experience.

She had come from just as much money as most of the other kids, some of them "old" money and others from "new" money - but for some reason she had been considered an outcast, someone they had not wanted anything to do with her. She had not been the most outgoing of children, but she had not been one of the shy types who hid in the shadows either. Perhaps it was because she treated everyone equally instead of deferring to the ridiculous hierarchy they were supposed to have followed. The few friends she had were those she had met in college, having gone to a local college instead of one of the Ivy League schools her parents had nearly insisted on. Not that those such schools were bad, but she figured that since she could study what she wanted to closer to home at a smaller school there was no need to worry about anything else.

As comfortable as the bed was, Lenorah finally decided it was time to get up and head back home. She could not very well turn into a squatter at Wayne Manor, however grand the house was. She was still not entirely sure what she thought of the owner. Bruce certainly intrigued her, and she was certain there was more to him than the playboy image he was currently known for. But she was not sure if it was a wise idea to become involved with him. He was hiding something, but what it was she had no clue. The attractiveness factor could not be denied, he was a fine male specimen after all. There was enough danger around him, nothing on the surface, but something she could sense lurking underneath to make her want to take things slow and easy. It was not like they had to rush into anything, hell, they had only just met after all.

So she would bide her time and see where things went. If nothing else, she would be very glad to call him a friend - as well as Alfred. She could tell that Alfred had plenty of stories to tell about his young master...and she would not mind knowing what they were. There was no need to share any embarrassing stories of her youth, as she did well enough embarrassing herself as an adult. Straightening the slightly rumpled bed, she took one last look around the room before stepping out into the hall. Reaching the staircase, she was surprised to see him at the bottom.

"You haven't been waiting for me have you?" Lenorah asked on her way down.

"No, I was actually on my way back to the study."

"Oh...good. I mean...I should probably head home now before I'm classified as a squatter."

"You don't have to leave unless you really want to."

"I feel I should. We haven't known each other all that long, and I don't want things getting weird right at the beginning."

He gave her a look like she was slightly crazy, but respected the decision she had made. He was not going to let her slip away quite so easily though.

"Would you like to do dinner sometime?"

"That doesn't involve getting all dressed up and sitting down to mediocre food?"

"I thought that was a very nice dress, but yes."

"Have you ever been to Wong's house of stuff yourself silly goodness?"

"Um...I don't believe so."

"It's a great little Chinese place near where I live. I've become something of a regular there. Not sure if that's a good thing or not, but the food is excellent."

"Wednesday evening sound good?" Bruce knew better than to make plans into a weekend - not that idiots waited until then to commit crimes, but the middle of the week recently had been rather quiet.

"Wednesday would be wonderful." Lenorah smiled. "Meet at my place?"

"I can be there around seven."

"Perfect." Lenorah leaned forward on impulse and delivered a swift light kiss to his cheek. "Thank you again for the sculpture."

"Let me walk you to your car."

If Alfred had seen him then, he would have been amused at the slightly silly grin on Bruce's face.

Chapter 5

That first dinner date turned into a few more, with a few quick lunch dates here and there, and before either of them realized it, six months had gone past. They had both been rather lucky on not having Batman make a mess of things too often, and when he had, the excuses had been accepted without much hassle. One of the cancellations had even come from Lenorah herself when one of the men in the lab had decided to be nice enough to share his cold germs. Neither of them had any clue still as to what kind of relationship they had going, but they did enjoy each other's company. Things were still moving at a nice easy pace, enough that they could both adjust to each other with only a few road bumps every now and then. Lenorah was still a little wary about whatever it was Bruce kept hidden, but she could sense it was not another woman or anything like that. She did not let it fully come between them, but she felt that it would have to come out eventually if she was to give him her complete trust...let alone her rather picky heart. And it frightened her a little that things might very well be headed in that direction.

All their dates and get togethers had been at low key, relatively inexpensive places, or at one or the other's home. Lenorah was not interested in the big flashy expensive restaurants, and had given Bruce a thorough education on just about every little mom and pop joint in Gotham. But now Lenorah found herself in the middle of a dilemma. Bruce had told her he wanted to take her someplace nice that required a dress code of something other than jeans. So she had called in the cavalry, otherwise known as Carrie the fashion expert.

"Carrie...I don't know what to do! You have to help me."

"Lee, girl, you are the most fashion challenged rich woman I have ever met. This would be much easier if it wasn't over the phone, but as I can't travel until after the baby comes, we're stuck with this. Too bad neither of us have video phones."

"Ha ha. He wants to go somewhere nice, somewhere I won't be allowed to wear jeans." Lenorah wailed as she collapsed onto her bed.

"And good for him for taking you somewhere nice. You deserve it."

"But I like little casual restaurants."

"Lenorah...don't make me come through this phone and slap you. Now, what are your goals for the evening?"

"I don't know."

"You've been dating this man for six months right? And in those six months, have you gotten any?"

"Carrie!"

"What? It's a legitimate question. How long has it been since you've gotten any in the first place?"

"Um...I...well..."

"Long enough you can't remember. Do you want to get some?"

"I don't know if I'm ready for that Carrie, it just isn't important to me."

"Liar! Keep telling yourself that. Well, lets dress you somewhere in the middle - if you get lucky, you get lucky. If not, you still looked great."

"I can't believe we're having a conversation about this." Lenorah muttered into the phone. "Just tell me what to do."

"Get your ass up off the bed and go stand in front of the closet."

"I am up and I am in front of my closet."

"Tell me what you have that's knee length."

"Some ugly flowered thing I believe my mother sent me a while ago that I've never worn. Blue turtleneck sweater dress thing, a few bland little black dresses, and this dark red strapless thing I believe you talked me into a couple years ago...that I've never worn either."

"Strapless red - you'll look terrific. Now, you still have those red Jimmy Choos to go with it?"

"Jimmy whats?"

Lenorah swore she could hear Carrie's palm hitting her forehead.

"I swear Lenorah...you will give me more gray hair than my own children will. Go to your shoes - there should be a box with a label in my handwriting."

"The one that says 'wear these to get lucky'?"

"Oh...I forgot about those ones. No, look for the label that says something like I'm a sexy bitch and I'm not afraid of the color red."

"Found them." Lenorah opened the box. "Oh dear God...how am I supposed to walk in these things?"

"Practice. You have two days right? Put them on right now, I'll wait."

It took Lenorah a few minutes to get all the little strappy buckle things done up, and took a deep breath before gathering her courage to stand up. She tottered slightly, but they did not feel too bad. She was pretty sure they would not be something she wanted to stand in for long periods of time, but it was most likely they were not designed for that. She picked the phone back up and made her way out of the bedroom.

"Okay, I strapped myself in and I am now walking around my apartment. Are you sure I can pull this off?"

"Yes, I am positive you can manage to do this. Do you feel sexy yet?"

"I feel a little silly wearing these with my pajamas."

"Oh, well...yeah. Anyway, the red strapless thing, those shoes, and you still have that set of rubies from your grandmother?"

"Those would be too much. But I have a more sedate set my father sent me a few years ago that would work I think."

"Good. Now we move on to the hair - that dress low cut in the back? I can't remember now."

"You have a better idea of what's in my closet than I do. But yes, it is daringly low in the back for a short strapless thing."

"And you have a sexy ass back woman. So, up do it is. But do me a favor and get one with a few teasing curls left down."

"Yes, mistress of fashion. I will even have someone else do my makeup, how's that sound?"

"Oh, that is a very good idea. When did you get to be so smart?"

"Funny lady. Alright, I have two days to learn how to survive in these shoes, and get hair and makeup appointments scheduled."

"Alright girl, I want a full detailed report the day after. I need to go, junior here is getting hungry again."

"Talk to you soon Carrie."

"You have a good time on your date, and you order the biggest, bestest steak there and chow down for me."

"Alright, I'll do just that."

"Good. Later hun."

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Saturday evening found Lenorah scrambling to get into the dress and shoes before Bruce showed up. Her hair was done to perfection, and the makeup artist had created a work of art of her face with the minimum amount of makeup needed. A solitary ruby on a worked silver chain added some sparkle, along with the dangling earrings peeking through the curls she had left down per Carrie's instructions. She finished getting herself strapped into the shoes with five minutes to spare. Then the worst thing that could possibly happen, happened - the phone rang.

Two minutes later, a rather dazed Lenorah was stumbling towards the couch. She was not sure if she should be angry or understanding. Bruce had just called to cancel their date. Something about an overseas business deal that he had no choice but to take care of. It was not so much that she had anything against his business or him working, everyone had to work and he was no exception - but to learn this five minutes before he was supposed to pick her up and take her to dinner was a bit of a blow. Not to mention all the wasted time and money getting herself made up. Thinking of it only served to make her angry.

As it was already eight in the evening by the time the shock wore off, it was a little late to get changed and go for comfort food at Wong's. The place would be busy on a Saturday evening - but she could call in for take out. Forty-five minutes later found Lenorah still in her dress, and still in the sexy red devil shoes, sitting on her balcony surrounded by a large selection of take out boxes with a bottle of scotch nearby. Though she had not started to drink yet, she was saving that for desert.

Ten o'clock came around, the scotch was open, and she was on her second glass. And she was a few sips closer to agreeing with her inner Carrie voice that a part of her had indeed wanted to "get lucky" as her friend had put it. Not a very lady like thought, but she could no longer deny that little inner voice. That was not the entire story however. It was a lot of being plain disappointed that she had been stood up. The only consolation prize was that she had at



least gotten a phone call letting her know. But that did not offer a great deal of comfort, no matter how she looked at it.

Two hours and the third glass of scotch later found her still on the balcony, and still in her dress and shoes. She figured she should at least get her monies worth out of a wasted evening. So deep was Lenorah in her brooding that she did not even see the billowing black cape that suddenly appeared on one end of the balcony. Naturally, she jumped when he spoke up.

"Rather dressed up for an evening of takeout on your balcony."

He watched as her head whipped around to face him, and instantly regretted his words. If looks honestly could kill, he was certain he would be dead on the spot.

"You're all pigs." Lenorah spat.

"I believe that's the wrong mammal."

"Right now, I don't really care. I went to all the effort to get myself made up, into this dress and these damn shoes...and then I got a phone call five minutes before my date telling me it wasn't going to happen." Lenorah took a swig from her glass. "Who in the hell does business at eight in the evening on a Saturday?"

Her ranting was met with silence, which only prompted her to continue.

"I never should have listened to Carrie. I should have stuck with the plain stupid little black dress that does absolutely nothing for me and a pair of shoes that doesn't take half an hour to get in and out of...but no, I had to go lose half my brain cells and do something stupid expecting...hell, I don't know anymore."

She stood up and made her way to the half wall surrounding the balcony, looking down on the city below. Bruce took a few steps towards her, worried about what she might think of doing in her current state of mind.

"I'm so very very stupid when it comes to men. I thought this one might be a little different, but there's something he's hiding...and part of me says that's okay, and the other says I'll never be able to fully trust him. Tonight's lame ass excuse aside, everything has been going rather good the past few months. And I don't even know why I'm telling you this. I'm sure you have something better to do - someone waiting for you at home that's more important than talking to some stupid woman who got stood up tonight."

"There's no one waiting for me."

"No one?"

"No."

"That's...that's really sad. What reason would there be to do what it is you do if there's no one waiting for you at home?"

"I doubt any woman would be thrilled at the prospect of being second place to...this."

"Not that I know you...or, at least, the other you...but I'm guessing you're not a complete ass when you're out of the suit. What woman would turn that down? Obviously you're well funded, because I imagine crime fighter by night doesn't pay much."

"No, it doesn't."

"See...now dressing up in such an outfit and attempting to save the city is a much better excuse than some overseas business deal late Saturday evening. I doubt I'd be half as angry as I am if that had been his excuse."

Lenorah turned back to face him, rather surprised to find he was standing almost directly behind her. She had never been this close to Batman before, and it sent chills (the good kind she told herself) down her spine. The only things visible were his mouth, and slightly hooded eyes. And there seemed to be something familiar about them, but she had consumed just enough scotch to make her head a little fuzzy and she could not quite connect the dots.

"I find it hard to believe that you would have no problem with this boyfriend of yours doing what I do, leaving you alone on a prearranged date night."

"I never said I wouldn't have issues with it. Of course I would be disappointed that our plans had been disrupted - but I would be more tolerable of such events. That might be a double edged sword though, as I'm sure I'd be sitting around worrying about such a person. But wouldn't you rather have someone waiting for you at home - even if they were asleep when you got there?"

He could not deny that the idea was a rather nice one, but he still could not believe she would be as comfortable with the idea as she said she would be. It was a nice fantasy though, one he would probably indulge in from time to time now.

"Are you afraid of letting someone get close to you?" Lenorah asked, her voice low and quiet.

"Yes."

"So was I, but then you meet someone special and that fear goes away. Aside from the fact that my friend had to talk me into my outfit for the evening, I was really looking forward to dressing up for a guy for the first time in my life. And I'm not the kind of girl who likes to dress like this very often."

"I'd say he was a fool to have left you tonight."

"Oh, no arguments there."

Lenorah was finding it hard to breath with how close he was to her. Batman was close enough she caught a faint whiff of cologne - one that she remembered smelling on someone else. But plenty of men wore the same scent, it simply meant that Batman had good taste. Her eyes focused on his lips that tickled the recognition center in the back of her brain. She had seen these lips up close like this before - but that did not mean this was Bruce standing before her. She had seen men with similar shaped mouths plenty of times. It meant nothing. The last piece of evidence was one she could not ignore, or excuse away, however. Ever so slowly, her eyes traveled up the rest of his face to rest on his eyes, not as hidden with him being only inches away now. Her own eyes widened slightly as the scotch induced fog cleared enough to tell her what face such eyes belonged in.

Bruce watched as her eyes widened slightly and a range of emotions stampeded across her face. She went from confusion, to shock, to anger and a few others he could not quite place to end with something that could only be recognition. His heart plummeted down somewhere around his stomach, and he knew he had made a very large mistake getting close enough to where she could clearly see him. Shaking his head slightly, he turned slightly and began to pull away. His progress in leaving the area was stopped when he felt two hands grasping the edge of the cape where it met the base of his neck. Confused, he turned back to look at Lenorah once again. She was angry, he could not miss that much, but behind her anger was something else, something that set the internal butterflies to fluttering.

"You damn fool, why couldn't you just tell me?"

He was not quick enough to process exactly what was being said, and he did not have to worry about forming a reply because he soon found himself on the receiving end of a kiss. When he did not respond right away, Lenorah pulled back with a slight air of uncertainty around her. Had she made a mistake? Her answer came in a returned kiss, one they both participated in fully. They separated a few minutes later, both needing air. Lenorah put a little bit of space between them, enough so she could see his eyes again.

"Are you done for the evening?" she asked in a breathless whisper.

"Yes."

"I'm still mad at you, but I might forgive you if you're back in about an hour. Because as sexy as this is right now, this current suit of yours is about as comfortable as hugging a tree."

"Lenorah, I..." He stopped as she gently rested a couple fingers against his lips.

"Oh, we have some talking to do. However, these are my 'I'm a sexy bitch' shoes, and this is my 'I wouldn't mind getting laid tonight' dress. The offer expires if you're not back before I take them off though."

"That doesn't sound exactly fair."

"I was supposed to have a steak dinner tonight. Instead, I got a really shitty excuse and had takeout from Wong's. You're a smart man, you do the math."

Lenorah left him with that and returned to her apartment, locking the door to the balcony behind her. Bruce stood in momentary shock - but was gone off the rooftop faster than was usual for Batman in any other circumstance.

# Chapter 6

After leaving the balcony, Lenorah paced around her apartment for a few minutes, wondering if she honestly had finally lost her damn mind. Most of it was due to her realizing what she had told "Batman" earlier - and that now she would have to live up to her words. It was proving rather easy to mesh the two things together in her mind, even if she was still a little angry with him. It was true though, if she had already known about Bruce being Batman, and he had called this evening to say dinner would have to wait she would certainly not be as pissed off as she was. Her anger now was directed more towards what he had kept from her than the canceled date.

Though, it was understandable that he would not willingly share such information with someone. It would be hard to make sure that a person would react well to being let in on the "big secret"...and utterly devastating if they did not. But had she not proved herself to be someone who would not have issues with it? Or did he have such rooftop conversations with other women? No, that did not sound right to her at all. Granted she had only known Bruce for six months, but she did not see him as the kind to "flirt around" if he was just a little serious about one person. And she was relatively sure that he was at least a little serious about the time he spent with her. Lenorah certainly did not expect his feelings were the same as hers. And as she was not entirely sure what her own feelings were, this was not a major sticking point with her. She knew there was some darkness in his past, though she had no idea of all the details. And she did not really need to know those details - all she needed was the here and now, and possibly the nearer future. No, she was not looking for a "rest of their lives" type commitment - she was not sure she herself was ready for such - but another few months would not be all that bad.

Glancing up at a nearby clock, she was surprised to find she had already wasted twenty minutes. A quick glance around the place showed that it was not all that messy since she had left the evidence of dinner out on the balcony. A quick dash into the bedroom proved that she had already cleaned up after herself there. She spent the rest of her time going around and pulling the blinds down that covered the large windows to the balcony, and the adjoining dining area. Not that anyone could see into the rest of her apartment - but she did not desire to provide free entertainment for the rest of the neighborhood tonight...if anything other than talking actually happened.

Forty-five minutes later, she was really wishing Bruce was going to show up soon, as her feet were starting to scream at her to take the damn shoes off already. She was going to give him that hour first though - knowing he would have to return to wherever, get to his house, change and get back into town...perhaps she should have given him longer, but that would have made things too easy. He did need to squirm a little she thought, and he most certainly still

owed her a steak dinner. A quick, slightly soft, knock at the door made her heart jump just a little...but it was too late to turn back now.

On the other side of the door, Bruce was feeling just a little nervous - probably more nervous than he really wanted to admit right then. His brain kept repeating what she had said about the dress over and over...and he had begun to wonder if that had been the scotch talking right then. Granted Lenorah was rather forward about nearly everything, tonight he had heard things he thought he would never hear her say. And did he even want to take advantage of such a situation? Could he even do that to her? So far, their relationship was nice and comfortable - but this would take it to a different place - and it could make or break it. With his luck, it would end up broken.

The door opened, and she was just as beautiful as when he had left earlier. In fact, he was sure she looked even more beautiful in the light of her apartment - even if every light was not turned on right then. Now at least he could see every detail the darkness had hidden before. Her dark brown hair was pinned up somehow, with a few curls down here and there seeming to tease and taunt. Those long legs looked even longer with the shoes she had chosen, and he admitted to himself that the dress (whatever color it was) looked rather delicious. Or was it that she looked delicious in it? He felt rather bad after simply throwing on slacks and a plain button up shirt after a hurried shower before dashing back out the door. Alfred most likely thought him crazy as he had run through the house, but a quickly shouted name over his shoulder as he went out the door had hopefully been enough to settle that for the rest of the evening at least.

"Wow, I didn't think you'd actually make it in an hour."

"I keep...him...in the basement. And there was careful avoidance of speed limit signs on the drive over."

"Um...it's just you and me here."

"I'm not really used to this, to tell the truth."

"I suppose it would be a good idea to let you through the door."

"The hallway is nice though."

Laughing, Lenorah stepped back to allow him to step into the apartment. He swallowed slightly as he heard the door lock behind him - still unsure as to what would be happening tonight. Bruce made a guess that Lenorah might be just as nervous as he was...which should have comforted him, but not quite as much as he thought it would. For her part, Lenorah was not sure if she wanted to continue making the first move, or if she wanted him to take over.

"I had so much to say earlier, and now it seems I can't form a single coherent thought. And there's no more scotch in my system to fuel the fire."

Lenorah realized it was a little weird to be talking to the back of his head, but she was aware that if she could see his eyes she truly would lose all ability to speak. She was not sure why he affected her in such a way right then, but as odd a feeling as it was, it was a good one. That made even less sense to her right then, but she really did not care. Of course, he had to turn around right then, and she felt her face slowly heating up and she was certain she was about as red as her stupid shoes.

"I really don't know where this is going. Only one other woman figured things out, and it..." He still found it hard to talk about Rachel - even more so to Lenorah. For the second time that evening, he found himself silenced by gentle fingers.

"Bruce, can we both agree that I'm not her? I don't need the details - I'm not worried about what has happened to either of us in the past. The only thing that concerns me is right here, right now."

"I don't...I don't want to hurt you. I mean, if we...this could change everything."

"This will change everything. I will understand if you want to walk back out the door right now...but I'm not sure how easily I could let you back in if you do though. I want this, I want you - but I don't expect you to feel the same way I do."

"I can't promise anything."

"I'm not asking for the rest of your life right now, I'm just asking for tonight."

Bruce reached out a hesitant hand to caress her cheek, which Lenorah leaned into, closing her eyes.

"Are we talking about the same thing?" he asked.

"If we're talking about you ripping my clothes off and ravishing me, then yes. Otherwise, we're not exactly on the same page at the moment." Lenorah said as she opened her eyes again.

"Are you always this forward?"

"No, this is rather new for me too. I usually wait for the man to make the first move."

"I'm not complaining."

With that, Lenorah did not hesitate to pull him into a kiss - one much slower than that they had shared on the balcony - but no less passionate. Stumbling backwards still locked together, Bruce soon found himself pressed up against one of the walls. It was a little bit different letting her take charge, but he could sense she would be fine if he took the wheel at some point. Breaking off the kiss, but not separating, his lips trailed across her jaw and down one side of her neck, earning him a soft moan.

"Not that I want to interrupt, but I need to ask a favor." Lenorah panted slightly.

"And what would that be?"

"Getting these damn shoes off me before we go any further."

"As the lady commands."

One short stumbling kiss-walk (no easy feat mind you) across the room landed them on the couch, and the shoes were forgotten again for a few more minutes. Bruce found an amused delight in discovering a slightly ticklish spot on the back of Lenorah's leg as he slid his hands down towards the offending shoes.

"Next time, I recommend less complicated shoes."

"I'll let my fashion coordinator know you said that." Lenorah replied with a husky laugh.

A few too many buckles later, the "I'm a sexy bitch" shoes finally landed on the floor and they could continue on with the rest of their evening.

"Do I get a reward for relieving the lady of her shoes?"

"Mmmm...and what would you like?"

"I'd love to see you with your hair down." Bruce replied as he nuzzled her neck.

"I suppose I could arrange that."

Though it took a while, with a few distractions along the way, they managed to get into some sort of sitting position. Lenorah found it a little difficult to concentrate on finding all the pins holding her hair up thanks to the man distracting her, but as it felt good, she was not going

to complain too much. She also probably would not be telling Carrie how right she had been. It had been too long since she had shared herself so fully with anyone, and certainly no one she felt so strongly about. Knowing the big dark secret Bruce had been keeping from her made it even better. Bruce could not remember the last time he had enjoyed such activities as much as he was this night. He had been worried that when they crossed this line it would ruin things, but he was finding himself believing more in what Lenorah had said earlier. Knowing that a woman finally knew both his sides and still wanted to be with him was a rather wonderful experience. He had also never had a woman divest him of his shirt so fast either.

"You're very skilled with buttons."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all."

"Good." Lenorah purred. "How skilled are you at zippers?"

"I think I got an A in that class."

He felt her smile against his neck, followed by a series of soft nips along his collar bone, and he melted against her. Rolling over, Lenorah gave him access to the back of her dress - but he decided to take his time. Ever so slowly the zipper tab came down, followed with a trail of kisses down her spine that sent shivers through her body. Before he could finish removing the dress, Lenorah managed to twist and maneuver herself to be straddling his lap, with his hands pinned gently beneath her knees. She was certainly asserting herself this evening, and it seemed now he was merely along for the ride.

"I can't use my hands."

"Oh, isn't that too bad. Big bad man is weak and helpless without his hands?" Lenorah teased in reply.

There was not a great deal of talking going on after that.

# Chapter 7

Late the next day, Lenorah slowly woke. At first she wondered about the odd pressure across her midsection - and then she remembered the night before. For whatever reason, she found her self blushing, with what she assumed was a giant smile on her face. And she had to fight the urge to start giggling like a mad woman. Behind her, a nose gently moved against the back of her neck, and the arm pinning her to the bed tightened slightly. She was not sure if Bruce was awake yet or not, but she really needed to get out of the bed. Attempting to slip out from under his arm was met with a series of low growls.

"I really need to get up. I'll come back, honest."

He grumbled something she could not quite understand, but moved enough to let her get up from the bed. Finishing in the bathroom, Lenorah had to turn back for a second look at herself in the mirror. He had given her a rather large sized hickey on her left collar bone. She was pretty sure she had enjoyed it at the time, but now...she would have to make sure her shirts covered it so she did not have to explain where it came from to anyone. This was something she wanted to keep to herself for the time being. Returning to the bed, she sat on the edge and watched him as he lay there half asleep.

"It's rude to stare at someone." Bruce said without opening his eyes.

"I'm trying to see if I was as nice about giving presents last night as you were."

"Wha..?" Bruce cracked open one eye, taking in the reddish mark on her collar bone.

"Oh...sorry about that."

"I'm pretty sure I enjoyed it at the time." Lenorah smiled.

"And I'm sure you'll have your revenge some day."

"That is a very good idea."

Before they could think about getting comfortable again, and perhaps drifting back off to sleep, a rather odd ring tone could be heard from somewhere out in the living room. Lenorah was sure it was not her phone, judging by how Bruce groaned and hesitated in getting up from the bed. Lenorah stepped out into the main living area, but had no idea where their clothing had ended up.

"Um...do you remember what happened to your pants?" she called back over her shoulder.

"No." it was more like a growl. "They can leave a message."

"But, isn't that Alfred's special ring? I've heard it before you know."

She was sure he was cursing as he got up from the bed, but she could not quite make out exactly what he was saying. It was a very sexy image though, of him standing in the doorway with a sheet around his waist and his hair sticking out in a few different directions. The angry look on his face made it even better. Lenorah refrained from telling him how cute he looked



with his brows all scrunched up like that. He finally found his pants behind the love seat, and while he dealt with the call, Lenorah returned to her bedroom to pull on her robe. When she returned, he was sitting on the couch, head leaned back staring at the ceiling.

"Something bad happen?" she asked.

"Slight emergency at the house."

"Bullet proof suit emergency or something else?"

"Something else. Alfred asked me to get back as soon as possible, apparently the plumber did something wrong in the kitchen and we now have water everywhere."

"Oh...that's not good. I'll see if I can find the rest of your clothes. Though now you'll miss out on my special after sex omelet."

"Evil temptress. Come with me and cook it at my place."

"Um...you just said your kitchen is having difficulties."

"I've got galoshes you can borrow."

"Ha ha. Here's your shirt."

"I would really like you to join me today, if you want. You don't have to cook - besides, I still owe you dinner."

"I really need to shower."

"So do I. Be quicker if we do it together."

"And how do you figure a shower together will take less time?"

His answer was a slightly devilish grin.

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Very likely not as soon as Alfred would have preferred, the two of them were on their way to Wayne Manor. They arrived to find the damage to the kitchen was not quite as bad as it had sounded over the phone, but it was still a rather large mess involving the dishwasher and a few pipes in the wall behind it. Alfred had been pleasantly surprised to see that Lenorah had walked through the door with Bruce directly behind her. From the rather silly grins the two of them shared, something good had apparently happened last night after all. He had been worried that Bruce would let this one slip through his fingers, and was thankful that she would be around a little longer. With emergency repairs underway, the three sat in the breakfast nook chatting quietly.

"Oh, he still owes me a steak dinner. There is absolutely no way he's getting out of it. Hopefully at some place with a more relaxed dress code." Lenorah assured Alfred.

"Ah, well, there is a very nice grill in the back yard."

"Does he know how to cook?"

"I believe so."

"I'm sitting right here you know." Bruce interrupted.

"Oh, sorry love. So, can you cook?" Lenorah teased.

"Enough to get by." came the grumbled answer.

"Sandwiches don't count." Alfred added.

"I make very good sandwiches I'll have you know. I can also do a killer spaghetti sauce."

"We should probably not pick on him anymore..." Lenorah mused.

"I believe you're right my dear."

Bruce could only shake his head and try not to grin at the two people sitting across the small table from him. He could not tell who was a worse influence on the other...and obviously letting Alfred and Lenorah spend a great deal of time together was a bad idea. Lenorah mollified him with a peace offering of a quick peck on the cheek, while Alfred gave him a look that plainly said the master would receive no such treatment from him.

The plumbing was fixed as well as it could be right then, and they would come back out to redo the dishwasher after the drywall was repaired and ready to go. It hopefully would not take long to have the contractors come out after the weekend was over and put things back in order. It was not too bad, just a bit of mopping up and things would be okay for the next few days at least.

"So...since there's no paint to watch dry right now, what's the plan?" Lenorah asked.

"I have to get things tidied up, so you two youngsters are on your own." Alfred stood with his customary quirky smile.

"Well, it's not like you don't know your way around the place."

"You invited me mister, and now you're going to make me entertain myself?"

"Would you like the rest of the tour?"

"Are you serious?" Lenorah's eyes lit up.

"You are forever sworn to secrecy, and we'll be forced to kill you if you say anything."

"And if they torture me first?"

"We might overlook such an incident and let you live."

"I would hope so, because it would take a lot to get anything out of me...only current company included in the list of people who can make me squeal in less than five minutes."

"That was too much information." Alfred called from the other side of the kitchen. "Run along and play now."

"Yes sir, on our way sir." Lenorah stood with a mock salute, and what could only be classified as a shit eating grin. (funny phrase that one...as I doubt anyone would be smiling if they were consuming such stuff).

Bruce took her hand and led her from the room, through the house to his study. A panel on the wall slid aside at a slight tap revealing a digital combination pad. Lenorah averted her eyes so she could not be forced to reveal such a code. Probably a silly gesture, but she figured it was better to be safe than sorry. He was trusting her with something he did not share with just anyone. It was the most precious gift he could give her, to tell the truth, and she would willingly do anything to protect it. After the code was entered, another section of wall slid back to reveal an elevator standing at the ready. She followed him inside, taking a hold of his hand.

"I kinda have this thing about elevators..." Lenorah murmured.

"You have an elevator in your building."

"And I still don't like being in one. That also means no elevator sex, just to get your mind off of even thinking such an idea."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Dreaming is the only way lover. Now, do I need to keep my hands to myself down here?"

"Not really."

When the elevator reached the lower levels, Lenorah was rather surprised at what she saw. It had started out as a natural cave, now modified to fit in with the lifestyle of a costumed crime fighter. One area to the right of the elevator was a large bank of computer screens, with a few workstations setup below. A vault was off to the left, where she figured he kept his suit. But the centerpiece to the whole setting was a dangerous looking...something...on wheels. There were more side tunnels and chambers, and she hoped to one day explore them all, but the computers were calling to her. After glancing at Bruce to make sure it was okay, she nearly scampered over to the computer alcove.

"Ohh...I could so write some killer analytical software for this. Something to help track criminal traits and other such details. Wouldn't be that much different from what I'm working on right now at the lab."

"Is this like your proverbial childhood candy store or something?"

"Something like that." Her nose scrunched up as she scrolled through a few directories.

"Um...did you set this up?"

"Some of it. Why?"

"Oh...um...nothing."

"Something not right?"

"No, it'll work the way it's setup...just could go faster if a few things were changed and rearranged for a better work flow. I'd need to dig around a little more to see what all to adjust, probably add in a few new things, but that would take a while."

"Next weekend perhaps."

"Only if you want me to. I tend to get a little carried away if someone sets me down in front of a computer." Lenorah blushed.

Bruce smiled and shook his head when she turned back to the screens. Perhaps it would be a good idea to have someone take a look at his setup, and if she could write a few new programs that would assist with what he wanted to do...that would simply be the icing on the cake. He managed to pull her away from the computers finally and the tour continued for the better part of the afternoon. Returning to the elevator, Lenorah paused for one last look around, a thought nagging at the back of her mind.

"Me being here...knowing what I know...you knowing I'll be waiting no matter what...that's not going to disrupt things is it? I don't want to be a distraction from all of this. I need to know you'll conveniently forget I exist every time you suit up and head out."

"I don't think I can get you completely out of my mind, and truthfully I don't really want to. You won't be a distraction."

"So visions of me in a skimpy bikini won't go romping through your brain halfway through the evening while you're tracking the bad guys down?"

"Oh thank you, now that probably will happen."

"Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Bruce replied before reassuring her with a kiss.

Chapter 8

Gotham City was surprisingly quiet and rather well behaved for the next few years. Oh, certainly there were some small time crooks that tried to carve themselves a small piece here and there that had to be put down, but nothing on the grand scale people had witnessed with the Joker. The narrows were still as bad as ever, but it had not bled over to the rest of the city a great deal, and the police were doing a fairly decent job in keeping what did cross the river in check.

Bruce and Lenorah were known publicly as Gotham's Golden couple - depending on which gossip magazine one read anyway. Though the biggest question on every society reporters lips was when the two would ever tie the knot. Bruce generally managed to ignore such quips, though he was having a difficult time convincing Lenorah that beating the snot out of such people was not a good idea. Most were surprised that the two still had separate living arrangements after being together for so long. It was unheard of for a couple to be an item for over two years and be unmarried and still living apart as well. Somehow they managed to make it work, though there had been a few rough patches along the way. Neither of them suspected another one was on the horizon.

One of the catalysts began with a series of ingenious robberies. They were all small items with big price tags, taken by a thief who no one could identify. The culprit managed to avoid or bypass any security measures and the authorities were at their wits end. Naturally, Batman had been brought in unofficially to help find Gotham's new upper level criminal, and it was slowly beginning to consume him - for being such a petty thing after all. Lenorah did not have a problem with him spending a great deal of time on the matter, and had actually proven to be of great benefit taking the gathered data and compiling it to see if any information could be gathered from it. The problem began when the identity of their prey was finally discovered.

The thief was a woman, with a taste for the theatrics herself, and dressed up in what could only be considered a cat outfit. A rather revealing cat outfit if one was honest. Her image had been captured during a heist at one of Gotham's higher level jewelers on one of the many small hidden cameras Batman had placed around the city. They were no where near bringing this woman to justice, but at least they knew what they were looking for. Some things may have been better if she had not been found, as a certain gentleman would come to think a few months later.

Lenorah was spending an evening in her living room, once again with the lights off and all the blinds raised so she could watch the city. It was odd that after everything, she still enjoyed her bat watching hobby. But she did, even during the times they seemed ready to kill each other. There had been two rather major "disagreements" over the years, but they had managed to work through them. The first one had been the worst, in Lenorah's estimation, and

it still pained her from time to time. It was hard to compete with the memory of a dead woman, and she had no desire for him to forget his first love and childhood friend - but it was hard not to feel like a despised second choice every now and then when she was set aside for a brooding moment. She had worked through it, and such events were very few and far between now - mainly only a bad day on the anniversary of the woman's death. Most of her information had come from Alfred, as she had never wished to cause Bruce pain by bringing it up.

The second event, well...that they had decided to never speak of again. Both had been stupid and behaving foolishly which had led to a months worth of misunderstandings. Neither of them could remember what started it or what had kept it fueled exactly - but they had both wanted it to end. Lenorah smiled as she remembered the makeup session from that one. Things had evened out now, and everything was back to being as it should. At least, that was how it was supposed to be. Ever since the cat burglar had been seen, things were starting to strain again - and Lenorah was not sure which of them was the cause this time.

She was not jealous or clingy by nature, but something was causing Bruce to pull away from her again, and she was clueless as to what was wrong. A couple of rather loud thuds on the roof above her pulled her out of her musings and she slowly went towards the balcony windows, stopping in the middle of the room. A few minutes later, she jumped back as two shadowy figures landed on the balcony. One of them was very familiar to her...and she had a rather good guess as to the other slightly smaller one. Waiting for a fight, or at least for him to put the stupid woman in her place - she got an entirely different show. One that started the process of ripping her heart out, thanks to one window being cracked open a bit.

"Someone finally managed to track me down, I should be impressed." the masked woman purred. "So what's a big handsome man like yourself doing worrying about me?"

"I'm here to stop you."

"I'd say you certainly did that. Gave me quite a chase."

"Do you surrender?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. I rather like what I do."

Lenorah watched as the woman stepped closer, her seductive skills pushed to the maximum. Her blood began to boil as she watched the woman press herself up against *her* man. Then the temperature dropped when he did nothing to stop the seductress' advancements. Lenorah shook her head - she was not seeing this - not at all.

"Are you really happy chasing down the 'bad guys'? We could make a wonderful team, you and I."

"No thanks."

"Aww...so quick to judge? I can be a great deal of fun you know."

Spots began to form in front of Lenorah's eyes when the cat woman moved in even closer (wondering how such a thing was even possible) and pulled Batman in for a kiss. One he seemed to be enjoying a little too much from what she could see. A part of her brain told her it was just the darkness outside, the lack of light, that made things appear so. The rest of her brain went blank, as her body collapsed onto its knees. It was not happening, she was simply dreaming. That was all there was to it. Denial can be a funny thing, causing a person's brain to come up with any manner of excuses to explain away something we would rather not come to terms with.

Everything shut down, and Lenorah did not hear the rest of the conversation after the two people on her balcony drew apart. The sound of a gentle tapping on one of the windows brought her partly out of the shocked state she was in, but what she saw brought her little comfort. After what he had just done, he expected her to get up and just let him in as if nothing had happened? Their eyes locked even through the shadows, but Lenorah saw nothing. She stood slowly and turned away to stumble through the apartment to her bedroom where she lay staring at the ceiling until well after the sun came up, oblivious to everything else going on around her.

Lack of sleep left her feeling slightly dazed, and nearly like she had a hangover. Heading towards the kitchen, she noticed there were ten messages on the answering machine, and probably that many attempts to call her on her cell phone. Those were not pressing matters right then with the only thing on her mind being the refrigerator to get something to drink. Two glasses of juice later, she decided to brave what awaited her for messages - starting with her cell phone. Most of them were hangups, and a few slightly plaintive "Please call me" shorts from Bruce. The last one sounded more like he had gotten angry, but he had not left anything longer than a few words.

The messages on the answering machine were pretty much the same as those on her cell phone, except for the last one. If she had felt better, it probably would have made her throw the machine across the room. But all she felt was a vague numbness through her entire body, complete with a foggy brain. Lenorah did not even notice the tears slowly trickling down her cheeks as she replayed the message a third time. By the fourth replay, something finally clicked in her mind - and she knew there would be no going back on this one. Thanks to both their actions there would be no more shots of Bruce Wayne and Lenorah Sorris on the society pages - at least, not ones of the two of them together. With that, the only thought she had was that she needed to get out - to get away from everything. And she did not really care if or when she came back.

Clothes were thrown haphazardly into a beat up old duffel bag she had shoved in the back corner of her closet. Toiletries suffered the same lack of care in packing, though in a separate smaller bag. If anything leaked, she could always purchase more somewhere along the way to where ever it was she would be escaping to. The bags were left by the front door while she finished up the last thing she felt necessary before leaving. All but the last message Bruce had left her were erased from the tape, leaving that one intact. The tape went into an envelope with a very brief note, and Bruce Wayne hastily scrawled on the front of the envelope. That she would leave with the doorman downstairs before she left, either to be picked up or sent to the intended recipient after a few days if he did not show up again.

She called Carrie and left her a message that she was taking a vacation and to leave a message if she felt like calling. She was not going to chance answering the phone while forgetting to check the caller ID...that would not help her brain right then or in the near future either. Throwing a jacket over her shoulder, she hoisted the bags from the floor and headed out the door, making sure to lock it behind her. The envelope was left with the trusty Frank, a nice older gentleman she had hired as a door man when the renovations to the building had opened it back up for families to move in again. He gave her a sympathetic smile and assured her the envelope would reach its destination - even if he had to deliver it himself in person. A few minutes later, she was pulling out of the parking garage and on her way to the bank. She wanted

to leave as small a trail as possible, and decided cash in hand would help with that.

Having left the lab for her own software consulting business from home meant she had no worries on that front - and as she was in between jobs right then, that was even better. There was nothing left to tie her to Gotham for a while, she just had to figure out where she felt like going. Or she could just pick a direction and drive and see where she ended up. That was something she had not done since a crazy road trip weekend in college...and it sounded like the best idea she had come up with for a long time.

Chapter 9

Frank did not have to wait long, or have to leave the building even, to deliver the envelope Lenorah had left behind. Mister Wayne came through the front door not a half hour after Lenorah had left - looking rather haggard and worn down in Frank's estimation. He could not feel too bad towards him, as his loyalties lay elsewhere - but he still did not like to see two young people that had been rather happy with each other suddenly not be so. Bruce had taken the envelope without words, tossing out a barely there thank you before he turned around and left. Frank prayed that whatever it was would blow over and all would be right as rain again. Lord knew he and his wife had gone through their fair share of spats before they finally ended up with each other. If they could do it, those two could patch things up as well he figured.

Bruce sat in his car in front of the building for a few minutes just staring at the envelope, and her less than tidy handwriting - which was out of character for Lenorah. He could tell there was a tape inside, and he had a pretty good idea of what was on it. When she had not answered her phone, or the door he had been standing outside of all night after a rushed trip home to change suits he had given into his anger in that moment and said things he regretted as soon as he hung up the phone. It had been too late to take them back, and he had been too afraid of calling again to say anything else. There were no excuses about what had happened on Lenorah's balcony. He could not explain why he let it happen or why he did nothing to stop it either. Certainly not when things with Lenorah were going well and he was wanting to spend even more time with her than they already did. So why did he allow himself to sabotage their relationship when he knew she would be there watching? There were no answers, none that would satisfy anyone. Opening the envelope, he pulled out the short note she had left - the final blow of the hammer on the nails of the coffin he had placed himself in.

I have listened to this five times now I think, and I have no response. Obviously I'm not enough anymore, and so will simply say goodbye. I pray all goes well for you in the future, and I will always love you. I doubt it would have made a difference had it been said earlier, something I will never know now, but it wouldn't be right to leave without saying it. What I'm doing is for myself, so please allow me this as a last parting gift from you.

His first reaction was to crumple it all up and throw it away, but something inside dictated otherwise. They had always skirted the issue of expressing their feelings, as neither of them had ever been sure or comfortable of what they both felt. They had certainly cared a great deal for each other, felt strongly about the other - but such things had never found a voice until now. Of all times to "hear" something, this was most possibly the worst possible time. For the knowledge that Lenorah loved him to come after everything had gone to hell was the lowest

blow one could ever bring upon themselves. One very foolish mistake and it was as if the past few years meant nothing. Yet they did, but he was not sure how he could fight for it. Lenorah had removed herself from the situation, and he had no idea where she was. She had also learned enough that she would leave very little evidence pointing to where she went.

Returning home seemed a daunting idea, as he would see it in Alfred's face, even if the man said nothing to him. It was his own doing, so he would simply have to face the music. Though Lenorah was still alive, it felt like the day Rachel had been taken from him. Some would say it was not quite that bad, and of course it was not - but the pain was the same. Losing someone generally felt like the end of the world, no matter the circumstances of that loss. There would be nothing for him to do but loose himself in his work again. To shut himself away from the world for a while and forget about life and living for any purpose. It was stupid, but it would get him through this. What would come out on the other end was anyone's guess.

He found Alfred in the den catching up on the morning's paper when he returned home, and sat down heavily in the chair across the room. The only sound for quite some time was the occasional rustling of the paper. Alfred was waiting for him to speak first, and Bruce was not sure he wanted to say anything. The need to confess bubbled up for whatever reason and he found his mouth opening of its own violation.

"I'm such an ass. I've made a complete mess of things."

"You two have gone through this before, it will work out in the end. Just like it always has."

"I don't think that's going to happen this time Alfred. I don't deserve for it to be fixed. You know the worst part of this whole mess Alfred? She loved me."

"How is that bad sir?"

"She loved me and I screwed everything up. I did something stupid and I destroyed her."

The two men were silent for a while longer, both lost in their own thoughts. Though Alfred knew nothing of what had happened, it had to be truly bad for Bruce to be acting the way he was. The devastation radiating from him was nearly as bad as the day Rachel had died. There was little he could say that would bring even the smallest amount of comfort this time - nothing to keep hidden that would allow for false hope. There would be no picking up of oneself from this fall for a very long time he sensed.

That evening, while Alfred was fixing dinner for the two of them, he received a phone call. He did not recognize the number, but something told him to answer it anyway.

"Alfred Pennyworth speaking."

"Alfred? It's...it's Lenorah."

"My dear girl, how are you?"

"I'm...well, I don't really know how I am. I'm alive and breathing, but that's about it. How...how is he?"

"About as one would expect. I've never seen him quite this bad."

"I'm...I'm so sorry. I just...I just couldn't stay Alfred. I..."

"Hush now."

"I feel childish for just running away. I don't know why, but I do."

"Sometimes one needs to distance them self from something to better see how to fix it."

"I'm not sure things can be fixed this time Alfred."

"Master Bruce said the same thing to me earlier today. Isn't agreeing on something the first step to recovery?"

Her laugh sounded tired, but warm at least, with some feeling to it.

"I suppose you might be right Alfred. You might just be right. I should go, I've been driving all day and I don't remember if I slept last night or not."

"Rest up, clear your head, and check in every now and then with an old man that worries about you. Both of you."

"Thank you Alfred. I'll call again soon."

Chapter 10

Lenorah had driven through the day until she came to a small bed and breakfast near the coast. South had seemed like a good idea, and that was the direction she had gone. It was the off season, and the older couple who ran the place had been more than happy to have her stay with them. She felt as if she could stay a few days in the easy peace found there. It was far enough away that there were no memories of anything, painful or otherwise. The weather was still warm enough to allow a few walks along the beach, and just general laziness. It was perfect actually, and her hosts were kind and unassuming. She heard Mrs. Jenson calling upstairs to let her know breakfast was ready. Recalling she had eaten very little yesterday, a home cooked meal sounded like a very good idea.

"Ah, there you are dear. Today is pancake day, I hope you don't mind. Ralph has to watch what he eats, but the doctor allows one day a week for a special breakfast that breaks the rules."

"Anything sounds wonderful, I didn't really eat much yesterday. Well, nothing good anyway."

"Eating well while traveling is always such a hard task. Now, come on into the kitchen and join us."

Lenorah soon found a plate piled with pancakes set down in front of her, with another plate with scrambled eggs and bacon soon beside it. She had not realized how hungry she actually was until she was nearly licking the syrup and crumbs off her plates. Her hosts smiled as she looked up and blushed.

"Good to see a healthy appetite in a young woman nowadays. All too often they worry about their weight and pick at their food when they're in desperate need of a few good meals in the first place." Ralph said with a grin.

"I've never been shy about eating. Some man takes me out for dinner and I order the biggest steak on the menu." Lenorah replied.

"I say she's a keeper Martha, how about you?"

"I say she might be wanting seconds."

"Oh, I can get it here in a bit. Probably should let things settle just a bit first."

Laughter and another round of Martha's famous pancakes filled the homey kitchen that morning. Lenorah felt as if she had found a home. She had never experienced such meals with her parents, things had always been a little formal, and it had been even more so with both sets of grandparents. Family dinners had involved a big room with a long table, and not a great deal of laughter or even stimulating conversation. Though Martha attempted to shoo her out of the kitchen, Lenorah insisted on helping clean up.

"You're our guest dear, you shouldn't be doing this."

"It's the least I can do after such a great meal."

"Well, I suppose a little help with the dishes won't be such a bad thing."

Lenorah was finally shooed from the kitchen after the dishes were done, so she soon found herself wandering along the beach. The coastline in this area was more rocky than sandy, and she was soon lost in the fun of climbing around the rocks and seeing what could be found in the tidal pools hidden here and there. Sea life was so very interesting, and she loved to watch the small crabs scuttling about the area. In one spot, she found a piece of green sea glass. It had started out in life as a bottle most likely and had ended up broken and then washed up to be rounded and slightly polished by the waves and sand it came in contact with.

A few other interesting pebbles, and a slightly battered shell or two joined the piece of sea glass in her pocket, and she resolved to bring a bag the next time for the special finds that caught her eye. Thankfully she had her own car to haul all this stuff back that she had no idea what she would be doing with it. Martha only smiled and shook her head as she watched Lenorah emptying her pockets on the porch before coming in to wash up for lunch.

"Find anything good out there?" Ralph asked when Lenorah entered the house.

"Just some pebbles, and other junk. I have no idea what I'm going to do with it, or why I had the urge to pick them up...guess it's because I'd never done much of it as a child."

"Never gone to the beach and collected things?"

"Few family vacations, and those we did go on were always at some resort where they either wouldn't let you collect anything or were so picked over it wasn't worth it."

"Well, should be plenty of stuff to make up for lost time. Not much for lunch, just sandwiches."

"I'm sure any food that comes out of Martha's kitchen is delicious."

"That's true. She took the doctor's orders and found a way to make my poor limited diet taste pretty decent. Not as much fun getting old as what I thought it would be when I was younger."

"Don't pay him any mind, he's having as much fun now as when we were younger. Just goes about it a little slower now is all." Martha called from the doorway to the kitchen.

Lenorah followed a laughing Ralph into the kitchen, a large grin on her face.

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Two days quickly became four, and those four soon became eight before Lenorah began to wonder if she was going to wear out her welcome. When she had started her trip, she had every intention of moving on, of just traveling until she was tired of the whole thing. But being around Martha and Ralph had ended up being more healing than any random road trip could have ever hoped to be. They felt very much like the family she had always wished had been hers, and leaving was becoming rather hard to do. Though she was also pretty sure that they were enjoying her company, and probably would not kick her out for a while yet.

One Thursday evening, while Martha was attending her monthly book club meeting, Lenorah and Ralph were enjoying one of the last relatively warm fall evenings on the back porch looking out over the sea. Two steaming mugs of mulled cider and a pair of Martha's lap quilts kept what little chill there was away. Ralph studied the young woman sitting nearby, something

he had taken to doing for the past few days. For someone of her age, she seemed rather old and weary at times, as if carrying a burden too great for her to bear. Neither he nor Martha had pried into Lenorah's life and what had happened that made her leave it - even if for just a moment. A small smile crept up onto his face as he remembered a thought Martha had shared as they were getting ready for bed the night before. She had stated that if they had actually had children, she would have liked a daughter like Lenorah.

Neither of them regretted not having children, and though they had considered adoption in the early years of their marriage, things had not worked out that way. Instead, they spoiled their nieces and nephews and some of the local children, some who now had children of their own, making Ralph and Martha grandparents of a sort. Lenorah felt like family to them, even though they had only known her for a few weeks now. They both wished they could help with whatever was wrong, but sensed she needed to work things out on her own.

"Don't get views like this in that city of yours." Ralph remarked quietly.

"Not really, but I do have a very nice view from my balcony when the weather cooperates."

"When we don't have any guests, Martha and I usually sit out here all evening when we can before it gets too cold."

"It's nice to have someone to share special moments with, even if it's an every day event."

"And is there a someone special waiting for you back home?"

Ralph noticed the hesitation, and the seemingly long moment before Lenorah answered him.

"There was."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Oh, no...he's still alive. Something happened and I...I had to get away. I didn't know if I could look through the bad part and see what had been good between us."

"Young men can do foolish things for no real rhyme or reason. He didn't...hurt you did he?"

"Just my heart." Lenorah replied with a sad smile.

A comfortable silence fell between them for a while, the only sounds were the gulls drifting lazily out over the shore. Ralph did not know what had happened, but it brought him back to a time in his life when he had done something rather stupid that had nearly cost him what he considered the greatest treasure of his life. He did not know if hearing his tale would help Lenorah at all, but she would at least know she was not alone in her pain.

"Thirty-five years ago, there was this handsome young man. He had never 'gone steady' with a girl, just little flings here and there - until one day he met a goddess. She was two years younger than he was, but that didn't seem to matter to either of them. They were both hesitant at first, and it took almost a year for anything to happen. Oh, certainly they spent time together, dinner, movies and all the things two young people do to amuse themselves. When they were together, they had eyes for no other person, and each thought the other could possibly be 'the one'."

Ralph paused for a sip of cider, sharing a small knowing smile with Lenorah. She had guessed he was talking of Martha and himself when they were younger.

"Two years went by, and these two young people were hardly ever apart. Everyone around them were simply waiting until the day when he would propose, though the two themselves were hardly thinking of such things. They simply enjoyed being with each other and the rest didn't matter. Sure they had fights and disagreements, every couple does, but things always managed to work out in the end. It was all very nearly destroyed by a single kiss."

Lenorah waited for Ralph to continue, feeling very odd that his story matched so well with her own. How in the world could she end up staying with people that had gone through the same events as she had?

"You might be wondering how a kiss can tear two people apart...but it can. Our young man had a very foolish encounter with a woman he had met sometime in the past. They had never dated, just bumped into each other at the same gatherings from time to time. This woman was older, exotic, and a bit of a devil if one may say such things. I don't think she was an evil person, just someone who didn't care much for the feelings of others. Our foolish young man was waiting for his sweetheart near a local bar, as it was close to where she worked and she was running late that day. He thought a harmless conversation would do well enough to pass the time, and that's all that went through his head right then. Before he really knew what was happening, this other woman had herself pressed up against him and locked him into a rather passionate kiss. It was as if his mind just turned itself off, and he had no control over anything - though that isn't much of an excuse."

"A sound behind him brought him back to his senses, and he turned to briefly see his sweetheart's anguished face before she fled the scene. And that girl could run...he certainly couldn't catch her that night. So he wasted a roll of dimes on a pay phone to hear her hang up or not even answer the phone. All weekend he camped out on the lawn in front of the building where she lived. He needed to fix things, but they don't sell a glue for shattered hearts. And since she wouldn't see him or speak to him, the only thing left was to just walk away. It was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do."

"What happened then?" Lenorah could not keep quiet, she had to know how things turned out.

"He left that day an empty shell of a man, with only himself to blame for what had happened. After that, he became a bit of a hermit, only venturing to the outside world to go to work every day. Many times his friends tried to entice him to a night out on the town to get his mind off of things, but he didn't want to forget. He didn't want to replace his goddess with some imitator that meant nothing." Ralph smiled. "Hearing this, you may think stories don't have a happy ending, but I assure you it does. Can you guess what happened?"

"She managed to forgive him, and they got married, and bought a little house down by the shore. And they have pancakes for breakfast every Wednesday."

"All too true. It was a long road to recovery - I had to wait two very long years. And truthfully, I like to believe I would have waited forever for her to forgive me. Thankfully she didn't make me wait that long, and I still don't know why she did, but we got our happy ending - so to speak."

"So to speak?"

They both jumped in their seats, and turned to see Martha standing at the door gently dabbing her eyes.

"Well, we're still going so it hasn't ended yet. Besides, you're supposed to be at that book club thing still."

"Most of the group is behind on reading for this month, so we let out early."

"Well then, I will let you keep this young lady company while I go take my evening meal of pills before bed."

Lenorah felt herself tearing up as she watched them embrace briefly before trading places at the door. Was it still possible to have her own happy ending? Granted, she had been the one to walk away this time - but she was still the one who would have to forgive the event that had sent her here in the first place.

"Broken hearts, even if it's just a tiny little fracture, can take a long time to heal. I just, well I just knew that Ralph was the one I wanted, even when I hated him for what had happened. We were both so young though, who could really say we knew what we wanted then?"

"I'm sitting here wishing that will happen for me, but I don't know if it can." Lenorah replied softly.

"It's still too fresh dear, you've only been with us for almost three weeks now. It will take time, and effort, to work through this."

"A small part of me wants to go back and return the favor, just to show what he's missing...and then leave him hanging for a while. I don't think it's a very healthy solution though, for either of us."

"Such a thing never crossed my mind back then. I wonder what would have happened if I'd done something like that. You're much more independent and headstrong than I was then, course your debilitating event happened much later in life than mine. I was twenty-three and fresh out of college then."

"It's not any easier at thirty."

"Sleep on it before you make any decision about going back. I better get in there and make sure he actually took all of his medication. Lord knows he doesn't like to take some of those pills, not that I can blame him...but I'm rather selfish about wanting to keep him around for as long as I possibly can."

Lenorah smiled as Martha stood and returned to the house. She would most certainly not do anything without thinking it through this time. Leaving had been a spur of the moment decision, as had been reflected when she opened her duffel bag the first day she had arrived and seen the rather eclectic mix of clothing waiting within. Forgive and forget had never been something she could do, feeling that there were some things that could not be forgiven, and certain things that should never be forgotten. But was this situation really one of those? Bruce may have participated in returning that woman's kiss, there was no denying his actions on that front - but had it been something he really truly wanted to do? The other part of her brain demanded that if he really had not wanted to kiss that skankily dressed cat he would have moved away from her before it ever got a chance to happen.

Yet, Ralph had stated that he had felt like his brain had shut off, and he had no clue how he had gotten to the point of another woman kissing him. He accepted that it was no excuse for what had happened, but he had not invited the other woman to lock lips with him either. Groaning to herself, Lenorah leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. Martha was right, she would most definitely need to sleep on this and think about it for a while. But first, a phone call

was in order.

"Alfred?"

"Ah, my dear. How are you today?"

"I'm much better actually."

"Still at that coastal hideaway?"

"Yeah. I got here and it just didn't feel right to leave. You'd like it. Should take some time off and come down here for a weekend or something."

"Things never go right around here if I take time off. Certain parties would be lost without me."

"That is the lamest excuse I have ever heard. That certain party is more than capable of taking care of himself for a few days."

"The last time I left him alone, for less than an hour mind you, the bloody house burnt down."

"And if someone else was there to babysit?"

"I couldn't ask anyone else to take on my job, even for a few days. Or were you actually offering yourself up as a temporary replacement?"

"I'm not sure that I'm ready for that just yet...but soon maybe."

"And when will you be returning to us?"

"In a few days. I'm not quite ready to leave just yet. How is everyone?"

"We're all well for the most part. Some are better than others still, but that's to be expected."

"I shouldn't have left."

"Now, what did we agree on the last time you called?"

"That I would stop apologizing for my actions when I haven't done anything that I need to apologize for."

"And how many times do I need to have you repeat it before it sinks in?"

"Probably a few more times Alfred."



# Chapter 11

Lenorah decided when she woke the next morning that she would leave Saturday afternoon. There was no rush, so she could take her time and make it a two day trip and not be quite as tired when she returned home. This time she would try to enjoy the drive and everything she had driven past without seeing three weeks ago. It was going to be hard to leave Martha and Ralph, but knew she would always be welcome in their home - just as they would be welcome in hers if they ever came to the city. Which was sooner than anyone would have guessed.

"Oh, my word," Martha exclaimed at breakfast Saturday morning, a letter from her sister in her hand.

"Who went and died now?" Ralph asked.

"No one is dead. But it looks as if we won't be going to Florida for Christmas this year."

"Well, don't leave us in suspense dear."

"Samuel was promoted, and that promotion came with a transfer to the main office for where he works. You'll never guess where he's ended up."

"Metropolis," Ralph guessed, glaring at the spoon of oatmeal before him.

"Nope. Gotham City. Family Christmas is in Gotham this year."

"No lazy days on the beach this year? Darn."

"Well that's wonderful news then, we'll be able to see each other while you're there."

Lenorah said.

"Oh, that will be wonderful! The only problem is, I don't think all the family will fit in Sam's new place for the whole month, it's just an apartment and they've only got one guest room because of the kids. Genna didn't think of that."

"Oh, well, I have three guest rooms that aren't being used. And there might be an empty apartment in the building you all can use if you like."

"How would you manage to work that out with your landlord dear?" Martha asked.

"Um...I am the landlord. I own the building I live in." Lenorah replied with a blush.

"We have friends in high places dear." Ralph said with a wink.

"Are you sure dear? We'll be there for the whole month." Martha asked.

"That's only one week longer than I've been here. I have a good sized dining room, and a nice huge kitchen. There will be plenty of room for everyone."

"We wouldn't want to invade your home during Christmas, you'll have your own family to spend time with."

"My mother lives in France, and my father was somewhere in Japan the last time I heard from him. Not real close with the rest of my family really, I talk to my brothers once a year and that's about it."

"Oh, that's terrible. Sweet thing like you and your family ignores you?"

"I think we can solve that by just adopting her Martha. Perfect age too. No diapers, no crazy teenage years, she's the perfect child."

"Ralph!"

Martha tried to be angry, but it was too hard when Lenorah was laughing right along with Ralph. She had certainly enjoyed the last three weeks with Lenorah more than she had of any of their guests. Granted, most guests did not stay for three weeks, but that mattered very little in the grand scheme of things. The three of them seemed to be a perfect fit to their odd little puzzle. Generally Martha did not like to share her kitchen while she was working, but Lenorah had carefully wriggled her way in and helped with quite a few meals and it had felt like the two of them had been working together for a long time.

It angered her that Lenorah's family had not been in contact with the young woman for some time. Coming from a close family, even with the distances separating them all, it was something she had just never understood. Maybe it was because she had never been able to have children, but it just did not make sense. Why have a child if you were not going to have anything to do with them? No matter what, from here on out, Lenorah was officially part of the family. What was one more to add to their numbers?

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With a basket full of goodies from Martha's kitchen, Lenorah set off shortly after lunch, with the promise to call and write often. Her trip back to Gotham was filled with a grand wonder, and she stopped often when some little roadside stall or mom and pop shop caught her eye. There was something to be said for taking the back roads every now and then. She spent the night at a small inn run by another nice older couple. The room was small and cozy, with huge fluffy pillows on the bed (fluffy pillows were the best things ever she had decided). She woke early feeling refreshed, though that turned to faint nervousness when she recalled that in less than six short hours, she would be back at the scene of the crime.

She decided that the first thing she would do would be to reclaim her balcony for herself. Lenorah felt the need to cleanse the area. For whatever reason, mainly for her mental well being she supposed, she was going to do it. A phone call to the front desk had Frank arranging for a crew to have the furniture hauled off and donated somewhere, and she stopped at a home improvement place on the outskirts of Gotham to pick out new furniture, paint and some plants. A few extra dollars ensured that the items that would not fit in her car would be delivered before the end of the day. When she arrived back home, she had the ever trusty Frank to direct the delivery people to leave everything on the first level of the parking garage and she would have it brought up later.

First things first, she changed into a pair of scruffy jeans and an old t-shirt. Hair was tossed up in a very messy bun, and the doors to the balcony were opened wide. The first thing was to quickly scrub everything down and prep for paint. She had chosen a color scheme inspired by the shore near Martha and Ralph's home. It had to be more relaxing than the plain concrete walls that had been there before. A few hours later, light sandy colored walls were before her. It was rather amazing how so little could do so much, and she had only painted. She

headed downstairs to see if her other purchases had finally arrived. A few elevator trips later had all the pieces upstairs and all that was left to assemble everything and decide on how to arrange things on the balcony.

The inside of the apartment was a bit of a mess, but the balcony was reclaimed and transformed. Taking a seat on one of the new chairs, Lenorah surveyed her afternoon of work. Though it still smelled a little of fresh paint, she did not really mind it. To break in her new outdoor space, she decided some victory takeout from Wong's was in order - after a shower anyway.

Chapter 12

The city was quiet for the evening, enough so that Batman had little to do. Catwoman (as she had been dubbed by the press) was still on the loose, though she had not done much for the past week. That was a good thing for him, as every time he had gotten close enough to bring her in, she had attempted to turn on the charm again. There was no attraction on his part, he felt nothing anymore, but it distracted him all the same. It should not have been possible, but the night he had lost Lenorah would flash through his mind every time he was face to face with Catwoman. The one thing he had promised Lenorah when he had finally let her fully into his life was that he would not allow himself to be distracted by her or any thoughts relating to her. And all had gone well until that night those few weeks ago. He was allowing things to affect his work, and it was only a matter of time before he made a major mistake that cost him more than a woman named Lenorah.

As was his usual custom now before returning to the manor, he made his way across the rooftops of the city towards Lenorah's building. There was no real reason for him to do so, he simply wanted to keep watch to see when she might return was all. Foolish probably, as he could simply see if Alfred knew anything since he knew the two of them had been in contact with each other. Since she had not called him or asked to talk to him however, he figured she would not appreciate him asking after her. That and he was not sure Alfred would tell him anything anyway. Landing on the rooftop a fair distance away from her balcony, he was surprised to finally see the lights on again. Granted that did not mean Lenorah herself was actually home, but things seemed a little different as he took in the scene before him.

He noticed that the balcony no longer looked the same as it had before. It had been painted, and there was new furniture. Had Lenorah moved away and rented the place out to other people? Was there truly no going back on this one? With a heavy heart he was trying very hard to ignore, he turned to leave, but paused as a woman's voice drifted out the opened doors.

"I made it home safe and sound. I would have called you earlier, but I had the urge to reclaim my balcony and went a little crazy."

It was her, of that he was very sure. Unless he had finally gone over the edge and was hallucinating the whole event. He had certainly dreamed of her enough that he could picture sitting there on the roof fully wanting to believe that she was back - even if it was not to return to him.

"What all did I do? I painted - no more ugly gray concrete. And I bought all new furniture and had the old set donated to a local youth clubhouse."

Her laughter was like gold to him right then. But the question that kept him rooted to the scene right then was who she was talking to. Had she met someone? It was perhaps a very

stupid question to ask, but it was a fear that he tried very hard not to give into.

"No, I haven't had a chance to try that idea out. I'd have to find him first Martha...and I highly doubt he's going to just show up the moment I'm back in town."

Relief washed over him - she was talking to a female friend. But were they not talking about him right then?

"I should let you go, I have a bit of a mess to finish cleaning up here now that my dinner break is over. Tell Ralph hello and I look forward to seeing you both again soon."

Bruce hesitated - should he leave and come back in civilian garb, or would she be okay with him just dropping by on her balcony? In the end, his desire to see her again now that she was only a few feet away won over all other thoughts and he slowly made his way across the rest of the distance separating him from her to land on the newly redone balcony. He was still rather nervous as to what would happen at this meeting considering what had transpired the last time he had been standing where he was now. Bruce decided that he would stand out here all night and wait for her to acknowledge him, let her make the first move rather than attempt to announce himself. It seemed the more prudent action of all his options - other than simply leaving right then. As he waited, he pondered the message of the redone balcony, and the bit of conversation he had overheard earlier that was just now finishing up, for all that Lenorah had started to say goodbye a few minutes ago.

And there he was - a grown man with his own means standing on a lady's balcony feeling like a school boy awaiting punishment for some stupid stunt. This would be the first contact they had engaged in for nearly a month - but was that enough to begin the process of healing and forgiveness? He felt he should not be letting the situation affect him as much as he was, but for the first time in a long time, he was letting his heart take control of a situation. This was not some crime lord to be brought to justice, or some damsel in distress that needed to be rescued (unless he wanted to consider himself the one needing to be rescued). Logical thought had taken a seat in the back of the bus and was simply along for the ride - where ever it was they would finally end up.

Inside the apartment, Lenorah was debating on exactly how long to leave him alone on the balcony. She did not wish to appear too eager to see him again, though a part of her was wishing to throw caution to the wind and just go for it. She needed to feel like she had the upper hand on this one - or she might very well not make it through what needed to be done. It was nice to see him again, even if a few feet and a set of curtains separated them. She found herself rather nervous about what she had been thinking about doing, and wondered if it would work as well for real as how she pictured it going in her head. Knowing her luck, things would backfire and she would find herself burned beyond recognition this time around. Theories always sounded good, but they did not always pan out as those experimenting hoped. Futzing around doing nothing for a few more minutes finally drove her to giving herself a mental kick in the pants and she made her way towards the open balcony doors.

His back was to her, but it did not take him long to turn towards her as if he sensed she was there finally. A silence stretched out between them for quite some time with neither of them moving. A flurry of emotion passed between two pairs of eyes, and neither could give voice to what they were thinking right then. For his part, Bruce stood rooted to the spot. Everything he had thought of saying if he ever saw Lenorah again was no longer readily accessible in his mind - which had gone a bit blank right then. He did not want to do anything

that would cause her to step back and close the doors, but he very greatly desired to feel her in his arms once again. His dreams over the past few weeks had been painful and torturous, and here she was again so very close. He held his breath as she moved towards him, slowly and a bit hesitantly until she was standing directly in front of him. Closing his eyes, he readied himself for whatever it was she had decided he deserved to receive. What happened next was certainly not what he had ever thought to expect.

This kiss was like no other they had shared before, and it shocked him at first to the point he did not return the favor and nearly pulled away. Lenorah did not allow this action and moved with him as he backed up slightly. She was insistent and demanding, and he realized on some level that she felt a need to re-establish her territory. And how she had chosen to do so indeed. The rest of him finally gave in and he wrapped his arms around her, tightly prolonging the embrace in fear it would end much too soon. This was what he had missed, this was what had very nearly ended up destroyed. Both decided, independently from each other, that nothing would come between them again - not without a fight on both their parts at least. Bruce knew he was still most likely waiting on forgiveness, but perhaps that wait would not be quite so long. The need for a proper breath of air finally forced them to separate, but neither moved away from the circle of the other's arms right then.

"I wanted to make sure you knew what you were missing," Lenorah murmured.

"I've known it since that night - I was so..."

"You were stupid to allow it to happen, and I was stupid to just stand by and watch."

"Why did you leave?" Bruce's voice was slightly pained sounding.

"I knew that if I tried to stay all I would see when I looked around me was what had happened. There was no way I could see the good through all that if it was clouding my vision. I had to get away."

"I called..."

"I believe we know how that ended up already." Lenorah quickly interrupted him, not wanting to think about that much right then.

"I never should have said any of it. I honestly didn't mean it."

"Part of you had to, otherwise it wouldn't have made it past your lips. You'll have to work that out for yourself though. I can't help with that."

"I know I have no right to expect you to forgive me...but is there hope?"

"In time. Though the headlines make me believe you've forgotten a promise you made to me a while ago. I'm not sure about that one."

"Every time I get close enough, there's only one event in my mind and...things just don't happen the way they're supposed to."

"You're letting thoughts of me distract you from your work. You assured me that would never happen."

"There isn't much point in putting this suit on every day if you're not one of the reasons I do it."

"Oh...oh there is a city full of reasons. All these people need you, even if they don't know it or appreciate it."

"You are the main reason. Knowing that at least one person knows, and hopefully appreciates it, made it so much easier to keep doing this every day."

Lenorah did not know how to respond to that one. She had not known she was truly that important to him. Yes, she had suspected his feelings had slowly been growing deeper, but to hear it explained in such a way floored her. They could not start all over again - there was too much between them already for such a farce. They could not just pick up where they had been interrupted either, so she was not quite sure what to do anymore. Her body wanted him in every way possible, but her heart was still urging caution. Which one she should listen to was a hard decision to make. She was not sure she could trust herself to make the right one. Thankfully, Bruce made it for her.

"I know things will be different, and as much as I wish otherwise, I think I should leave now. But I would like to see you again tomorrow, hopefully at an earlier time."

"Lunch. Come on over for lunch. Will give the poor gossip mags something to get all lathered up about."

One more kiss sealed the deal, and they pulled away from each other both looking forward to the next day and the hope (and broken relationship "glue") it brought with it.

Chapter 13

Lenorah woke early, wondering what in the world she would do for the lunch date she had arranged. Takeout just did not seem like it would do the trick, but she had no idea what she had in the kitchen. It would mean a trip to the market, but for what? She had no idea why coming up with a meal idea was so hard, it was not like she had no idea what he would or would not eat. Close to three years with a person generally gives you an idea of their likes and dislikes. Perhaps it was more along the lines of what she felt the two of them would be in the mood for, or at least what would be a good "make up" meal. What kind of message she wanted to send would dictate the types of food.

Or, perhaps, she was putting way too much thought into food and should just do something quick and simple. Something delicious and easy - because she had a feeling there would be more talking than eating going on anyway. Lenorah figured she would simply head to the market and see what caught her eye. Over thinking a situation would only complicate matters, and they did not need anymore complications between them. What they already had between them was more than enough. A smile began to form on her lips as she thought back to their reunion the night before. She had never honestly admitted to him just how sexy she found his Batman voice, because she was not sure exactly how he would take it. Sure he had always seemed to be okay with her being so entrenched in every part of his life - but would he really find as much pleasure in how hot she was for what he kept hidden from everyone else? Maybe he would be fine with the idea...which suddenly gave her a new one of her own, and a new rather devious smile stretched across her face. Perhaps a different shopping expedition was in order before her trip to the market.

Supplies for both ideas brewing in her head were gathered, one left for later in her bedroom while she got to work fixing lunch. Homemade pizza was always a good choice, as it was always a good conversation food. People enjoyed chatting over a pizza, and she hoped this idea would pay off. She was not real sure about the other one, but it would certainly be fun to try. Though, as she chopped the peppers for the pizza, she could very well manage to really piss him off with it. It was a risk she was willing to take, because there were a few things that needed to change, and this would be the biggest thing yet. If he could not get his head on straight about this stupid woman playing kitty cat, Lenorah would straighten things out for him - whether he liked it or not.

Bruce arrived a few minutes early, with a nervous grin plastered on his face. He had considered bringing flowers, but had not been able to decide on which ones to get. Roses said too much and there were too many colors and messages associated with each one. Close to an hour had been spent standing outside the nearby florist's shop dithering about going in or not. He had wasted enough time that it had made his decision for him and he had to be off. The

warm smell of fresh pizza filled the entry way in the kitchen, and his eyes darted about looking for the boxes from the local pizzeria before he could catch himself.

"Oh, you are so not doing what I think you're doing. I do know how to cook you know."

A faint pink tinge crept up his neck towards his face as he hung his head towards the floor. Leave it to him to shove his foot in his mouth before things had even started. She was giving him a strange half smile however so things could not be quite so bad. Hopefully she would still decide to share what she was cooking.

"Sorry...I just figured you had other things to do than spend the morning cooking."

"That's why I picked an easy meal. Pizza doesn't take all that long if you use some pre-made ingredients."

"It does smell very good."

"First rule is always take care of the stomach. Then everything else doesn't seem quite so daunting."

They settled in at the kitchen counter, though it did bother him slightly that Lenorah chose to sit across from him rather than beside him. It did make sense from one point of view so that they could see each other while they talked (when they got around to such things), but he had been looking forward to the nearness of the stools on the same side.

"When do you have to be back at work?"

"I took the rest of the afternoon off." Bruce replied.

"Benefits of being the boss?"

"Something like that. I think they're probably glad to see me gone. I kind of buried myself in all my work the past few weeks."

"I'm sor..."

"You have nothing to apologize for. I'm the one who should apologize."

"Why don't we agree that apologies and sorries are needed and accepted, on both sides."

"Are they?"

Bruce was not trying to be mean or difficult by asking, but he had to know if she truly meant what she had just said. Moving forward would be so much easier if it were true.

"They are. Unless you have other issues..."

"No! I mean...I..."

"Bruce, I'm not denying that what happened hurt. It hurt like hell, and I'm sure that some people out there would think I should dump you on the side of the road and keep driving. But that's not what I want to do. I don't think I can throw away three years of my life just like that without a fight."

"I didn't...I don't want that either. I came by here every night to see if you had come back - and leaving for home thinking you might never return was very hard."

"Part of me wanted to turn around and come back so many times, but I knew I wasn't ready then."

"Where did you go?"

"I had no destination at all when I left. I simply got in the car and drove. It was twelve hours later when I finally came out of the daze I was in and noticed it was late and I should find a place for the night. There was this little bread and breakfast place just down the road...and when I got there, I just stayed. The owners were a nice older couple, the nicest people I've met

in a while. We just sort of adopted each other."

"Sounds like they were able to help you."

"They did, and I'm sure you'd like them too. They're the parents I wish I could of had. And if you're a good boy, you'll get to meet them in December."

"They're coming to visit you?"

"By happy chance, they usually meet their family in Florida for Christmas - but this year all their family is going to be in Gotham. So I told them they could stay here. In fact, I'm supposed to call Martha with an update today on how things are going."

"They know about me?"

"The situation yes, but I never mentioned your name to them. I didn't know how things would work out when I returned...so I figured you wouldn't mind being anonymous."

"Thank you." Bruce reached across the counter top and took a hold of Lenorah's hand.

"The shore near their place inspired the redone balcony, amongst other things."

"Alfred let me know you were still alive and well, but that's all he would share with me. It did help a little."

"I couldn't sever ties completely..."

"I'm glad you didn't."

After finishing their lunch, they retired to the couch for a movie. Though Lenorah ended up falling asleep on Bruce's shoulder. He was happy enough he had no desire to move and simply settled into a more comfortable position, gently wrapping his arms around her before falling asleep himself.

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Lenorah woke a few hours later feeling warm and safe, even if the couch felt a little lumpier than normal. It felt like forever since she'd woken up in Bruce's arms, even though they had only been apart for about a month. She knew this was where she felt she belonged, and she never wanted to leave. It had never bothered her that they were only dating - as long as she was with him she cared little for anything else. Well, she cared about other things - everyone did - but things felt more complete with him around. There was only one last thing to take care of, and if she was lucky she would not be making him mad a few hours after they had managed to make up after a fashion. It was something she felt compelled to do. Their lazy afternoon on the couch was suddenly disturbed as Bruce's cell phone started ringing. It startled him awake, and he found it hard to juggle holding onto Lenorah (he had this odd urge to not let go) and dig it out of his pocket.

"Alfred..." he growled into the phone.

Lenorah wiggled free before he got too into his conversation, which earned her a grumpy pouty look. But a girl cannot very well ignore her bladder when it calls out for attention. Returning to the living room a few minutes later, she found him standing and waiting for her.

"I have to go. She's back at it again."

Lenorah's eyes narrowed slightly at this news, but she nodded.

"I'll take care of things this time - because I want to be back here before it's too late tonight."

"You think you'll get a reward or something?"

"No..that's not..I...it just felt good being here again." Bruce felt his face growing hot.

"Wow, you have to totally relearn when I'm teasing you...and it took you a while to train that skill the first time." Lenorah's grin was slightly devious.

"I won't be gone long."

"I'll be here."

A quick kiss and he was out the door. Lenorah dashed into her closet for the items she had picked up on her other shopping trip that morning. She was most likely crazy for thinking about doing this, as she hadn't really worked out the three weeks she had been gone, but she was going through with it anyway. The gymnastics classes she had taken in school, with the boxing club from college had to pay off somehow. And tonight they were going to be put to the test - along with a new red leather outfit.

Lenorah knew she did not want to make a habit of this, she preferred to stay behind and provide support from the "Batcave" (Bruce had not liked her naming his underground lair...but she had not been able to resist) on the few occasions he allowed her to help. This time though, she would be taking a much more active role. Dark red leather covered her, but showed off every curve. She would be fighting fire with fire, except she was not stupid enough to run around in heeled boots. A specialty shoe shop that catered to different tastes had had the perfect pair of combat boot looking things in the window as she had walked past - and she knew they would be the perfect addition to the picture she had in her brain. A red skeletal looking mask finished off her ensemble, something a theater major friend had given her in college. Slightly cheesy perhaps, but she had always loved the Red Death costume in *The Phantom of the Opera*. And that was what she had decided to become on her one (and only she hoped) trip into the vigilante justice side of Gotham City.

She braided her hair and wrapped it around her head before donning a hood that cast a bit of a shadow over her face. Now the only thing left to do was to be in contact with Alfred to find out where he had gone...with the hope that she did not have to explain to him why she needed the information. One word from Alfred and she would finish talking herself out of this crazy ass idea, and she did not want to waste the outfit on her empty apartment. That did not end up happening - as Alfred saw right through her flimsy excuses, and was more than happy to direct her to where Batman and his prey were last known to be. It was not too far away from her own building (what that devious cat bitch had with her neighborhood Lenorah did not know - but this was the last time she would see it) so she would actually be able to get to the area just traveling across the rooftops.

Fifteen minutes and a few rooftops later, Lenorah found herself spectator to another confrontation between costumed mammals. Catwoman was wearing even less than the night she had appeared on Lenorah's roof - something Lenorah had no idea how she pulled off. Sure it might work on most men...but honestly - having your tits and ass hanging out all over the place was not a good look. Even the hookers Lenorah had seen one spring break in college had been better dressed. It made her feel down right modest to tell the truth. An evil grin formed behind the mask. She had no idea what Bruce was waiting for, but if he was going to hesitate to take action a few more minutes, she would be able to move into position behind the woman.

Getting to the rooftop they were both on was a bit tricky, but she managed to cross a rather convenient beam a little ways down. It was harder to move stealthily in the half light of

dusk, but she hoped she did not screw up too bad. He would most likely notice her since he was facing the direction she would be coming from, and she could only hope her quarry remained oblivious to her presence. Unless the woman could smell like her name sake, Lenorah figured she was relatively safe from detection. She was finally close enough to hear what was being said.

"Oh, Batsie dearest, why do we keep up this little game? We both know you aren't going to do anything to me. You haven't in the past few weeks, and tonight won't be any different."

"This time, you're wrong. This needs to end."

"We could be the perfect pair you know. The offer still stands."

"Sorry, not interested."

Bruce's eyes flickered towards the figure in red slowly approaching from behind Catwoman. She had never had a partner before was the first thought to go through his head, but it made no sense that Catwoman's partner would be sneaking up from behind...the other person would be better served attempting to sneak up on him. The confusion doubled when the person in red raised a finger to the lips of the mask they wore. Since when did he have anyone here to help him? He worked alone dammit! He did not need yet another misguided citizen thinking they could do what he did. That had only gotten the last few idiots injured, and one of them killed. He did not need something like this again weighing down on his conscious.

"Or do you keep refusing me because there's a Mrs. Batman at home waiting for you?" Catwoman smiled a coy smile.

"Something like that." came a voice from behind her.

The woman in black spun around quickly, only to meet with a rather decent right hook that sent her to the ground. Bruce winced, then felt his anger bubble up when he finally placed the voice that had come from the figure in red - one that was every inch a woman. What in the hell did Lenorah think she was doing?

"I assume you have something handy to restrain her with? I'm afraid I didn't plan any further than beating the crap out of her...which didn't last as long as I'd hoped."

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" he growled, as he removed a pair of cuffs from his belt.

"Finishing this. I wanted this to be over, and I realized this morning that I wanted to be the one to end it. Not that I didn't trust you to get the job done, it just felt like something I should do."

"And I suppose you're going to make a habit out of this?"

"Not really my thing. Unless you think you'll need help out here."

"No! You shouldn't even be out here now. You could get hurt."

"And you escape injury every single time? I've stitched your wounds before, or have you forgotten that part?"

"No," he finished cuffing the unconscious Catwoman and stood back up. "I have not forgotten. That doesn't mean I want to see you in this kind of life."

"I ended up in the middle of this kind of life the moment I fell in love with you. And I rather like it. Maybe not the dressing up part, but I like it."

"That is a very nice look." he grudgingly admitted. "What are you supposed to be anyway?"

"I am the Red Death."

"Are you serious?"

"Oh come on. It's no more melodramatic than Batman."

"At least my face is still kissable."

"And look where that got you," Lenorah replied.

"Touche. We should probably deliver our package here."

"There's usually a cop car a couple blocks down this time of night...if they're still patrolling the drug block."

"Alright, I'll take her and be back at your place later."

"Oh no you don't. I'm not letting you out of my sight. Besides, you did promise me a ride in the car quite some time ago...and you have yet to fulfill that one."

"And then I'll still have to drive you back home and explain how you left without going out the front door."

"Who says I want to go home right now? Or do you not find this outfit appealing?"

A slight shake of his head and they were off. Lenorah had certainly thrown him for a loop this time around. He was surprised to find he was not really all that mad at her about it.

# Chapter 14

Alfred was waiting in the cave when they finally arrived. Bruce had taken the long route home so that Lenorah would hopefully consider her ride in the "Batmobile" (she was naming things again...much to his dismay) good enough. He was just glad she had not asked to drive, but he had a feeling that might come sooner or later.

"My word! What in the world are you?"

Bruce should not have been surprised that Alfred had known about Lenorah's activities that night.

"I am the Red Death."

"I believe you may have watched *The Phantom of the Opera* one too many times my dear."

"No, but I have read the book an awful lot." Lenorah smiled as she removed her mask. "And you may rest assured that the little stray cat is now resting in the city pound. I may have put a little too much 'oomph' into things when I hit her though - sure hope she's not mad."

Bruce and Alfred watched as she hung the mask in a small natural nook in the wall near the elevator, and waved to them before disappearing upstairs into the mansion proper.

"I take it then that everything is...back to normal, so to speak."

"Is anything around here ever normal Alfred?"

"Normal for us, yes. Now, I do believe you have a guest waiting for you upstairs sir. Perhaps you should change and join her?"

The suit came off in record time, a pair of sweat pants thrown on, and Bruce was soon on his way upstairs. He figured the lack of a shirt kept Lenorah's comments about his ratty old sweatpants to herself (she had once threatened to burn them if he did not buy some new ones to wear occasionally). She was still in the very sexy red leather outfit, not that he had expected her to be naked the moment he stepped off the elevator, but he had thought she would take the jacket off. The slightly evil look on her face told him he was in for a rather interesting night.

"I thought about leaving you a trail of clothes, but I didn't want Alfred to have to pick up after us."

Lenorah took his hand and led him out of the study and on up the stairs. Once behind the closed door of his bedroom, she left detailed instructions that when she returned from the bathroom, she did not want to see any evidence of that particular pair of sweats, and to make himself comfortable. Bruce had grown used to Lenorah occasionally taking over and ordering him around like she was a first rate drill Sergeant. In the beginning, he had wondered if she was hiding another personality somewhere, but soon had simply accepted it as one of her quirks. It was something he would never complain about, because the results were always very good. He still had not tried it himself, but perhaps some day he would attempt such and see what

happened.

He did not have long to wait before Lenorah sauntered back into the room (at least, that was what he thought she was doing) and started to rise from the bed. A quick wave of her hand and a slow shake of her head stilled him.

"You're to look, not touch."

"That's not fair."

"Sit back and enjoy lover."

"Do you come with a soundtrack?"

"Sorry, no cheesy seventies porn music for you."

"Damn...and I was so looking forward to it."

Lenorah tossed back her head and laughed, a deep warm sound that he was glad to hear once again. She started her teasing by ever so slowly unwinding the braid from around her head and letting her hair loose. It was one of his favorite things, seeing her hair down around her - so much so that she had even let it grow out a bit from when they had first met. He had never figured himself for a hair person, but he was more than happy to indulge in such. Next to go was the tantalizingly slow pull of the zipper on the form fitting jacket. Underneath was some sort of corset thing (he did not really care what it was, he just knew she looked very good in it). The jacket hit the floor, and he waited for the next step. Her boots were the next items to come off, and were not what he had been wanting.

Smiling, Lenorah crawled up the bed towards him, still not giving him what he had been waiting for. He felt as if the strip tease had been cut a little too short. Though the scene of a sexy woman crawling towards him made up for it a little. Alright, it made up for it a lot - at least that was what his hands told him when they had leather underneath them.

"I really did miss you." he murmured.

"Really? Or did you just miss this?"

"All of you. Everything - us together, the way you make me feel just by being in the room. I don't...I don't ever want to loose you again."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Earlier...I don't want you to think I would be against you wearing this more often...I just don't want anything to happen to you."

"I much prefer to stay behind in the cave. Though I would not be against putting this on here at home if you so desired."

"Right now, I just want to see you out of it."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Bruce did not need any further incentive after that, and no more words were exchanged for quite some time.

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Late the next morning, Bruce woke with a happy little grin on his face. It was out of character to what he had been the past few weeks, but that did not matter anymore. Things were back to how they were supposed to be...except he was the only one in his bed. Rising in a panic, he calmed slightly seeing articles of red leather still scattered around the room. He did not think that Lenorah would leave such if she had decided to return home. Further evidence

that she was still in the house was found when a set of sweats was discovered missing from his closet. Not really noticing what he grabbed to throw on, he dressed in a hurry and made his way downstairs. Voices were coming from the kitchen that could only be Alfred and Lenorah.

"I'm sure he would have taken care of things, but it really felt good to get my hands dirty on this one."

"And the feline is now out of the picture?"

"For however long at least. Still not sure if I knocked her out when I hit her, or if it was when her head bounced off the roof of that building. Rather anticlimactic to tell the truth, I was hoping it would last a few rounds at least."

"Ah, Master Bruce...finally decided to join us?"

"Alfred."

"Would have saved you some food, but I was hungry," Lenorah said.

"It won't take me long to fix something sir."

"I'll survive until lunch Alfred, it's not that far away."

"True. I have gotten used to you not rising until well into the afternoon."

Lenorah tried (rather poorly mind you) to hide the grin growing on her face, but was caught by both men. The dynamics to their relationship were rather interesting, and she always loved to watch them interact. She watched as Bruce sifted through the mail Alfred directed his attention to. His face was mainly disgruntled until the last envelope, at which he simply looked disgusted. It looked like some sort of invitation, and Lenorah's interest was peaked.

"It can't be that bad."

"Yes it can." Bruce grumbled. "It's Madame Turon's annual costume gala."

"Mediocre food. Bad dancing. Idiots in costumes?"

"Something like that."

"We've never gone before."

"I don't do costumes."

"I am going to refrain from pointing out the problems with that remark," Lenorah replied. "Oh...it could be fun."

"This is even worse than that stupid auction we always end up going to."

"Mister Grinch the party pooper."

"I will not be budged. We are not going."

"And if I have my own invitation waiting for me at home? What will you do then when I decide to go without you?"

"That would be impossible because we're both on this invitation."

"You're joking."

"Sorry, no."

Bruce tossed the invitation in Lenorah's direction, and she nearly fell off her stool reaching out to catch it. Sure enough, the invitation was for the both of them.

"I can still choose to go by myself."

"Any particular reason you're set on going to this thing?" Bruce asked.

"I love costume balls...and last night was the first time I've dressed up in years. We don't have to stay all night...but I would like to go."

"And what awful costume will you force me to put on?"

An evil grin suddenly appeared on Lenorah's face.

"Oh, hell no."

"I wasn't even thinking about that...though that would be very fun to do to them all. I was trying to picture you as Tarzan."

"That would be an even bigger hell no."

"You mean I won't get to see you strutting around in a small loincloth of fur?"

The look Bruce gave her was answer enough.

"Well, Bonnie and Clyde? Antony and Cleopatra? The Phantom and Madame Giry?"

"Isn't that supposed to be The Phantom and Christine?"

"Only if you actually like Christine, in any media."

"Isn't there some couple out there that didn't meet some terrible end?"

"Aside from a princess and her prince charming?" Lenorah wrinkled her nose at the idea.

"What's wrong with that?"

"I was never big on the whole prince charming thing. Unless you want to run around in a pair of tights...that would be nice to see."

"No."

"James Bond and Pussy Galore?"

"You're not a blonde."

"Ever heard of a wig?"

"No wigs." Bruce countered.

Alfred rolled his eyes and left the room, though it was a good natured annoyance with the two of them bickering about what they would wear to a Halloween party of all things. He did wish Lenorah luck, as he had no doubt that it would take nothing less than a miracle to get Bruce to agree to dress up in anything other than your average tuxedo. The debate in the kitchen lasted a good thirty minutes more. It was only resolved enough that they would head into town and see what they could find - after Lenorah checked to see if she had left any clothes in one of the spare rooms...she could not very well go shopping dressed in sweats borrowed from Bruce's closet.

Chapter 15

Returning a few hours later after their expedition to town, Alfred found himself amused at the looks on their faces. Lenorah was looking smugly satisfied about something, while Bruce looked just a little shocked. At least she was kind enough to carry half of the boxes and bags into the house, where most women would have left it all up to their other half to take care of. She gave Alfred a wink as she headed up the stairs. Bruce paused just inside the door, looking and feeling a little lost.

"Alfred, what have I gotten myself into?"

"It can't be all that bad can it sir?"

"No...I guess I'm just in a bit of a daze."

"I'm sure everything will be fine."

It had not actually been all that bad. They only had to make one stop, at a small shop run by one of Lenorah's friends. Fittings had taken just a few hours, and they had gone for food at Wong's while the alterations were made. While he still was not all that sure about his own getup, Lenorah was going to be a rather stunning addition to the party. They only had two short weeks to wait for it all to be over.

The day of the costume ball finally arrived, and Bruce found his house overrun by assistants to help Lenorah with her costume. His involved putting on a varied hue tuxedo of red, yellow and orange over a black shirt and a rather intimidating looking mask with feathers of the same shades and a sharp pointed beak. He sequestered himself in the kitchen with Alfred to stay out of the way of the army of young ladies milling around upstairs. Time was rather quickly running out, and Lenorah still had not come downstairs. Not that Bruce minded. It was not like he was looking forward to leaving the house for an evening with a group of inebriated people in silly costumes. They did finally hear the group coming downstairs, and the two of them left the kitchen to meet them all.

"Sorry, there was a last minute repair." Lenorah smiled with a slight shrug as they reached the bottom of the staircase.

"Either way, you are certainly stunning my dear."

"Thank you Alfred."

Lenorah's friend stood back and surveyed her handiwork. Lenorah was a sparkling beaded vision in red, yellow and orange. It was a pattern of flames that danced their way up the full length of the dress, cut with a rather high slit up the right thigh, with the black inner layer peeking through, to end with a flame shaped burst over the left shoulder at the sculpted strapless bodice. Sheer shimmery fabric with beaded fringe came from the back of the dress to attach to the wrists with more beaded accents in a bit of flowing wing like additions. The longest time had been spent on the mountain of curls piled on Lenorah's head with feathers

and more beaded bits woven in here and there. Her mask was a perfect match to the one Bruce was still rather reluctant to wear.

"Now, I only need to get a couple photos to keep in my portfolio...if that's alright with the two of you. We setup in the dining room."

"Of course Malorie." Lenorah took Bruce's arm and gently steered him towards the dinning room. "And showing up late will cut our stay there even shorter, so do attempt to smile lover of mine."

"That is reason enough to smile I guess."

A few shots of their costumes with and without the masks, and they were then headed out the door and to the car Alfred had brought around front. They would be driving themselves, deciding that made for a quicker getaway when they had finally had enough of the party.

"You're not still grouching over what you're wearing are you? I think it looks wonderful." Lenorah asked from her side of the car.

"No, it's just a little different."

"It's a normal tuxedo."

"Normal tuxedos happen to be black."

"Color is a minor detail. I'm still happy you let me go with these and not the other ones. I think these are a great deal more symbolic of where we are in our lives right now."

Bruce smiled and spared a quick glance in her direction before his eyes went back to the road before them. Though he had been more interested in the black suit for another costume set Malorie had shown them, Lenorah had fallen in love with the dress she now wore. Malorie had called it the call of the phoenix or something like that, and that had Lenorah hook line and sinker right then and there. He did have to admit they had gone through such a moment, and had risen triumphant from the ashes of a slightly tattered relationship. They were the phoenix, and their light would continue to shine for the both of them.

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They were not as late as they thought (or hoped in one case) they would be, which worked out well as they did not end up the center of attention when they entered the room. Though certainly enough heads turned in their direction as it was - but the masks hid who they were quite well. Madame Turon (where the Madame had come from no one really knew) ran a rather decent party. There was no set meal, simply a rather decadent table of various appetizers and a never ending bar. The next room was the main ballroom, with a live band at one end and a sea of swirling costumed people. Bruce led Lenorah into the midst of the other dancing couples as the next song started.

A few men approached Lenorah asking for a dance, but Lenorah refused every one of them that evening. Normally she had no problem dancing with other people, she just did not feel like sharing herself for once. A little over an hour into the evening, while pausing a moment for a drink, Lenorah noticed something after a quick glance out one of the large picture windows that lined the south wall of the room. She had no idea if anyone else had noticed it, and hoped they had not, but she figured she could easily get them out of the party early. Leaning in close, she whispered in Bruce's ear for him to react to her cell phone going off in his pocket in a few minutes.

"Dear, I believe you have a call."

"Oh, thank you. I'll be right back."

He watched as she headed towards a quieter area for her "call" and glanced back out the window. He needed a way out and Lenorah was providing one. Bruce felt himself swell with pride knowing he had someone that would help him in such a way. Not that he could not have just left, it was something that would have matched his previous behavior. Things had changed when he started dating Lenorah. People treated him a little differently now, in a good way he supposed. Returning his attention to the room, he saw Lenorah walking towards him at a quicker pace than when she left.

"I'm sorry love, but there's an issue at home that I need to take care of. You don't mind if we leave early do you?"

"No, I'll go get the car."

"Oh, I need to borrow a pocket again."

Bruce pocketed her phone and made his way from the room while Lenorah made their excuses to the hostess. It was a fairly smooth operation, and they were on their way only ten short minutes after Lenorah had spotted the signal in the sky. The trip back to the manor went much quicker than the one that took them to the party. She helped him partially disrobe in the elevator ride down, which at any other time would have been rather arousing. He had a mission before him though and needed to be on his way as quickly as possible. Alfred was waiting down below and helped with the other suit while Lenorah stationed herself at the other love of her life - the bank of computers. It was like a well oiled machine, and it felt very good to have it all back together and running smoothly again.

# Chapter 16

Waiting on the rooftop by the signal setup to attract a certain person's attention was a rather impatient Commissioner Gordon. It had been an interesting few years since the masked man had made his debut, and they had seen each other through the trying ups and downs that came with attempting to keep the city safe. Corruption was still to be found in the various departments, though it was not quite as rampant as it had been in the past. Gordon himself had moved up the ladder a little quicker than most, but he was known as one of the more trustworthy additions to the police force, and that was what those in charge wanted. The people wanted their city back, but they did not always know how to go about it. And so they had to call in their resident unofficial crime fighter from time to time - to fight fire with fire as was often the thought process on that.

It usually did not take Batman quite this long to answer the call, but as Gordon had no idea where the man came from, he was not overly worried yet. The masked man had never let him down before, and Gordon knew it would not start now. He hoped there would come a day Gotham did not need their secretive protector, but that would most likely be a long time off. There were those that thought Batman was the cause of all their troubles, that all these bad things happened to Gotham because these crazy elements wanted a piece of the man in the suit. Gordon was not one of them, the dark element had always been there - it was in every city. Occasionally it manifested in greater concentrations. A sound behind him made him turn, but nothing was there. Turning back, he was startled to see the man he was waiting for.

"I really hate it when you do that."

"You have something for me?"

"Something I think will interest you. Another odd one has sprung up, and I don't know what to make of it."

Gordon handed him a large piece of paper, with an odd cut and paste message glued to it. It was nothing extraordinary, looking a little like something a small child would put together for a class project. Everything except the message, that was most certainly not something a child would do.

*In darkness I fall  
In light do I shine  
I make sound, though I have no voice  
Here and there, and everywhere  
Life needs me  
But I can end it if I choose  
Children often tell me to go away,  
but still they like to play*

It was an odd little collection of lines, obviously alluding to something, but what? And why? What purpose was there behind this odd little riddle that so far meant absolutely nothing.

"There was no crime that we know of. It was delivered by hand, though no one knows by whom." Gordon added.

"Then there will be more. Someone like this is most likely seeking attention for something. Any odd happenings? It wouldn't even have to be a big crime."

"I can check. There's been the usual happenings. Might take a few days to sift through everything."

"Let me know when you have something."

Gordon watched again as Batman took his customary jump off the roof, and made his way over to shut off the spotlight beacon to await the next time it would be called to action.

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Returning to the car, Bruce immediately contacted Lenorah to see if she had any ideas on the little riddle Gordon had given him. After mulling it over for a few minutes, she had gleefully returned with an answer.

"It's rather clever - Rain. The answer is rain."

"Rain?"

"Rain, rain go away - come again some other day. Rain makes sound as it lands. We need water to live, but too much causes a flood that can kill."

"That makes sense, but what is the purpose behind it?"

"Um...I'm a computer programmer, not a psychologist."

"Alright. I'm going to stay out for a while."

"I may not be still awake when you get home. It's getting a little late."

"I'll try not to be too long."

Shutting down the com link, he made his way through the city streets, seeing what he could find. Nothing much was happening, so he turned in the direction of home.

Lenorah was indeed asleep when he finally got home, but it was still wonderful to come home to someone. Three years ago, he would have never guessed that his life would have taken the turn it did, though he was very glad it had. It was something he was very happy to have grown accustomed to. In fact, it was something he began to miss on the days Lenorah stayed at her own place. But he did not know if he wanted to simply ask her to move in, as it was beginning to feel that something more was needed. The question was if the two of them were really ready for something more - or if it was truly wanted. Those were the thoughts going through his head as he settled into bed, trying not to disturb Lenorah. It did not quite work, but her rolling over to snuggle up next to him was worth it.

Chapter 17

"So, your friends arrive in a few days?" Bruce asked over a late lunch one afternoon at the end of November.

"Yes. I've probably been driving you crazy, haven't I."

"Not at all."

"You're so cute when you try to lie nicely."

For the past week, Lenorah had been a little crazy getting everything ready for the friends that would be visiting soon. Bruce was glad he would finally meet Martha and Ralph, having heard quite a bit about them since Lenorah had returned. She certainly talked more about them than she ever had about her own family, older brothers included. He certainly wanted to thank the couple that had managed to help Lenorah and return her to him when he least expected to have her back. There was something else he was thinking about asking them, though he could not say exactly why he felt he needed to seek their permission - he just knew that trying to ask her own parents would be a waste of time. Talking over his idea with Alfred had helped, but he still had no idea if going through with it would be the right thing to do.

"Hello...Earth to Bruce. You still with me here?"

"Huh? Oh...sorry. My mind was wandering."

"I could see that, you're not thinking about work during our lunch are you?"

"No, something else."

Lenorah raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He was hiding something from her again, and she really wanted to know what it was. But she had a feeling he was not ready to tell her yet, and she would simply have to wait. Lenorah hoped that it was not anything...terrible...but sometimes her worries got the better of her and she got herself worked up over nothing. This time around, she was trying to ignore those feelings. It was not working out all that well. Still, everything else was relatively normal for them, so it could not be anything too bad. At least, that was what she hoped. It may have been the series of petty crimes with riddles left behind...though he had said he was not distracted by "work". Shrugging mentally, she turned back to her plate of food and set things aside for the afternoon.

Lenorah knew that Martha's sister would most likely have activities planned for the family, but she had gotten extra tickets to the special performance of the Silvahh Circus that would be performing one night in December for the Children's Hospital charity event. It would be a little odd going to the circus all dressed up, but that would make it all that much more special she figured for those of the group that wanted to go. She just hoped that there would be enough room for everyone, even with the extra apartment she had quickly furnished enough that people could stay in temporarily. The family member recently moved to Gotham was only a few buildings down from hers, so they were all within walking distance of each other. And as the

weather was being rather nice so far this year, she hoped it would stay that way for a few more weeks at least. Cars were already arranged to pick everyone up at the airport so none of them had to try driving on Gotham streets that they had never experienced such before.

Everything was arranged, everything was ready and taken care of...and Lenorah still felt like something was missing. She had already taken care of her annual holiday phone conversations with her brothers, all either stationed overseas or permanently living there. Though the five of them were not spectacularly close, they did email on rare occasions, and they always did a holiday season conference call before Thanksgiving. It never lasted very long, but enough to say some hellos and a few minor updates. It was more than any of them got from either parent or their one surviving grandmother. It did not bother Lenorah much anymore, having Bruce and being "adopted" into Martha and Ralph's family certainly made up for other things. She had a feeling that in the next month she would have more family experiences that she would know what to do with - and she was not related to a single one of them.

The past few months, she had really been craving family. Not really children of her own, but she wanted to be more than a party of one with something going on the side. It was not that she did not enjoy being with Bruce, or that she would ever leave him...she just wanted to be part of something more. She would never rush him or pressure him or anything like that - she would certainly take whatever she could get. She was happy with what he could give. Most of it was the time of year - between Thanksgiving and Christmas she always wanted to be part of something other than her lonely little tree in the corner and the turkey lamp in the kitchen. But this year, she would be a part of something...and that made things seem not quite so bad.

"Now you're the one spacing out." Bruce teased.

"Sorry." Lenorah replied with a blush. "Just thinking about family and how nice and crazy it's going to be with Martha, Ralph and all those people around."

"You come from a large family though."

"Yes, but not a close one. When I got to college, I always went home with one of my friends and I was always a little jealous of how close they were with their parents and other family members."

"Do you want a large family?"

"No...I'm not sure if I want to have kids or anything like that...but a little something would be nice. You know, we've never really talked about this before. What about you?" Lenorah asked.

"Something along those same lines. I don't know how well 'work' and children would mix though."

"There is that to consider."

They both looked away from each other for a moment, not quite sure of the direction their conversation was heading. It was indeed the first time they had ever had a conversation involving family, children and things along those lines. The topic had never been forbidden, they had just never considered it in the past as it had not been all that important to either of them. It changed things a little, and they both felt a little nervous now around the other...but not entirely in a bad way. Their views were rather similar, so that meshed well. It was not one person wanting a van load of kids and the other wanting none - just two people rather undecided on such a subject. That was a relatively good thing in each other's estimation. Now the only other question was would either of them act further on this conversation.


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The day finally arrived that brought Bruce some relief from the crazed worry wart Lenorah had become. He would be joining them all later for dinner, leaving Lenorah to welcome Martha and the others herself. It was arranged that Martha, Ralph and two of their teenage nieces would stay in Lenorah's guest rooms. The rest of the group would be in the apartment one floor down, while Martha's sister Genna exploited her privileges as a grandmother and would be staying with her son to spend plenty of time with her grandchildren.

Lenorah stood waiting in the lobby, under the fatherly gaze of Frank, who had a funny little smile on his face as he watched her pacing anxiously back and forth. She had already confessed how nervous she was about meeting such a large group of people she had never seen before. A few more minutes went by before the first of the black cars pulled up out front and people and luggage began to assemble on the sidewalk. Spotting Martha and Ralph coming from the second car, Lenorah made her way outside to greet them.

"There's our girl!" came Ralph's happy greeting followed by a big hug.

"It's so good to see you! How was your trip?" Lenorah asked as she turned to Martha.

"It was as good as flights can be. And the airports...I'm rather glad we only do this once a year."

"Let's get everyone inside and settled and then we can do introductions over coffee and cookies."

"Cookies?"

"I do know how to bake Martha."

"Our little girl has been busy!"

The three of them entered the building in a round of laughter followed by the rest of the family happily chatting away. It took a few trips in the elevator to get everyone and their luggage to the top two floors. An hour or so later found everyone assembled in Lenorah's apartment. Martha and Ralph, along with their two nieces Tina and Marsha, who were both in their late teens, had been very pleased with their accommodations. The others were just as pleased with the apartment a floor below, agreeing that it was much better than staying in a hotel. They all voted to make Lenorah their official vacation home - though she did have to remind them it was possible that the apartment could be rented by the next time they came to visit.

Bunking together in the other apartment were Martha's brother Leon and his wife Cassie, their son Richard, Martha's other sister Anne and her husband Taylor and their other daughter Jennie. Genna, her husband Markus and the rest of the family would be over later for dinner, and Lenorah hoped there would be enough room. She had not counted on quite so many people in what had felt like a large dining room at the time. Bruce would be arriving soon to bring the total up to sixteen by the end of the evening. It was going to be a tight squeeze, that was for sure, and not everyone would be able to eat together in the dining room.

"I was sure we'd be able to fit everyone in...I must have missed counted." Lenorah groused.

"This is more room than we have when we're all at Genna's place." Martha reassured her. "So don't you worry, we'll make it work."

"This is such a great view!" Tina and Jennie both exclaimed as they stood by the windows in the dinning room.

"It gets even better at night. All the lights go up, and some of the neighbors have Christmas lights in their windows. Most nights I sit here with the lights off and just spend hours staring out the windows."

"I am so jealous. I would love to live in a place like this." Marsha said.

"Finish college, get a good job and maybe someday you can live in some nice city at the top of a building." Taylor said.

"Dad!" Marsha pouted and stuck her tongue out as she plopped down on the couch next to him.

"It's either that, or find some rich man to marry." Tina teased.

"That only happens in the movies, so you better do more studying than partying." Cassie chided her daughter.

"Lenorah...a little help here!" Tina pleaded.

"You'll do better getting a really rich man if there's something going on upstairs. A pretty face will only get you so far, and not for very long. And besides, it's always better to be able to take care of yourself instead of asking some man to take over."

"Are you girls taking notes? You listen to Lenorah and that's an order." Anne called out from the kitchen.

"Yes mom!" Jennie and Marsha chorused in unison.

Lenorah could only smile and shake her head. This was so very different from any family gathering of her own. There was so much happy, friendly banter going back and forth she could not keep up with it at times.

"So Lenorah, when do we get to meet that young man of yours?" Ralph asked.

"He should be here for dinner, if not sooner."

"And you will be nice to him and not subject him to an interrogation. That goes for all of you." Martha said.

"Yes ma'am," the rest of the group replied.

"It pays to be the oldest of the group." Martha said in response to Lenorah's questioning look.

All eyes turned to the door as it opened, and they fell upon Bruce. He froze halfway into the apartment when he noticed everyone was looking at him. Ten new people were arranged around Lenorah's apartment, and he suddenly felt like a specimen under a microscope.

"You sly dog!" one of the young women exclaimed while cuffing Lenorah on the shoulder. "All that about school and taking care of oneself and you've landed Mister Ten on the most eligible bachelor list."

"Tina, you may 'land' them with looks, but you keep them with your brain." Lenorah retorted as she stood. "And he shouldn't be on any list anymore, as I caught him three years ago."

"Until a piece of paper says otherwise, rag mags make their bachelor lists." Tina replied.

"And only you read that trash."

Bruce watched, shocked, as the three young women began some sort of debate over "rag mags" and eligible bachelors. He waited, with his hand still on the doorknob as Lenorah made her way over to him. Maybe it would have been better to call in sick. Somehow he guessed Lenorah would not have accepted such a phone call. He would have had to be on his death bed for her to accept him not being at her apartment tonight. She pried his hand from the door and gently pulled him all the way inside with a smile and a quick peck on the cheek.

"They do take some getting used to, but they're all nice people." she whispered in his ear.

"Everyone, this is Bruce. Bruce this is...everyone." Lenorah made a sweeping gesture to include everyone assembled. "That's Anne there in the kitchen, and her husband Taylor is there on the couch with their daughters Marsha and Jennie. Leon and Cassie, and their children Richard and Tina. And last but not least, this is Martha and Ralph."

Bruce nodded to each one in turn as Lenorah named them all off, and he was sure that he would have a hard time remembering everyone for the first few days.

"We're still a few members short, but welcome to the group. Ralph and I are glad to finally meet you." Martha said with a warm motherly smile.

Bruce was still nervous, but not so much as he was when he first arrived. He just had to survive this first meeting. Everything else would be much easier after that.

# Chapter 17

A few days later, everyone had started to settle into a routine of who all was visiting where. Ground zero was usually Lenorah's place, but the other apartment and Samuel's place were seeing plenty of visitors. There was still an issue as to where everyone would fit come time for Christmas dinner. They had soon found that as large as Lenorah's place was, they would not be able to fit themselves and all the food in her dining room. Granted they did not all need to be in the same room, but everyone crowded around the same table was their main tradition for the holiday.

Bruce came to the rescue on that point, inviting everyone to spend Christmas at Wayne Manor. There was more than enough room, and Alfred was certainly looking forward to being mostly roused out of the kitchen for a day. Tina, Marsha and Jennie (whom Lenorah had dubbed the Three Amigos) were floating on Cloud Nine. All the adults were planning the menu and the "kids" could not wait to be able to decorate the big house. They seemed to be rather oblivious to Lenorah telling them they would not have free reign over what they got to do with someone else's home. The other main excitement was the circus in just a few more days. Marsha had taken it upon herself to look up the acts they would get to see - and of course she had to share all of the information she managed to dig up on the internet.

There were the usual acts associated with every circus, with top billing going to the Flying Graysons - a family of trapeze artists that were reportedly the best in the nation. As it was a dress up charity event, the other main point for the three girls was what they would be wearing. Many groans and grumbles came about when they found out they would not be allowed to raid Lenorah's closet, but the smiles quickly returned when she told them she would take them shopping for something appropriate. With the ladies otherwise occupied the Wednesday afternoon before the circus, Lenorah's apartment found itself host to a smaller group of menfolk. Ralph saw it as a prime opportunity to become better acquainted with one Bruce Wayne.

"So, no work for you today?"

"No. There are some benefits to being the boss on occasion." Bruce replied.

"Like late night business dealings with overseas interests?"

"That is an unfortunate side affect."

"Something I imagine the ladies don't always appreciate."

"Before Lenorah, that was very true. She has been very understanding."

"She's a very special girl. I know enough that I know something happened, something bad - and believe you me, I've been there. Martha and I were glad to see that things were okay between the two of you when we arrived."

"I feel I owe you a debt of gratitude. The two of you were a great help to her, and I know she's very happy to have you all here now. I don't..."

"Whether we deserve the women in our lives is not up for us to decide. I say that because I still thank whatever power is out there that I got Martha back. You're not the only young man to do something stupid. And you're not the only man lucky enough to get that second chance. Just don't screw it up again."

The two men traded knowing smiles.

"I know you're not really family, though I'm sure Lenorah considers you such...so this is probably going to be a little odd. But I've been giving it a lot of thought, and I'd like to ask Lenorah to marry me."

"And you're looking for permission from someone? Not sure if I can give you that, but if you're sure - and you're sure she's sure - I think I could give my blessing." Ralph smiled. "Just know you still have to get past my wife. Martha can be a little overprotective at times of her 'children'."

"I've already won half the battle, can't be too bad can it?"

"Now son, you've got some learning to do about women. Specially those ones that have no children of their own and choose to mother everyone else. They're a special kind, and you'll have to approach it delicately."

"Care to give me some tips?"

"Well now, you fetch us something more to drink and I think I could manage to give you a crash course education on the matter."

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While Bruce was receiving his "education" Lenorah and Martha were trying very hard not to maim or kill three very excited young ladies. Thankfully, Lenorah had given them all a spending limit, so they could not go too crazy with their clothing purchases. All items had to meet the approval of both her and Martha as well, which had earned the two older women some grumbling. It had not phased either of them much, as they could just as easily take them all back to the apartment and not go shopping at all. Waiting in a pair of comfortable chairs near the dressing rooms, Lenorah and Martha were enjoying a conversation.

"I just don't know anymore. We had *the* talk...and everything is still the same, but yet it isn't." Lenorah said.

"The talk?"

"You know...the one about the future involving kids and all that. In the three years we've been seeing each other, we've never once talked about it. And now we have."

"Oh...that talk. What's the big deal? One of you want a big family while the other one doesn't?" Martha asked.

"No, we're both on the same page of 'don't know' or 'maybe'."

"Well, that's the biggest hurdle right there. So what else?"

"I don't know. There's nothing wrong with what we have, or how it works now...maybe I'm just being stupid."

"Do you want to get married?"

"Yes...No...hell, I have absolutely no idea."

"Would you accept if he asked?"

"Yes...yes I would."

"Then, until he gets around to asking you, I'm telling you to not worry about it. And if he does ask you sooner rather than later, there's nothing saying you have to finish it off with a marriage right away. Nothing wrong with long engagements."

"You're right...I just...I'm not in control, and that scares me sometimes."

"Some things you can't control, and some you can. It's best to not worry about the ones you can't. And never let go of the things you can." Martha turned her head as Tina came out of the dressing room. "Oh, honey...that's much too short. Your mother might let you wear that to a school dance, but Aunt Martha is not going to allow you to wear that to a charity event."

It was indeed a bit too short, hitting quite a few inches above the knee. It was a very pretty deep purple color that suited Tina quite well. It also bared a little too much in the front, and had no back what so ever. It was a dress that sent a definite message - one Martha was pretty sure the young woman did not want answered by any man that would.

"That color is perfect for you though Tina. Why don't we see what else we can find in it?" Lenorah added when she saw the girls face droop a little.

"It didn't look this short on the hanger, honest."

"Knee length or tea length would be fine if you don't want a floor length dress dear. I didn't mean to sound so harsh...just that I'm not sure you really want to send the message that dress broadcasts." Martha said with a smile.

"Alright, I'm off to find more purple then." Tina beamed and set off back out into the store again with all the determinedness of a big game hunter.

Lenorah and Martha settled back in to wait for the other girls to show off what they had found.

Chapter 19

"So, you survived the great dress hunt then dear?" Ralph asked when they returned home.

"Yes we did. Although, I think next time there's a shopping trip it will just be myself and Lenorah. Those girls near wore me out."

"You still had fun Aunt Martha." Tina grinned.

"Yes, but I never knew it could take so long to find a dress."

"Don't forget the shoes and everything else to go with it!" Marsha added.

"I doubt I will be forgetting that shoe store experience any time soon. Now, I'm going to rest a bit before dinner. So no loud noises."

"Yes ma'am."

Ralph grinned at the two girls as they made their way down the hall to their rooms, loaded down with bags of loot. A slightly tired Lenorah finally made it through the door, though she still had a smile for the older man.

"Still alive! That young man of yours left just a little while ago. Said he would be back this evening sometime."

"Oh...I thought he was going to be here all day with you guys."

"He was here quite a while actually. But something came up and he had to run off and take care of it. Said it wouldn't take him too long though. I am also supposed to ask if you had any plans for dinner tonight."

"Not that I know of...we were all on our own today to do whatever."

"That's what I told him, even if it wasn't true. I couldn't remember."

"Alright, what are the two of you up to?" Lenorah asked, her hands on her hips. "Don't think I can't tell when two men are being sneaky about something."

"I have been sworn to secrecy. Though I do believe part of it is he just doesn't feel like sharing tonight. Something comfortable and a little dressy may be in order...and he did mention something about a simple shoe selection." Ralph's grin was just a little evil.

"Oh really..." Lenorah felt her face heat up, and she was sure it was as red as Santa's hat. "And did he give a time?"

"Something about being ready by seven, or thereabouts."

"That doesn't leave me much time." Lenorah grumbled.

"You have an hour. Now, I'm off to take care of my special lady. So you're on your own."

"Oh, thank you so very much." Lenorah replied, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Careful now, don't want you teaching those young impressionable girls any bad habits."

Lenorah could only laugh as she made her way towards her bedroom. Staring at her closet gave her no ideas, and the only thing for it was to make an emergency fashionista call.

"Lee, hun, you know you can call me for things other than date emergencies."

"Oh, I haven't done that for a year and a half and you know it. Somethings different about tonight...and I'm feeling nervous."

"And as I know how you get when you're nervous, I will help you. So, where are you going?"

"No idea."

"Did he leave any instructions?"

"A co-conspirator said something comfortable yet dressy, and simple shoes."

"Three years and the man is still going on about those shoes?"

"They're designed to leave an impression...aren't they?"

"I suppose so...as long as he remembers other things from that night." Carrie teased.

"Oh, trust me, he does."

"You're getting feisty in your old age woman. Okay, comfortable yet dressy - and we have to plan for colder weather. He's probably going to take you some place nice, but not all stuffy fancy like. Oh my...Lee...you don't think he's going to..."

"Carrie, I have no idea."

"Do you want him to?"

"I have no idea."

"What would you say if he were to ask you right now - if he was there this very second?"

"I would probably say yes."

"Probably?"

"I'm leaning more in favor of saying yes...I can't answer a question about a question Bruce may or may not ask me tonight, or any other night in the future. My brain just can't process it right now."

"Alright, but if I'm not like the first or second person to know when he does - I'm so coming down to Gotham and kicking your ass."

"You have my word, I will make sure you're the first person I call. Now that you're close enough to follow through with that, Miss Metropolis."

"Good. Now, let's get you dressed. Hair down?"

"Yes, he really likes my hair down."

"Makes it easy for you then. So, instead of showing off that sexy back of yours, we show off that sexy front."

"Carrie..."

"What? It's the truth. You are my sexy bitch and you love me for saying it."

"You're the only one that says it that way."

"Good, I would have to kick his ass if he added the bitch part."

The next twenty minutes were spent in good natured ribbing and closet searching. Carrie finally settled on a black tea length dress with a flared skirt with purple panels, and a pair of purple heels with less buckles (there were only two this time) than the original red shoes. Her reasoning was that they were indeed simpler - while still making him work for it through the drool. It was finished off by the simple set of amethyst jewelry Bruce had brought her from a quick business trip to Brazil. The reasoning was the jewelry fit in the suitcase better than the geode cathedral she had begged for before he left (which had shown up mysteriously in her living room the very next day). Lenorah managed to finish with five minutes to spare, and

headed back out into the living room. She was greeted by a few whistles from the girls.

"Ohh...someone is going somewhere special without us!" Tina crowed.

"I don't have to share him all the time you know."

"But there's plenty to go around."

"Sorry dear, you'll just have to find your own."

"But...all the good ones are already taken." Tina pouted.

"I highly doubt you've gone through all the 'good ones' yet." Lenorah rolled her eyes with a playful grin and turned to where Martha was getting ready to fix dinner in the kitchen.

"You look lovely dear." Martha said with a warm smile.

"Thank you. Just as long as I don't get a phone call in the next two minutes, everything will be fine."

"Must be hard sometimes."

"It is, but he usually does good on the making up for it part."

"He'd better, otherwise I'll have to introduce him to a wooden spoon. A good whack on the head solves a great many things."

The two of them were still laughing when Bruce came through the door, arms full of two rather large mixed bouquets of flowers. A kiss and one of the bouquets went to Lenorah, while Martha was the surprised recipient of the other.

"What are you up to young man?" Martha asked after thanking him.

"Just bringing flowers to two special ladies, that's all."

"Oh...get on out of here and take our lovely girl to dinner you." Martha's cheeks turned a faint shade of pink. "Give me your flowers dear and I'll take care of them."

Bruce gave Martha a small bow, and a quick wink, before helping Lenorah with her coat and leading her out of the apartment. Though she spent the majority of the elevator ride down trying to get him to tell her where they were going, Bruce would only smile and shake his head. Grumbling playfully, Lenorah stopped asking when they got to the car. He had only gone so far as to tell her it was some place she would like. Needless to say, she was rather surprised when the bright colorful lights of Wong's were before her. A confused look on her face (why she had dressed up to come to Wong's top most on her mind) continued when they were led to one of the private rooms in back that most people reserved for parties. Why the two of them needed so much space to themselves was beyond her.

"Are you going to tell me why I'm all dressed up and sitting in a back room at Wong's?"

"Because I like seeing you dressed up fancy, and because I thought we could use a night to ourselves. And...I know you've been craving the crab rangoon."

"You know me too well." Lenorah said with a smile.

The dinner was wonderful, another Wong special. Lenorah had no idea what all they ended up eating, just that everything was delicious, and she very nearly stuffed herself silly. Such habits had possibly lost her a few dates in college, but she had always held the idea that if a man was going to buy you food - you did more than pick at some bland pasta dish. Bruce had never seemed to mind, even if he did tease her about it occasionally. After dinner, they walked the streets in the area a while, enjoying being with each other and the holiday displays in the windows. Other couples seemed to have the same idea, as they passed many strolling along holding hands just as they were. Lenorah was momentarily distracted by one of the toy store windows with an animated little village scene.

"And what do you want for Christmas little girl?" Bruce asked when she was done cooing over the display.

"I have everything I want." She replied.

"Everything?"

Lenorah gave him a questioning look as he brought something out of his coat pocket, keeping his hand tucked so that she could not see exactly what it was. It still managed to set the butterflies loose in her stomach.

"Perhaps this is selfish of me, but there is something I want for Christmas. I thought you might like to share it with me."

Bruce finished off the statement by opening the small box he had brought out from his pocket. Lenorah's eyes grew wide and she gasped seeing a ring glinting before her. A deep blue sapphire sat nestled between swirls of small diamonds on a silver band engraved with viney scroll work.

"It was my mother's, from her mother. I thought the next Mrs. Wayne might like it, if she agrees to marry me that is."

Lenorah wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss, happy tears trickling down her cheeks. A few minutes later, they separated, both grinning at each other like giddy school children.

"I take it that was a yes?" Bruce asked.

"A thousand times yes." Lenorah replied.

"Someone distracted me from finishing things properly."

Lenorah's hands were shaking, both from the cold and crazy happiness, so Bruce had a few difficult seconds as he tried to get the ring on her finger.

"It's so...that it was your mother's and you trust me with it...thank you."

"I've trusted you with something greater for far longer, it seemed right. I'm sure she would have loved you as much as I do."

A few more kisses later, and knowing looks from a few older couples that passed them, Bruce and Lenorah decided it was time to leave the little street corner they had been occupying. Lenorah turned and took a quick picture with her cell phone of the display window. It was more special now, with all that had just happened in front of it. He gave her an odd look as she suddenly pulled the cell phone back out again as they were walking back to the car.

"Carrie has to be the first to know." Lenorah informed him as she waited for her friend to answer.

"You had better have good news lady, I was in bed."

"Sleeping or otherwise?"

"None of your business."

"Well...I'm only following orders."

"Orders?"

There was a pause as Lenorah waited for the gears to click together.

"You have a ring on your finger! Oh my...David! Lee...Lee is getting married! When did he ask?"

"Just a few minutes ago." Lenorah replied with a laugh.

"And I'm the first one you called?"

"Yes ma'am, just like to asked me to."

"What the hell are you talking to me for? You...you go do something I would do to that wonderful man. I'm expecting all the details tomorrow!"

Lenorah blinked at the phone in her hand after Carrie abruptly ended the call.

"Was she happy to hear the news?" Bruce asked.

"I think so. She got mad at me for being on the phone with her...and told me to go do something she would do to you, you wonderful man."

"Dare I ask what Carrie would do to me?"

"I do believe it's something you like...as long as I'm the only one doing it." Lenorah grinned as she got in the car.

Chapter 20

It was midmorning the next day when Lenorah and Bruce returned to her apartment. The only ones there to greet them were Ralph and Martha. Anne had taken the girls out sight seeing, and everyone else was somewhere doing something. Ralph and Bruce exchanged knowing grins as Martha gushed over Lenorah and her ring. Which was shortly followed by wrapping Bruce up in a motherly hug.

"You will take good care of our girl here won't you?" Martha asked as they all settled on the couches in the living room.

"Yes ma'am."

"You better young man, I know where to find you now." Martha mock scolded.

"That's her way of saying she approves." Ralph said.

"Oh...I'm just so happy for the both of you. So much so, I just have to say...our baby girl's getting married. Except...I'm not either of your's mother..."

"You're mom enough for me." Lenorah reassured her. "Just means Ralph may have to escort me down the aisle."

"It would be an honor. Just tell me when and I'll be there."

"Oh, yes. Have you thought of a date yet?"

"Martha, he only just proposed last night. I'm sure they had other things on their mind since then." Ralph said, with a conspiratorial wink.

Lenorah blushed and fidgeted with her ring. Deciding when the event would take place had most certainly not been on either of their minds last night.

"Well...maybe another Christmas for everyone in Gotham again next year?" Bruce put forth.

"That's a wonderful idea! Malorie could do a lot with a winter wedding." Lenorah exclaimed.

"Who's Malorie?" Martha asked.

"A friend of mine. She designs costumes and other unique dresses. And she told me she's always wanted to design for a wedding in winter as she's tired of doing spring and summer events. She designed the phoenix dress, in those photos I showed you a few days ago."

Ralph motioned with his head for Bruce to join him in the kitchen. Neither Lenorah or Martha noticed when they both got up and left the living room.

"I imagine they'll be like that for a while. It's best to just let them chatter on about wedding things and only say anything if they ask you a direct question. And even then, it's usually best to just agree...unless they're asking you to help them decide between one thing or another."

"What do you do then?"

"Make a quick strategic retreat from the area."

Chapter 21

It was finally time for the circus, though everyone had nearly forgotten about it in the craziness surrounding Lenorah and Bruce once the rest of the group learned of the engagement. The three amigos had been the most vocal about it, to the point where Lenorah promised them bridesmaids positions if they simply shut up (granted she did ask nicer than that at the time) and that had worked for a day or so at least.

Arriving at the Gotham Arena, the group was split up as Lenorah and Bruce had to sit down front - something about a presentation of their top contributors or some such. But the seats the others had were in a special upper box with more comfortable seats anyway, so the rest were not as disappointed in the whole thing. There was a troupe of acrobats that performed a complex routine on the ground along with small platforms and a trampoline. These were followed by a group of stunt riders with beautiful horses from around the world, and costumes to match each breed. An older couple with an amusing act involving dogs and house cats that go the audience involved, followed by the last act of the evening, the performance of the Flying Graysons. In between all these acts the audience was entertained by a troupe of clowns while the crew quickly set things up for the next main act (well, those that were not afraid of clowns were entertained anyway).

The trapeze artists were certainly the stars of the show, and kept the audience entertained and on the edges of their seats for close to half an hour. A family of five - mother, father, and their three sons - they worked like one fluid unit for all their separate pieces. And truly the star of the group was the youngest, a boy of twelve who finished off the show being tossed back and forth between his older brothers before his parents caught him together from swings higher up. Before the audience was allowed to leave, the circus performers all came back out into the ring to surround the hospital representatives and their top contributors as the customary over sized check was handed off. Those contributors included one Bruce Wayne, dragging with him a slightly reluctant Lenorah (his figuring that if he had to stand up there, he certainly was not going to do it alone). All the older members of the Flying Graysons were still up on their trapeze swings, giving the honor of carrying out the check to the youngest son.

Smiles and handshakes all around, with flash bulbs from far too many cameras distracted most of the people assembled. Everyone besides Lenorah, who wished she was back in her seat and was looking up towards the ceiling. A shadowy movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she focused on the area where one of the swings was attached to the upper rigging. Her breath caught in her throat, and in the few horrific seconds it took her to turn to get Bruce's attention, the lines snapped, and four bodies came plummeting down - to where the net had been lowered to make way for the presentation. Reacting more on instinct than anything else, Lenorah knelt down to the young boy that had moved out of the way standing

next to her to shield him from the sight, exchanging a horrified look with Bruce.

For a few brief seconds, there was utter stillness as those in the arena processed the shocking scene they had just witnessed. Then fear and panic took over from the shock and everything seemed to fall into chaos. Lenorah tightened her hold on the young boy still clinging to her as a rush of bodies pressed in on them of people leaving the center ring where the accident had occurred. Order was only slightly restored as police officers moved in along with a team of paramedics - though there was little they could do at this point other than cover the bodies.

More officers arrived on the scene to assist with the evacuation of the building, all knowing that this would most likely be a very long night. Commissioner Gordon arrived on the scene fifteen minutes later, and soon set about questioning those on the arena floor and sending a crew up to investigate the rigging in the ceiling. Bruce and Lenorah had moved into a cleared area of the stands with the boy, knowing they would have to wait around for the police to talk to all of them. Bruce had handed his keys over to Taylor so that he could help take the rest of their group home. Lenorah quietly assured them they would be fine, and would catch a cab back to the apartment when they were allowed to leave.

Gordon knew he would most likely not be able to get much out of the youngest Grayson that evening, and he was glad that Bruce and Lenorah had taken it upon themselves to care for the child. He remembered an evening once before when he had comforted a young boy who had witnessed a similar event, and he knew of no one better to understand the boy's pain than Bruce Wayne. All that was left was to interview the performers and crew of the circus and see what any of them might know. It could have been as simple as an accident, but the cut ends of the trapeze wires said otherwise. Something foul had happened, and it was up to him to find out who had done it and why. He was standing in the center of the performance ring staring up at the ceiling when Lenorah approached him.

"Commissioner?"

"Miss Sorris."

"There were men up there, I couldn't tell what they looked like, but I saw people up there before it happened."

"The ends of the wires were cut, so this certainly was not an accident."

"Why would someone do something like this?" she asked, her voice cracked and tired.

"All my years on the force and I have never had a good answer to that question."

"What will happen to the boy?"

"Family services will decide that now. He has no other living family."

"Do you think they would let him stay with us? I'd hate to think of him being shuttled off to a center or crowded foster home for the night."

"Being as it's Mr. Wayne, I think they would allow it. I will certainly do all I can to help."

"Thank you."

The woman from family services, when she finally managed to make it in through all the traffic leaving the arena, had no problems with Bruce fostering the boy for the next few days at least while his family's murders were investigated. Longer than that she could not say right then, as things would have to go through the system as with any other child without family, but she had been more than happy that someone was willing to take him in right then. Lenorah she had not been too sure about right at first, but seeing how the boy gravitated towards her when she

was near helped with that end of things. Knowing that she was engaged to Mr. Wayne seemed to help a bit also. Commissioner Gordon had stepped in as well stating the boy as a witness needed to be with someone he trusted. That had sealed the deal.

Two hours later, they were finally able to leave, after gathering a few items from the trailer the Grayson family had been living in. Mainly clothing, with the assurance that they would be allowed to return for other items when the police had finished their investigation. Lenorah and Bruce shared a look over the boys head, knowing that the police would not be the only ones to look into what had happened. Though the child had said very little, Lenorah had managed to get him to tell her his name. It was Richard, he had told her, though his brothers had always called him Dick. Hand in hand, with Bruce close behind, they climbed into a cab and set off to Lenorah's apartment to retrieve Bruce's car.

Chapter 22

Lenorah dashed upstairs to get the car keys, and a few items she would need to stay a few nights away from home (though she had plenty of things living in a spare room at Wayne Manor already). It took a few minutes to assure everyone that things were as well as they could be and that she would keep them updated as they learned more. She was soon on her way back down to the parking garage complete with a bag of cookies Martha had insisted she take for young Richard. Settling into the car, Dick nibbled half heartedly at one of the Christmas cookies - but he had polished the whole bag off by the time they had reached Wayne Manor. Alfred stood waiting for them at the entrance, having seen everything on the news.

"Welcome to Wayne Manor, young Master Grayson. There is a room upstairs all prepared for you, and I dare say you must be a little hungry."

Dick nodded, half hidden away behind Lenorah's skirt.

"Alfred makes the best grilled cheese sandwiches. Do you like grilled cheese?" Lenorah asked, answered by another small nod. "I like mine with tomato soup, so I can dip my sandwich in it and make a mess of myself."

"Soup and sandwiches it shall be. Shouldn't take me too long." Alfred replied with a warm smile.

"Why don't you and I go up and see your room, would you like that?" Lenorah asked the boy standing beside her.

"Yes ma'am." came the timid reply.

"Then away we go."

Lenorah smiled reassuringly as she led Dick upstairs to one of the guest rooms across from her favorite green room. The one Alfred had gotten ready for their young guest was done in tans and reds, with a nice large bed (perfect for jumping on) and plenty of pillows.

"This is my room?" Dick asked in a quiet voice.

"It certainly is. You have your own bathroom right through there, and I do believe this bed is perfectly made for jumping on. Though don't tell anyone I said that."

"I've never had a room of my own before. The trailers were always too small."

"You still had fun though, didn't you?"

A ghost of a smile appeared on his tired face. "My brothers and I would sit in the back and play games when we were on the road between shows."

They were interrupted by the grumbling of an empty stomach, and Lenorah smiled as Dick blushed slightly and looked at the floor.

"Will you be alright for a few minutes? I need to change, and then we can go down to dinner. I'll be in the room right across the hall."

Dick nodded and stared at the room before him again, with large eyes that were not

seeing much right then. He felt safe and protected, but still, it was not the same. It was not home. These people were not his family. But so far they had been nice to him, and had not treated him like a little kid, and he thought he could grow to like Miss Lenorah very much. There was still a blanket of shock covering him though, and he mostly felt as if it was all a bad dream and he would wake up and find everything was as it should be. Looking down at himself, he saw he was still wearing his performance costume, and he could not bear to see the familiar red, yellow and green outfit any longer. It was hastily taken off, and shoved with little ceremony under the bed. A drab pair of sweats were on top of the bag he opened, and like a robot he pulled them on. Turning towards the soft knock at the door, he joined Lenorah in the hall and followed her back downstairs. Dinner was quiet, but still good, though Dick found it hard to eat. They did not push him, and shortly through the not quite eaten meal Lenorah helped him back upstairs to his room.

"Try and get some rest dear. Bruce and I will be right down the hall if you need us for anything. Don't hesitate to come get us or anything like that okay?"

"Okay." Dick stepped into the room, but turned back before Lenorah left. "Thank you, Miss Lenorah."

"You're welcome. We'll get through this together alright? I know it must be hard, but you're not alone Dick."

"I know...I just...I just miss them. My mom always read us all a story after dinner. It was our together time."

"Would you...would you like me to read you something?"

"Could you?"

"You betcha. Do you have a favorite story you'd like to hear?"

Dick shook his head. He just did not want to be alone right then, so he did not care what she read, just as long as she was in the room.

"Tell you what, I'll go down to the library and see what I can find while you get ready for bed. Sound good?" Lenorah asked.

"Yeah."

Lenorah left to raid the library. She was pretty sure that Bruce had a few volumes of fairy tales and other folk tales if she remembered correctly. She just had to hope that he had one with her favorite little tale in it. *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* had always been her favorite story, and she had a feeling that the message it put forth would help Dick. It tore her heart in many pieces knowing what he was going through - but she had never experienced his exact pain. Bruce had, and hopefully he would be able to help the boy. Yet, it could be seen as slightly morbid...perhaps another story?

"Lenorah?" Bruce asked from the doorway.

"I'm trying to decide if my favorite story is too morbid for Dick...but I also can't think of another one that isn't dark in some way."

"The world is dark. He has seen that today. We can't hide what the world is from him."

"I don't want to cause him more pain right now though. He's been through enough today."

"What's the story then?"

"*The Steadfast Tin Soldier.*"

"The message behind it is good."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Would you like to join us?"

Bruce did join them, and they all sat on the bed in Dick's room while Lenorah shared her favorite story with them. She thought at times about some on the fly edits, but in the end she left nothing out. Dick was not a baby, nor was he made of glass, but she still did not wish to make him feel worse.

"Do you think it's true?" Dick asked as she closed the book.

"That what is true?"

"That people still love after...after they're gone? Just like the soldier and the dancer."

"I am most certain that they do." Bruce answered.

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive. I lost my parents when I was about your age. Though they were gone, I knew they were watching me - that they're still watching me."

"And my family is watching me?"

"Yes, and a part of them will always be with you."

Dick nodded, his eyelids drooping, and settled further into the pillows piled up on the bed. The events of the day, and the late hour were finally catching up with him and sleep was worming its way to his rather heavy eyelids. They soon closed, and he drifted off, to what Lenorah hoped was an untroubled sleep.

Chapter 23

Lenorah woke a few hours later after what she assumed was a troubling dream. Thankfully she had no memory of what it was, just that odd feeling that you have when you know you were just dreaming and it probably was not anything nice. Bruce was still asleep beside her, and she carefully got up from the bed to avoid waking him, as he had come to bed much later than she had. Pulling on an over sized hooded sweatshirt that some would have said clashed horribly with her pajama pants and well worn t-shirt, she made her way down the hall to check on Dick. The door was open when she arrived, and the boy was no where to be found inside. The anthology of stories she had read from earlier was also missing from the room, so she assumed she would find Dick somewhere in the house.

The floors were a tad chilly against her bare feet. As she generally hated wearing socks and shoes when she was home (in either place, hers or Bruce's), Lenorah was used to it. Quietly making her way through the house, she noticed a light coming from under the library door. She figured it was as good a place as any to start looking. And it turned out she did not have to search any other rooms, as Dick was curled up on one of the couches with the book tucked under his chin. He stirred and opened his eyes as she covered him with a blanket from the back of a chair.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you." Lenorah said softly.

"I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. So I went exploring."

"This is one of my favorite rooms in this house. I always love a good library."

"I've never seen so many books in one house before. We all shared things in the circus, because no one had room for a lot of things in their trailers." Dick sat up so Lenorah could join him on the couch. "Do you think they'll let me get my things today?"

"It's a little early for me to call, but in a couple hours we'll give Commissioner Gordon a call and find out, okay?"

Dick nodded, though it quickly ended as a slight rumbling noise broke the short silence.

"I do believe someone might be a little hungry." Lenorah nudged him with her elbow.

"Maybe a little."

"Come on, let's go raid the kitchen."

Dick followed her down the hall, glad that she knew the way. He did not remember much of the layout of the house from last night, just enough as to where his room was after the stairs were located. The library had been rather easy to find, as it was directly to the left when you stepped off the main stairs. And that had been as far as he had gotten with his explorations that morning. It was certainly the grandest house he had ever been in, and it was a little overwhelming. Reaching the kitchen, Dick pulled a stool up to the large center island where Lenorah had set to work making something that she told him was her special scrambled egg

surprise. That had earned her a wary look, but it soon began to smell rather good, and his stomach reminded him he had not eaten a great deal the day before.

Soon, a plate was set before him with a large helping of egg surprise, and some toast - and more types of jam and jelly than he had ever seen in one location before. It looked like there was enough there he could eat toast all morning and still have some jelly flavors left to try. Neither of them said much as they ate their early breakfast. He did not know if it was because he was really hungry, or if Lenorah's egg surprise thing was really that good, but he was through his second plate before he knew it.

"You were hungry." Lenorah grinned as she gathered up their dirty dishes.

"That was really good."

"Thank you, though I'm no where near as good a cook as Alfred or my friend Martha, but people won't starve around me at least."

A ring from the pocket of her sweatshirt interrupted her. It was a number she did not recognize, but it was most likely either the police or family services calling. Though she had to wonder what was so important they were calling at six thirty in the morning (followed by a quick thought of what the hell she herself was doing up so early).

"Hello?...Yes Mrs. Harris, everything is fine...No, Mr. Wayne is here at the house...Um, ma'am, it is rather early in the morning, and we were all up late last night. That could have something to do with why he has not yet answered his phone...I will have him call you when he's up and about...Yes, as soon as possible. Thank you Mrs. Harris."

Lenorah shook her head as she slid her cell phone shut. It was apparently not a matter of life or death, or Mrs. Harris would most likely have left the message with her to give to Bruce later. At least, that was what she hoped was the case. Looking over, she saw a worried look on Dick's face.

"Oh, don't worry hun. I'm sure it's just some forgotten paperwork she needs to have filled out."

"They won't...they won't put me in a home or...or a shelter...will they?"

"I don't know Dick, but Bruce and I will do all that we can to allow you to live where you want, even if it's not with us."

Dick climbed down from his stool and wrapped her waist in a hug. That was how Alfred found them when he entered the kitchen a few minutes later.

"I see there were mice in the kitchen. Ones with a fondness for eggs and toast."

"Sorry, I was just getting ready to clean up." Lenorah answered.

"I have cleaned up after many such mice attacks, why don't you show young Master Grayson the house?"

"Are you sure Alfred, I can clean up after myself. It won't take me long."

"Nonsense. Can't have the future lady of the house doing the dishes."

"Alfred..."

"Shoo, off with you."

Shaking her head with a smile, Lenorah led Dick from the room. They started with the main floor of the house, seeing the large living room, family room and other rooms for more public entertaining. She had "carefully" shown him the fun one could have with stockinged feet and the ballroom floor. This kept them occupied for quite some time, with Dick adding in some acrobatic moves from time to time. It gave Lenorah an idea for the little used space above the

garage - perhaps some tumbling mats could be brought in and turn it into a tumbling or workout space if Dick ended up staying with them. She was not sure what she could do for more daring acrobatics, but at least he would be able to do a part of what made him himself. A blush hit her cheeks when she realized she was planning changes to Wayne Manor already and she was not yet mistress of anything.

After the fun of the ballroom, they explored each and every bedroom, save Bruce's and Alfred's, finishing off the tour with a trip to the massive attic space. Since the fire, it was mostly empty, as there was little accumulated yet again to fill it. Dick immediately took to the empty space, and raced from one end to the other seeing what he could see from each of the small windows.

"That's a huge yard!" Dick exclaimed as he returned to where Lenorah was waiting.

"We can explore some of it this afternoon if you like. But I need to make that phone call, if you still want me to."

"Oh...yeah. I guess that would be a good idea."

They headed back down out of the attic, and took a seat at the top of the main stairs. Dick tucked his knees under his chin while he waited as Lenorah dialed the number Commissioner Gordon had given her the night before. As much as he wanted his few belongings with him, he did not know if he was truly looking forward to going back to the circus trailer.

"Commissioner, it's Lenorah Sorriss...We're all doing well sir, all things considered...Dick wanted to know if it would be possible to get more of his things, if you were done with that part of the investigation."

Lenorah's conversation with Gordon continued, but Dick slowly tuned it out. He tried to bring to mind the smiling faces of his parents, but all he could see was the events of the night before. No matter how tightly he closed his eyes, it was all he could see. Trying to force his mind elsewhere, another memory came up, of something that had happened the night before the performance in Gotham City. He had been outside, though it was late and he should have been inside. He knew his parents would start to worry soon, but voices from the next trailer over caught his attention. Carefully, he made his way over to the owner's trailer so that he could hear better.

"You've fallen behind on your payments, and that makes the boss mad."

"There was no agreement, as I have told you and those before you many times. I refused to pay that man, and I will keep doing that."

"You'd best be rethinking your position on that. You want to keep this circus running smoothly, you'll pay up and make good."

"Get out of here, before I call the police."

"The boss does not take kindly to threats. This is your last warning."

With a gasp, Dick's eyes flew open, startling Lenorah.

"I need to talk to him!" he demanded.

"Commissioner, Dick would like to speak with you."

Lenorah handed over her phone, and listened as Dick told his tale of the men he had over heard. It sounded much like a mob boss had been trying to extort from the circus owner - but who and why? She would most certainly let Bruce know, this was something they would

have to look into. It could be a small time crook, or something bigger. Either way, it was a starting point at least. It would not take long to track down who it was. Dick finished his conversation and returned Lenorah's phone to her. A few more words with Commissioner Gordon and the whole event was concluded. They would be able to retrieve Dick's belongings that afternoon.

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Bruce woke to an empty bed, a situation he was well used to as Lenorah always seemed to wake earlier than him. No matter how late either of them managed to get to sleep. He had no idea how she managed to function on as little sleep as she seemed to get, but somehow she did. Stretching, he slowly made his way down the hall and came upon Lenorah and Dick sitting at the top of the stairs. Holding back, he leaned against the wall just enjoying the scene. He had never figured himself a true family type, but seeing them there together made him wish it would always be so.

"Do you think he's going to stand there staring at us all day?"

Pulled from his musings by Lenorah's voice, he smiled and moved forward to join them.

"You need to call Miss Harris. And Dick and I will be going to collect his things this afternoon, if you can join us."

"Well, good morning to you too."

"Good morning." Lenorah and Dick chorused together.

"What have you two been up to?"

"We had a tour of the house, after we raided the kitchen."

"Scrambled surprise - and I missed it?"

"You're the one who always sleeps late." Lenorah teased.

"Dick, a piece of advice - stay away from girls. They're mean and nothing but trouble."

"I am not." Lenorah cried in mock dismay.

"Miss Lenorah is very nice. I like her." Dick replied.

"Well, at least someone wants me around."

# Chapter 24

Bruce sighed as he ended the call with Mrs. Harris. It was going to be a bit of a struggle, and about an afternoon's worth of paperwork, to allow Dick to stay with them for even a few days. The boy had been through enough, he did not need to be taken to yet another strange place and forced to be around even more people he did not know. Dick at least felt comfortable enough around them, and he needed some sort of stability right now being just a day since his family had been killed. The only thing for it was another phone call, and getting the Wayne Enterprises legal team moving on other options that might be available to them. There had to be something they could do to work with the system and still be able to do what was best for Dick at that moment. He would not settle for anything less.

The night before, he had relived his own terrible memories in the chaos of the moment. They had been quickly shoved to the back of his mind, but seeing the look on Dick's face had made it hard not to remember that it had been him all those years ago - and he had nearly wished a Lenorah had been there for him. But she was here for him now, and together the two of them would be there for Dick, no matter what happened. It was going to be another long day, as he would be working well into the night trying to figure out who had orchestrated the deaths of the Flying Graysons. Whatever sick mind was behind this would not be free much longer to do so again - that much he would see to.

Bruce looked up as Lenorah poked her head into his study.

"So...what did Mrs. Harris need you for?"

"We're going to have a bit of a fight on our hands. Seems a few people she answers to were not all that happy that Dick is staying here. I don't know what the problem is, but I'm going to be working on that today."

"They're not going to take him away are they? I mean...I know I have no right to be so attached to him so soon...but to put him somewhere new, with people who may not be quite as understanding...it just makes no sense."

"I know, and I'm getting the company legal team going on it and find out if there's something we can work out for the short term at least."

"Another thing, for later - Dick remembered some rough types harassing the circus owner the night before the performance. Sounded like mob types, but no names. A place to start anyway."

"I'll look into it tonight."

"So, I take it you won't be going with us this afternoon?"

"Not if I'm going to have to take care of family services and whatever is going on there."

"Call Gordon and get him in on it, or at least to try and put in a good word or something...like maybe the police want the boy with someone they know and trust or

something. It might help."

"I'll do that. Taking the Jeep?"

"Yeah, I don't know how much stuff he has."

"Alright, I'll call if I learn anything sooner rather than later. Otherwise, a quick dinner before..."

"Yes, we can't have you fighting crime on an empty stomach."

Lenorah leaned over and gave him a kiss before she left the room. She also could not ignore the guests she had back at her place, but would wait a bit before calling to check in with Martha and see how everything was going. They still had a couple hours to wait before heading to the area to collect Dick's belongings...and she was at a loss of what to do in the mean time. Bruce was going to be busy trying to get things sorted out with the family services people, and she did not want to be a bother to Alfred either. A nap would have been a good idea, part of her body tried to tell her - but as always, she ignored it. Dick was sitting at the top of the stairs again when she looked up, though he had changed from his pajamas into regular clothing. He looked so small and lost right then, Lenorah wanted to scoop him up in a giant hug and not let go. Then an idea came to her.

"Hey buddy, we still have a few hours before we can meet Commissioner Gordon at the arena - you feel like helping me with something?"

"Like what?"

"I always like to help out the local toys for tots program, and I could sure use a helper elf. You feel like coming shopping with me?"

"Do the kids actually get the presents bought for them?"

"They certainly do. And I know this great little toy store downtown run by a local family, so we'll be helping out other good people as well. They usually donate things to the local orphanage, and have a list of some of the things the children want."

"We'll be helping kids with no families have Christmas?" Dick's face brightened a bit at that piece of news.

"We most certainly will."

"When do we leave?"

"As soon as I change. Unless you want to be seen around town with some woman in yellow pajama pants and a crazy stripped sweatshirt. And shoes, I do believe you'll need to put some shoes on before we can leave."

Lenorah smiled as she made her way down the hall to the master bedroom, while Dick ran in the opposite direction to find some shoes. Sure, she was distracting him from darker thoughts - but there would be plenty of time to deal with such things in the near future, and she felt it might help him a little to feel he had done some good instead of sitting around brooding over something that could not be changed. Was she being too callous? Was it stupid to assume that a few hours of buying toys for orphans was a good idea that would help him? Lenorah shrugged as she stepped out of her sleepwear, not sure of anything at that point other than it had been good to see Dick animated about something. Perhaps she was a bad influence right then, but she felt he was too young to be forced to deal with the death of his family all the time right then. He needed to be reminded that things did keep going, whether a person wanted them to or not.



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The two of them sang Christmas carols all the way to the toy store, making up their own words when they could not remember the actual ones. Finding a parking spot proved to be an adventure in and of itself, but Lenorah finally managed to find a spot a few blocks away. It just meant some window shopping as they made their way to the toy store. It was the one with the enchanting little window display Bruce had proposed to her in front of, and Lenorah had resolved that she would support the little place as much as she possibly could. This part of things she told no one, but she had gone back to the store a few days later to just look around and compliment the owners on their display. That was when she found out about their donation program to a local orphanage and knew immediately that she had found her holiday charity event. Granted she gave large donations to various organizations around the holidays, but she always liked to find some small local group to help out for Christmas. The downtown merchant gift program seemed like a good one, and her mind had been made up.

The street they walked along looked a bit different from the evening when Bruce had proposed, but that is to be expected at a location between night and day. There were certainly more people about now, and many more people in Santa hats with their little red buckets. At Dick's questioning look, she had given him some bills to add to the buckets as they walked past. Her earlier misgivings on bringing him out of the house on their little charity mission faded away as he seemed to honestly enjoy the action of even just sticking a dollar or two into a little red bucket. He also soon had a pocket full of miniature candy canes that he started handing out to other children as they passed each other. Lenorah was happy to see his spirits bolstered a little, and hand in hand, they entered the toy shop with large smiles. The owners greeted them from behind the counter, and happily handed over a list with names of children and their Christmas wishes. Lenorah let Dick choose twenty children from the list that they would help.

"Let's start with this one."

Lenorah looked at where Dick pointed on their list. It was a little girl, only six years old, and she only had one thing listed - a baby doll. Looking at the small store aisle in front of them, filled with various baby dolls Lenorah had no idea which one to get.

"Wow...I don't remember there being this many baby dolls when I was a little girl. Which one do you think we should get for Alice?"

Looking up and down the row of dolls, Dick finally picked out one that came with a carrying bassinet bag, and plenty of clothes.

"It's eyes even open and close." he informed Lenorah.

"Does it come with a bottle?"

"Um...no."

"Then we'll need to add one to it, won't we."

The little boys on the list went a little faster, as it was quite easy for Dick to imagine what he would like to have and quickly pull it off the shelf and take it back to the front counter where the owner and his wife were helping keep everything organized. An hour and a half later, they had finally finished off most of the list (as Dick found it hard to stop and just twenty children and had begged they help a few more). Returning to where Lenorah was standing at the counter, he frowned seeing the box with a slinky in it sitting there.

"Lenorah, who is the slinky for?"

"It is for us...I have always wanted to let one go down the stairs at the house. I just never had a good enough excuse to come buy one before."

"So I'm an excuse to buy toys now?"

"No...having a playmate is my excuse for buying toys now. Bruce would just look at me funny every time I brought it up."

"I get the first go at it?"

"Of course, Captain Slinkyman!" Lenorah replied with a wink and a salute.

Dick returned the salute, but was soon distracted by the display case built into the front counter. Inside were older, more antique looking toys. And what caught his attention were a set of tin soldiers, just like the ones in the story Lenorah had read. He was so excited to see them that the only thing he could think of was to tug at her sleeve.

"Yes dear?"

"Look - just like in the story!"

"Why, indeed they are! All blue and red and proud in their regimentals."

"And no evil goblin in a snuff box."

"No evil goblins in this store son. We certainly wouldn't want that." the shopkeeper added with a smile.

"Real tin soldiers..."

Lenorah looked back up and mouthed to the shopkeeper to save them for her. She received a wink and a nod in reply. She had not expected the story of the little soldier toy would have made such an impression on him, but it warmed her heart and the bright box with its shiny soldiers would be under the tree with Dick's name on it. She just hoped he would still be with them come Christmas, which was only twelve short days away. With their slinky safely in hand, the two of them made their way back to the car with a happy bounce in their feet.

"Do you think the orphans will have a good Christmas?" Dick asked as they made their way back into traffic.

"I'm sure they will. And ours will be all the better for knowing we helped make their's a little brighter."

Dick smiled and looked back out the window. Today had been a good day, and things did not seem so dark right then. He was still a little nervous about returning to the circus to pack up his belongings, but Lenorah was with him, and knowing that helped.

Commissioner Gordon was waiting for them outside the trailer the Grayson family had been staying in, and he had a warm smile for the both of them. Dick paused outside the door, feeling a strong burning sensation in his eyes. The shock had finally worn off, and the tears he had not yet shed were coming to the surface. It really was not a dream, and his parents would not look up from the table to smile at him when he entered. A small hiccuping sob broke free, and he soon found himself wrapped in Lenorah's arms. How long she knelt there on the cold ground, Lenorah had no clue, but nothing else mattered right then other than being someone warm and safe for Dick to hold on to. Clumsily trying to keep her hold on the boy while searching her coat pockets for a tissue were stopped as Gordon handed her his handkerchief.

The tears slowly drew to a slight trickle, and Lenorah leaned back enough to gently wipe the cold traces from Dick's cheeks. A few small shuddering sobs still broke through on occasion, but he felt the worst was over. Nodding a silent thanks to Lenorah, he took over with the

handkerchief to wipe the rest of his face and blow his nose. With a deep breath, he climbed the small set of stairs and slowly opened the trailer door. Everything was as they had left it before that fateful night, though a few things appeared to be out of place from where the police had gone through during their investigation. Dick looked around before turning back to Lenorah, feeling numb and having no idea where to start.

"We have plenty of time, so we don't have to rush, and if it feels like it's getting to be too much, we'll take a break. Okay?"

Dick nodded and stepped fully into the trailer with Lenorah right behind him.

"Why don't we start with your things, and then we'll take care of the rest."

Turning back, Lenorah took the handful of flattened boxes Gordon had ready with a roll of tape. As the trailer was not all that large, Dick did not have a great amount of stuff to pack up. It did not take long to box up the rest of his clothes, books and other items. Lenorah found a marker in the kitchen and labeled each one after they taped it shut. The boxes were then passed out the door where a few of the circus performers had arrived to help. They set about loading items in the Jeep and bringing in new boxes when needed. Lenorah was not sure where Dick got his strength from, but it amazed her that he was able to keep going when they moved on to the belongings of his parents and brothers.

"You pick out the keepsakes you want of theirs, and then we can decide what to do with the rest."

Dick went through the trailer slowly, picking items with great care that had belonged to the rest of his family. The first item in the collection was his mother's small jewelry box. He remembered sitting on the bed with her looking over the treasures she kept inside. They may have not held great monetary value, but each piece had been special to her, and he could not bear to think of anyone else having them.

"Lenorah?"

"Yes dear?"

"Do you...do you think we could donate my brother's toys and clothes to the orphanage? The one we bought toys for today?"

"We most certainly can. I'll call the toy store and find out which one it was and we can take them down ourselves."

Now armed with a purpose, Dick took to finishing things quickly, knowing that the items would find a good home and help others in need. It was a few hours later, and the Jeep was filled to capacity, and still a few boxes remained. Lenorah had made sure that the boxes of things Dick wanted to keep, and the donations for the orphanage had been packed, and they could return for the other boxes tomorrow. What little food remained would be left for the other members of the circus to take, along with the dishes. Stepping outside, Lenorah and Dick were surprised to see that everyone from the circus was waiting outside - waiting to say goodbye to their youngest member. Dick felt his chest tighten as he looked at all the faces looking back with kind smiles on their faces. Lenorah squeezed his hand as he looked back up at her and she nodded that it would be alright.

Lenorah held back while Dick went through those assembled bidding farewell to what had been his life. She began to wonder if taking him away from all this was really that good of an idea - but it would have happened whether she and Bruce had been involved or not. Gordon stood next to her, along with the owner of the circus, and she made a careful study of the man.

She could not say what it was, but something about him bothered her, and made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. On the surface, he appeared rather normal and friendly, but something around his eyes did not match the rest of him. They were cold, hard, calculating eyes, so at odds with the colorful warmth she associated with the rest of the circus.

"Miss Sorris, this is Mr. Yennis, the owner of the circus." Gordon said.

"A pleasure miss."

"Likewise. Are the trailer and truck property of the circus?"

"The trailer is. Had to lend a hand last year when their's caught fire. The truck belongs to the Grayson family."

Lenorah filed the trailer fire away for later - perhaps nothing, and perhaps connected to the death of the family who had called it home. She would make sure to help Bruce dig up whatever he could find in connection to the circus owner and his "troubles" that very likely involved the mob.

"Can we pick it up tomorrow? I'm afraid I didn't know I would need an extra driver today."

"I have an officer with me that can take care of that." Gordon offered.

"Thank you. If you could have it taken to Wayne Manor, then we can allow Dick to decide what he would like to do with it. We have a few more errands to run before we head back."

"Not a problem ma'am."

Lenorah was sure that the red truck with "The Flying Graysons" painted on the doors would answer any questions Bruce or Alfred might have as to why it was suddenly parked out by the garage. A few of the circus members that had already said their goodbyes came up to load the last few boxes into the bed of the truck, and Gordon left with the officer to follow him in the squad car. Dick returned to Lenorah and she helped him into the Jeep so they themselves could leave. An older woman approached her after she closed the passenger door.

"You'll see he's taken care of?"

"You have my word on that."

"It's sad to say goodbye, but he has a chance for a better life now, and you have the look of someone who will care for him a great deal."

"I already do." Lenorah smiled.

"Is there...will there be a way we can keep in touch with young Dick?"

"Of course." Lenorah fished a business card out of her back pocket. "This is my number, and you can always send something to that address there as I own the building and they know to watch for my mail."

"Thank you."

Lenorah watched the woman turn and walk away before turning back to Dick waiting in the Jeep. She shivered as the wind picked up, and quickly climbed inside.

"Do you feel up to making one more stop before we return to the house? I just need to check on the guests I have at home real quick."

"The lady who gave you the cookies for me?"

"Yes. They're friends, but they feel more like family. They're up for the holidays, and we'll get to see them as we're all having Christmas at the house. My apartment is too small to fit everyone in for Christmas dinner."

"I get to join you for Christmas?" Dick asked in a small voice.

"You most certainly do, Bruce and I are going to see to that."

They were interrupted by Lenorah's cell phone suddenly blaring ZZtop's "Sharp Dressed Man". She blushed as Dick gave her an odd look.

"That will be Bruce...Hello?"

"I've got good news, and bad news." Bruce's voice sounded tired.

"Um...second one first."

"I tracked down a lead and won't be there for dinner. I'll be heading out as soon as I get home."

"Oh...you...don't scare me like that. I thought you had really bad news."

"Dick's right there, isn't he."

"Yes...though we are going to miss you being at dinner tonight."

"Sorry."

"So, what's the good news then?"

"Put me on speaker phone, so you both can hear."

"Okay...go!" Lenorah pushed the button on the side of the phone and held it between her and Dick.

"Hi Dick. You two have a good day?"

"It was okay Mr. Wayne. We bought Christmas presents for kids in the orphanage."

"I'm sorry I missed all the fun. But I have some good news for us all."

"Spill already Mister!" Lenorah said, grinning at Dick.

"It took most of the day - but Dick gets to stay with us...for as long as he likes."

"I can stay?" Dick asked.

"You will have to visit with a judge and some people from family services on Monday to finalize things, but everything is in place if you want to live with Lenorah and I."

"Forever and ever?" Dick asked, still not quite believing what he had heard.

"If you really want to, yes. Though, we'll be more than happy if you decide to move out on your own when you're old enough."

"Bruce!" Lenorah cried out.

"What?"

Lenorah realized she could not quite say what was currently running through her mind with young ears present, so she sighed and stuck her tongue out at the phone. This brought a small giggle forth from Dick.

"She's sticking her tongue out at the phone...isn't she."

"Yes." Dick replied.

"Lenorah, love, you're supposed to be the adult here."

"Ha! Just for that, Dick and I will not be sharing our slinky fun time with you. You'll just have to buy your own."

"Slinky...what?"

"Maybe if you're good, Captain Slinkyman will share. But don't expect any special treatment from me."

Dick and Lenorah could not contain their giggles, and it took a few minutes to get themselves under control again. On the other end of the conversation, Bruce had no idea what it was all about - just that it was good to hear the two of them laughing.

"Well, I still have some work to do, and I won't be home until late. Sorry I'm going to miss dinner."

"We're going to stop by and see how Martha and the others are doing before we head back to the house. Alfred didn't have anything planned did he?"

"I have no idea, but I'll call and let him know."

"Alright. We want the rest of the details later, and I have something for you as well...so don't let me forget to tell you."

Lenorah realized they were going to have to work on their cryptic conversations better now that Dick would be with them. That thought brought many more worries to the surface, but it was something they would have to deal with later.

"I don't know how late I'm going to be, so if I don't see you tonight, I'll see you in the morning."

"Night Mister Wayne."

"Night Dick, I'm glad you had a good day."

"You'll call me later?" Lenorah asked, hoping he got the hint.

"If I'm not buried under a pile of files."

"Alright. Drive safe, looks like it might be thinking about snowing again."

"You too."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

The call ended, Lenorah and Dick shared giant smiles. The best news ever had just been delivered, and things were certainly not as dark and dismal as they had seemed earlier.

"Let's go see if Martha has fresh cookies for us." Lenorah said as she started the car.

Chapter 25

Dick and Lenorah skipped (yes, they both actually skipped) into her building with bright happy greetings for Frank at the front desk. Lenorah was happy enough that she did not even notice she was in an elevator for the second time in a week (the first being the day after a ring showed up on her finger). Stepping off into the short hallway that led to her front door, they could both smell something good was going on in the kitchen inside. The warm aroma set their stomachs rumbling, and they quickened their steps. Martha looked up from the stove as the door opened, and her face brightened immediately when she saw it was Lenorah. The same warm motherly smile landed on Dick, who suddenly felt a little shy.

"Well, look who decided to come see us at last. We thought that man of yours was keeping you all to himself dear." Martha teased gently.

"Nah, I stole the car keys and made my escape." Lenorah replied.

"Will Bruce be joining us for dinner as well?"

"Unfortunately, he has work to do still. But I brought someone even better to join us, if there's room."

"Of course there's room! It's just Ralph and I tonight, everyone else is over at Samuel's this evening. We've been enjoying some time alone together."

"Dick, this is Martha."

"The cookie lady?" he asked quietly.

"The cookie lady I am indeed. It is a great pleasure to meet you Dick." Martha replied.

It did not take long for Martha's warm inviting smile to put him at ease, and Dick settled in on a stool at the counter to watch her cook. Ralph soon joined them and soon had Dick engaged in hearing one of the many tales Ralph always seemed to have for just such an occasion. Lenorah smiled and ducked into her bedroom for a moment to pack a few more things than what she had hastily thrown together the other night. Martha and Ralph were the perfect instant grandparents, taking to Dick as quickly as they had taken to Lenorah. In a short time, Dick had lost his family, but he was already in the middle of another one, and they would not let anything happen to him.

Dinner was a warm filling stew, and the most delicious corn bread muffins ever. After dinner, they retired to the living room, where Dick curled up next to Lenorah on the couch and started to doze. He had experienced a rather full day, and after a nice big meal it was no wonder he was sleepy. Her phone started to ring, and though she hated to disturb Dick, it was Bruce's *other* ring tone, one she could not ignore. She dashed into her bedroom, making sure the door was closed behind her.

"Hello my lover."

"Mmm...did you know it's cold out here? You had something for me?"

"I met the circus owner earlier today. There's something that didn't sit right with me. His eyes...I very nearly felt like I needed a shower. I don't think he's as 'clean' as he's made himself out to be."

"Still definitely a mob connection?"

"I don't know if I'd bet the farm on it, but a moderate wager at least."

"I'm not sure where this lead will take me, but right now it's all we have. I'll add the circus owner to the list."

"There's something else. The trailer the Grayson's were living in - it belonged to the circus. Their's apparently was destroyed in a fire sometime last year. It could be nothing..."

"Or it could be connected. We'll look into that. I'm not sure if I can dig up much more tonight, the storm is picking up." He sounded tired.

"As soon as we're done here, I'm going to head back to the house with Dick. Poor thing is nearly passed out on the couch."

"I won't be too far behind you."

"Martha is sending me home...I'll worry about the oddness of that statement later. She had plenty of stew left over, so I'll be bringing some for you and Alfred. And some corn muffins, I managed to not eat them all."

"Ohh...go and make me hungry why don't you."

"Alright, less talky talk, more going homey home. I want to snuggle up to a nice warm body while we're both awake." Lenorah smiled into the phone.

"Your vocabulary had taken a very odd turn today."

"I've been having to watch what I say all day, or coming up with creative ways to say things...cut me some slack."

"Yes ma'am. You have to remind me to make some modifications again to the cold weather suit. It's not as warm as it should be."

"You said that last winter - and I did remind you about it then."

"Alright, I'm going to head home now. I'll see you there."

"Be safe."

"You too."

Lenorah headed back out to the living room to find Dick had finally fallen asleep. It was difficult to wake him, but just enough for her to get him bundled up to head outside to the car for the trip back to the house. Martha followed them down with the box of food she had prepared for Bruce and Alfred, as Lenorah's hands were full carrying Dick. He was lucky he was a little small for his age, as she was not sure she could carry him otherwise. After getting him settled in, she exchanged a quick hug with Martha before climbing in the car. The storm had not yet fully hit, and Lenorah was thankful for that. It was not that she was unable to drive in it, she just felt a little more anxious with a child in the car.

She had never been so happy to see the gate to Wayne Manor as she was that night. It was only a few more yards and they would be safe and sound. She had no worries about Bruce and the Batmobile (calling it that was a great deal more fun than calling it the Tumbler as he wished she would) as it was the safest car on the roads that evening. Leaving the boxes of Dick's belongings for tomorrow, she carried him into the house, letting Alfred know of the food from Martha tucked away in the back seat. Bruce arrived home as she was getting Dick ready for bed,

and was waiting for her downstairs.

"So, the two of you had a busy day I hear."

"We did indeed. Dick even managed to up my normal quota of gifts for less fortunate children. I had to stop him before we bought out the whole store."

"Did him good though, didn't it?"

"Yes, he was really happy. And they're saving a gift for me for him. So I may need to leave him in your care for a bit sometime soon so I can pick it up."

"Something caught his eye?"

"A set of proud, shiny tin soldiers."

"Just like the story?"

"Well, I don't know if the last one out of the box is missing a leg or not...but I don't think that matters too much."

"Now...there was something earlier about a slinky?" Bruce teased with a grin.

"Nope, Captain Slinkyman - otherwise known as Dick Grayson - gets the very first run with the slinky. So you'll just have to find something else to amuse yourself with."

"Or someone?"

"That works too."

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Dick woke late the next morning, mostly due to the short night of sleep the day before. He was still in his clothes from the day before, though Lenorah had been kind enough to remove his shoes and socks just as he liked (not that anyone likes sleeping with their shoes on). Heading downstairs, he made his way towards the kitchen. Only Alfred was there to greet him, Bruce and Lenorah still being upstairs asleep.

"Good morning Master Grayson. Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"What would you like for breakfast young man?"

"Cereal?"

"I do believe we may have some stashed around here somewhere. Miss Lenorah likes to snack on it - dry without milk which has never appealed to me much."

"My mom would always give us a bag of our favorite cereal to snack on when we were in the truck between performances. Said it was better than other junk food, though we always liked the more sugary ones."

"And what was your favorite?"

"The kind with the little marshmallows. I always liked the colors, even in the non name brand ones. You got a bigger bag for less money, so we ate them a lot."

"Ah, here we are. It seems Lenorah shares the same view - bags and bags of cereal have taken over what used to be an empty cabinet. It looks as if she enjoys little marshmallows as well. Would you like plain or chocolate?"

"Marshmallows with chocolate cereal?"

"It would appear so."

"Can I have some of that?"

"Of course you can." Alfred smiled as he turned from the cupboard with the bag of

cereal in his hand.

Dick smiled, and he and Alfred spent the morning getting to know each other. It was much later that morning (nearly noon actually) before Bruce and Lenorah made it downstairs. They apologized, but one could see they were both still a little tired. It had not been all fun and games, though that had indeed come later. They had ended up spending quite a few hours in the Batcave first searching through records for more clues into Dick's past and trying to find whatever they could on the owner of the circus. It had also taken Bruce a while to calm her down when the full information regarding Dick being allowed to stay with them was revealed.

It was true that Dick would be allowed to stay if he so desired. But it would only be as a ward under the care of Bruce Wayne. As Lenorah was not yet married to him, she did not count at all in the factoring of the future of young Dick Grayson. She had moved quickly through various stages of anger, thankfully while they were down in the cave so the rest of the house could not hear it. He had reasoned that it would not sit well with her, but Bruce had not expected as strong a one as he got. That she had so quickly become attached to the boy seemed odd to him, but in a good way. Dick needed someone like her in his life, just as Bruce needed her in his. He had finally calmed her by telling her that he had his legal team working on being able to change things once they were married.

Lenorah had calmed a bit, but it had taken a while, and a great deal of distraction later on. So it had been a long night. But all was better with the new day with the sun shining through the windows. Neither of them could find Alfred or Dick, until they saw something go flying by the window. They found Alfred outside with Dick, watching as a family of snowmen slowly came to life in the back yard. They were decorated with a variety of bits of dead plants from the garden. One even had a wig from dried lily leaves he must have uncovered from the depths of the snow. Dick was certainly a resourceful child. Bruce arrived from behind with a mug of coffee for her, and together they watched Dick playing in the backyard.

"Who would have thought we'd be having a family moment like this just a few weeks ago?" Lenorah remarked softly.

"It's only been a few days, but it feels right, doesn't it."

"I just wish...I'm happy Dick is in our lives. But the way he was brought into it..." She could not finish the thought.

"I know. But all we can do now is see that he has a good future."

"And that we will make sure he has that." Lenorah's eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

"That we will." Bruce replied, wrapping his arm around her waist.

Dick noticed them watching from the window and waved, his cheeks red from the cold, but a contented looking smile on his face. Lenorah and Bruce waved back with happy smiles.

"Only a few more days until Christmas. We need to get a tree, and I suppose let the girls invade for an afternoon to help decorate." Lenorah mused.

"You know, I don't think we ever really got around to replacing the holiday decorations after the fire. Didn't see much need then with it being just myself and Alfred."

"Or myself...but we should do a little something for Dick and the others. Even if you and I are more closely related to the Grinch or Scrooge before they were lured away from the dark side."

"The three of us could go today and get things."

"And then you'll take Dick for an afternoon or something so I can pick up his gift?"

"Yes...but shouldn't we get him more than that?"

"Maybe a few things - though I do believe today we should get him some snow gear if he's going to turn the yard into a sales lot for snowmen."

# Chapter 26

What Bruce had originally thought of taking only a couple short hours soon turned into nearly half a day as Lenorah and Dick dragged him here and there in search of the perfect decorations for Christmas. He had assumed a tree, with lights and a few baubles would be more than enough - but was quickly proven wrong. The tree would not be enough, proving true with the bags and boxes now filling the back seat of the truck and some in the bed even. Thankfully there was still enough room for the three of them in the front seat, as he was pretty sure Dick would not be able to squeeze in amongst the loot now piled up. They had long since stopped asking for his opinion on things, as he had simply shrugged with a tired looking smile. Lenorah had rolled her eyes and turned to Dick as they made their way through yet another store. The only thing Bruce did was pay for whatever it was they had found and help carry the bags.

They did take a brief break from the great decoration hunt to outfit Dick with more cold weather clothes, as he had not had a great many in the belongings from the trailer. Bruce and Lenorah had kept their eyes open when Dick showed an interest in something, but only really kept note when he seemed really animated about any particular item. Lenorah was leery about going crazy and buying him everything, but a few nice gifts could not hurt.

It was late afternoon when Lenorah and Dick decided they had purchased enough things to fill the house with the look of the holiday, and with only a little bit of pouting and puppy dog eyes on Lenorah's part they found themselves at Wong's for dinner before they went to select a tree.

"This is your favorite place to eat?" Dick asked Lenorah as they waited for their food.

"Yup. Not sure what I'd do if Wong's wasn't here."

"We had Chinese food for Christmas one year. Mom had a sprained wrist and dad didn't want her cooking or doing anything to make it worse. So we got to live his favorite movie."

"*A Christmas Story*?"

"He liked the part with the dogs in the kitchen. Every year, we'd sit down on Christmas Eve, with cocoa and popcorn and watch mom's movie, and dad's."

"What were their favorite movies?"

"Mom always had to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* at Christmas, and then right after it came dad's. It was the only night of the year we got to stay up later when we weren't performing."

"My two favorites were always Rudolph, and the Grinch."

"Cartoon or movie?"

"Cartoon for sure. Oh, and *Miracle on 34th Street*. You know, we may as well have a movie marathon all day Christmas Eve. Nothings better than having a million cookies to decorate and watching a movie while you do it."

Bruce just gave her an odd look.

"Martha and some of the others will be over to get a few things ready for Christmas day, so we'll just have a day full of fun and movies."

"Can we...can we save my movies for when it's just us?" Dick asked, his eyes glued to the table.

"Of course we can. That's your special holiday tradition, and we'll do it however you like."

"With me in the middle with a giant bowl of popcorn?" Dick looked up.

"With a ginormous bowl of popcorn! And however many different flavors of cocoa we can find."

"You'll join us, right Mr. Bruce?"

"Wouldn't miss it for anything in the world." Bruce replied with a smile.

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They had a quiet day to themselves the next day, while Lenorah and Dick sorted through the holiday decorations in preparation for the decorating committee who would be coming over. Lenorah had something special planned for the mantle in the living room, which she was keeping a secret from them for the moment. She had found a set of red and gold Christmas balls, and with metallic green paint would be adding the names of his family on them. Another set of two would bear the names of Bruce's parents (having checked with Alfred first if he thought the idea she had would go over well) so that everyone would be remembered this year and in the years to come. A faux pine garland would hold everything in place, with their stockings hanging down below. It looked wonderful in her mind, she just hoped she could pull it off.

To facilitate secret projects, and gift hiding, Lenorah had deemed the green guest room as off limits - and no one would be admitted until after Christmas was over. It left the men to themselves for a few hours each evening, but they seemed to get along just fine without her. Bruce and Dick were slowly becoming more comfortable with the other, and they all settled into a crazy sort of routine in the few remaining days before Christmas. That Sunday, everyone was over to decorate the manor, and Bruce and his home managed to survive. The only other pressing matter was coming up the next day, involving a meeting with the judge and the family services people. Dick was a bundle of nerves that Sunday evening, and was not sure if he would be able to sleep or not.

"Everything is going to be just fine. Judge Tanner is a nice man, and he only wants to talk to you to make everything final. They're doing a bit of a rush job for us, but everything else is taken care of." Bruce reassured Dick the next morning at breakfast.

"Will you be with me?" Dick asked.

"Not at first, he wants to speak to you alone, but then Lenorah and I will be called in. I'm not sure how long it will take, but it shouldn't be too long of a meeting."

"I'm scared."

"We'll be right outside in the hallway, and a member of my legal team will be in there with you."

Dick nodded and looked back down at the half eaten bowl of cereal sitting in front of

him. Bruce's words and kind looks had comforted him a little, but he still was not sure if he could do it. It was simple, he just had to answer some questions and tell the judge he liked living with Bruce and Lenorah. He knew he was something of a special case, as most things like this did not happen in just a few days, but he would certainly be glad when it was all over. Lenorah joined them a few minutes later, and they soon set off for the courthouse.

The building was large and seemed rather imposing to Dick, and he gripped Lenorah's hand tightly as they made their way up the large front stairs. They had a few minutes to wait before the judge was ready to see them, and settled in on a bench outside his chambers. Lenorah distracted him with a thumb wresting match. He even managed to win a few times. An older gentleman with a kind smile on his face finally stepped out of the office and called Dick inside.

"There's nothing to worry about Mr. Grayson, I just have a few questions for you." Judge Tanner smiled as he settled in behind his desk.

Dick took one of the chairs before it, feeling rather small right then.

"This won't take too long son." Tanner put on a pair of reading glasses and readied a pen and notepad. "Do you like staying with Mr. Wayne and Miss Sorris?"

"Yes sir."

"They've been treating you right? No fights, no yelling, nothing bad?"

"No sir. M-Miss Lenorah reads to me every night before bed, just like my mom did. We're going to start reading Harry Potter after Christmas."

"What kind of stories are you reading now?"

"F-fairy tales and fables. Mr. Wayne has a big library."

"Do you miss the circus?"

"Some-sometimes. But it...it wouldn't be the same now." Dick replied softly, studying his shoes.

"And how about your schooling?"

"Mr. Bruce said that we would start looking here soon. But that I didn't have to make my mind up where to go until after Christmas."

"They're going to let you decide?"

"Mr. Bruce, he said that school wouldn't be as good if I didn't like it. And that I could always change to somewhere else if I didn't like the first one."

"Do they ever leave you by yourself?"

"No sir. If they have to be somewhere for work, Mr. Alfred watches me."

"Ah yes, Mr. Pennyworth. And he treats you good?"

"Yes sir. He raised Mr. Bruce after his parents died, so he knows his stuff."

Judge Tanner chuckled softly at that response, jotting a few notes down on the pad before him.

"You're sure you want to stay with them?"

"Yes sir, I like them both very much."

"Alright then. This helps me a great deal young man. Now, I need to speak with them for a moment and then this should all be finished up."

"Family services...they won't try to take me away will they?" Dick asked, the words tumbling quickly from his mouth.

"No son, I make the final decision. And so far everything looks to be in order."

"Thank you sir."

"Lets get them in here so you can all go back home, okay?"

"Yes sir."

Dick smiled and hopped down from the chair, racing over to the door. Dashing out into the hall, he told Bruce and Lenorah the judge wanted to see them. The Wayne Enterprises legal team representative sat with Dick while they were in the judge's chambers.

"Mr. Wayne, Miss Sorris - what you've done is a very fine thing indeed. I don't know of too many people that would just suddenly open their lives up to a young boy in need they didn't know."

"Thank you, your honor." Bruce replied.

"I understand the two of you are engaged to be married. If I may ask, when have you set the date for?"

"Next December, your honor." Lenorah answered.

"Was this decided before or after the incident at the circus?"

"Before. To tell the truth, we haven't even thought about it much really, we've been concentrating on Dick right now." Lenorah added.

"Good to hear. How is he dealing with the loss?"

"Rather well considering. He has his moments where the memories are painful, but we help him through the rough times. He's a very brave boy."

"He's been spending most of his time with you then, Miss Sorris?"

"Not all of it, mainly just while Mr. Wayne has been busy with the legal issues the past few days."

"I make sure to have some time for him in the evenings, your honor." Bruce added.

"You are self employed, correct Miss Sorris?"

"Yes your honor. I am independently wealthy, and mainly do consulting work from home for local businesses."

"So you'll have plenty of time with Dick during the day while Mr. Wayne is at work?"

"Yes, that is the plan."

"Well, I see nothing that dissuades me from making this all official. Dick seems to be doing well under your care, and he was worried that family services would take him away. I told him it was my decision to make, and he seemed fine with that." Tanner paused a moment. "You two are sure about what you've gotten yourselves into?"

"Yes, your honor." They both replied in unison.

"That should do it. There will be the required visits from family services for the first year, every couple months or so to make sure that everything is as it should be, but I am more than happy to place young Mr. Grayson in your capable hands."

"Thank you, your honor." Bruce replied.

"The paperwork will be delivered soon for you to sign Mr. Wayne, understanding that Lenorah cannot be added in until after your marriage takes place."

"Understood, your honor."

Dick jumped up off the bench in the hallway the moment the door opened. His questioning eyes darted back and forth between Bruce and Lenorah - comforted when he took in their smiling faces.

"Now, I expect you to take good care of these two, Mr. Grayson - and see that they

behave themselves." Judge Tanner said from behind them.

"Yes sir."

Bruce spoke with his lawyer while Lenorah helped Dick with his coat.

"So, over to my place for lunch with Martha and Ralph?"

"Yes, and then it's just us boys this afternoon?"

"Yes. As long as you both behave this afternoon."

Dick smiled as Bruce winked at him. Of course they would behave themselves.

Chapter 27

Left to their own devices after Martha's excellent lunch, Bruce and Dick were not quite sure what to do with their afternoon.

"So, what would you like to do today?"

"I need to find something to give Miss Lenorah for Christmas...but I don't have a lot of money to spend." Dick replied, a little glum.

"Tell you what, if you find something you'd really like to get her, I'll help you pay for it, alright? Did you have anything in mind?"

"I thought...maybe a heart charm or something. Like from the end of her favorite story."

"Ah, that is a very well thought out gift. And I believe I know just where to start looking."

The car ride was silent (Dick was not sure that Bruce would be apt to sing Christmas carols like Lenorah did) but it was fitting for the two of them. Ten minutes later, they were parking in front of a large jewelry store, one of Gotham's finest establishments. Dick looked around in wonder at the sparkling, well lit displays after they entered. An older gentleman approached them, an easy smile on his face.

"Ah, Mr. Wayne, how good to see you again. What can we help you with today?"

"Mr. Parsons, my young friend here is in need of a gift for a special lady."

"You have most certainly come to the right place. What kind of gift were you thinking of?"

"A charm bracelet." Dick replied softly.

"Very good, right this way sirs."

Bruce and Dick followed the man to a case at the other side of the store, where Bruce lifted Dick up onto a stool so he could see what was laid out before him.

"Anything in particular?"

"Um...a heart."

Dick took his time choosing from the selection set before him as the salesman pulled items from the case. He found a slightly lumpy looking heart that he felt matched the story the best. Then he moved on to adding a soldier, a ballerina, another heart with his birthstone in it, and one with Bruce's. He watched as the sales man laid them out along a chain, and made a few adjustments as to which on went where before considering it done.

"A very fine choice young sir. It will only take a moment to have it put together. Can we help you with anything else today?"

"I think we'll look around a little."

"Very good sir. Please do let us know if there's anything you would like to see."

"Thank you."

Bruce and Dick enjoyed a leisurely stroll through the store. Parsons & Co. was one of the oldest family run businesses in Gotham City, and they were as much a museum as they were a fine jewelry store. Their grand showcase displays were done by gemstone as well as regions of the world. The collection of antique jewelry was one of the best, but it was a new arrival that caught Bruce's eye. It was an amazing piece, worked in gold and silver with a wide variety of stones. The most remarkable things about it was its shape - that of a phoenix with wings in full flight to wrap around the neck. Lenorah would kill him, but he was very seriously considering breaking the one gift rule...as well as the imposed spending limit.

"What is it Mr. Bruce?" Dick asked.

"Something that will most likely get me in trouble." Bruce smiled down at him.

"Why would a gift get you in trouble?"

"Because Lenorah and I made it a rule a few years ago that we were only allowed one gift for each other, and nothing too expensive."

"Oh...that's kind of a silly rule isn't it?"

"I believe it is...this year anyway."

"You already have something for Miss Lenorah?"

"I do. But I think she'll like this one just as much."

They shared a conspiratorial smile as Bruce raised his hand to signal Mr. Parsons over.

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Christmas Eve finally arrived, and Wayne Manor was filled with the sounds of many happy voices, an event the house had not seen since it had been rebuilt. Lenorah, Martha and the other ladies shooed all but Alfred from the kitchen and set about with their various projects. It was not as if they had not already made many batches of cookies that month, as well as popcorn balls, fudge and other delights. There was just something special about everyone being together making more food than they could ever hope to eat in the coming days. Bruce and the other banished menfolk spent their time getting to know each other more, as well as sneak raids on the kitchen from time to time. Dick was charged with entertaining Heather and Sammie, Genna's two grandchildren, and turned out to be quite good at his job.

There was now an entire army of snowmen in the back yard, some now complete with scraps of fabric for scarves and other decoration. After they had experienced enough of the cold outside, the children retired to the breakfast nook in the kitchen with holiday movies playing on a small television in the corner and coloring books and other fun crafts. It was a long, busy, wonderful day, and everyone was loath to leave as the day drew to a close. But they would all return tomorrow to enjoy the fruits of their labors. Dick was waiting impatiently to watch his Christmas Eve movies, and so jumped right on in to help Alfred make the popcorn while Lenorah readied the cocoa.

"You're going to join us, aren't you Mr. Alfred?" Dick asked as the popcorn was dumped into two large bowls.

"Of course I am Master Dick. It has been a long time since I've seen *It's a Wonderful Life*."

Dick smiled and ran on ahead following Lenorah as she carried in the tray full of cocoa. Bruce and Alfred followed behind with the popcorn. As promised, Dick settled in on the couch

between Bruce and Lenorah with the bowl of popcorn in his lap. Happily munching away, he leaned against Lenorah's shoulder as the movie started. Unfortunately, he did not make it through both films, falling asleep halfway through the second one.

"Someone had a busy day today." Bruce said softly.

"He certainly did." Lenorah replied. "But we can take him up to bed when the movie is over."

Bruce carried Dick upstairs when the movie ended, while Lenorah brought out a few more gifts to stash under the tree and all the goodies to fill the stockings with. Coming back down, he helped her with the task, but gave her an odd look when she shoed him from the room after the stockings were rehung. Her last thing for that evening was the placement of the remembrance ornaments she had made. She hung them from the garland near each stocking, before turning the lights off and heading upstairs.

"I hope Dick doesn't wake up at the crack of dawn." Lenorah said as she snuggled in next to Bruce.

"I drugged his cocoa."

"Bruce! You did not."

"No...but I'm sure we wore him out enough today he'll sleep in a little."

"I hope so, I want to be there when he comes down the stairs."

"Go to sleep love, morning will be here before you know it." Bruce wrapped his arms around her and kissed the side of her head.

"I'm more excited about this Christmas than I ever was when I was a kid." Lenorah murmured as she drifted off.

# Chapter 28

Christmas day arrived, and Lenorah got her wish as none of them woke up too early. Bruce was even awake before her for once, and waiting downstairs with a small fire going - and the requisite cup of wakeup coffee ready. Snuggled up together on the couch, they waited for Dick to wake up. They did not have too long to wait before they heard small feet racing down the stairs (at least he had not used the banister as a slide this time). Dick burst into the room and paused when he saw the extra presents waiting, along with the bulging stockings.

"Merry Christmas Dick!" Bruce and Lenorah called out.

"It's Christmas!" Dick cried as he ran over to join them on the couch.

"It is indeed. We can do the stockings, and then we'll have to get ready because everyone will be over soon. And then we'll open the rest of our presents."

Dick flung himself off the couch and headed over to the fireplace to claim his stocking. He paused in the middle of reaching for it when he noticed the decorations that had not been there before. There was one for each of his family members, sparkling down at him in the twinkling lights strung about the room. Lenorah sat frozen on the couch, unsure of his reaction, so Bruce ended up going over to help take the stockings down. He paused himself when he saw what had captured Dick's attention. The ornaments with Dick's family's names were joined by two others in a different color with his own parents names. This was what Lenorah was finishing up last night when she shoed him out of the room. Bruce exchanged an awed look with Dick, before they both turned around to Lenorah.

"I hope you like them. I...I just thought...I felt it wasn't Christmas without everyone we love being with us."

Lenorah fidgeted with the hem of her sweatshirt, her eyes dropped to the floor. She was worried she had now ruined the day with her stupid ideas, and could not bear to see the looks on their faces. Had she been looking up, she would have seen the small smiles on both their faces as they stood by the fire.

"They're wonderful." Bruce said quietly.

Lenorah looked up and visibly relaxed when she saw she had actually done something good. Dick ran back over to her and threw his arms around her neck, not having anything to say right then. His family was with them for Christmas in more than just his heart, and that was the best present he could think of. He pulled back and Lenorah kissed him on the forehead before he went back to retrieve his stocking from Bruce. Christmas was the best day of the year, because when else was it acceptable to have peanut butter cups and other candy for breakfast?

Dick was busily unwrapping the small packages Lenorah had stuck in his stocking along with candy, an apple and an orange. There was even a bag of old fashioned licorice candy as the "piece of coal". Dick had scrunched up his nose making a funny face when he had pulled it out

of the very bottom of the stocking.

"It's the good kind of coal to find in your stocking." Lenorah teased.

"Oh...did I get some?" Bruce asked, looking at the slightly less lumpy stocking with his name on it.

"That's all I put in yours." Lenorah replied.

"Fine with me. I actually like licorice candy."

"You can't have mine!" Dick cried from his spot on the floor.

"I do believe there is a great supply of every type of sugar imaginable in this house - so we don't need to have any fights breaking out quite so early." Alfred stated as he entered the room.

Lenorah laughed as Dick and Bruce glared at each other over their candy. Glancing at the clock on the mantle, she herded them upstairs to get ready before everyone else arrived. Alfred had a large batch of cinnamon rolls already in the oven that would be ready soon, and the house smelled heavenly. Lenorah was the last one back downstairs, having had a rather long argument with her hair after a quick shower, and had simply thrown it up into a very messy bun. A chorus of many voices crying out "Merry Christmas" from the doorway meant everyone else had arrived. Jennie, Tina and Marsha all marched by with boxes of gifts to add to the pile already under the tree - none of them looking all that pleased with their job for the morning. Richard trailed behind them with a box of his own, and five year old Sammie attached to one leg. Marie was behind him with her older child, a slightly pouty seven year old Heather.

"She forgot we were waiting to unwrap all the presents together." Marie staged whispered as they passed by the kitchen.

Martha entered the kitchen with a rather nice smelling box in her arms.

"I made sticky buns, Ralph wouldn't let me forget the sticky buns at Christmas."

"Ohh...those will go wonderfully with the cinnamon rolls Alfred just took out of the oven." Lenorah said with a smile...and perhaps a little bit of drool. "I'll get a platter out for them."

"Thank you dear."

"Do we get to open presents now?" Dick asked, running in from the living room.

"In just a moment. We're getting breakfast ready dear." Lenorah answered.

"Heather's mad cause she had to wait..."

"You know where we stuck the extra Santa hats and such?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't you go get them out for you, Heather and Sammie. The three of you can play Santa and help hand out the presents when everyone is in there, alright?"

"Yay!"

"And tell Bruce to make sure we have the camera ready." Lenorah called out after his fleeing form.

"Dick seems to be doing well." Martha remarked.

"My first special secret gift went over well this morning."

"They liked the ornaments? That's good to hear. I know you were worried a little."

"Is this everything Alfred? Rolls, fruit, coffee, cocoa, juice and Martha's sticky buns?"

"I do believe that is everything for right now. I have the turkey in the oven, and the ham will be ready to start soon."

"Now, you're not going to spend all day in the kitchen are you?" Martha asked him.  
"Because we're used to serving ourselves and you're allowed to enjoy the day too, you know."

"Only be in here no more than is needed to tend the turkey ma'am." Alfred replied with a wink.

"Good. Otherwise I'll be forced to take drastic measures Mr. Pennyworth." Martha smiled as she left the room with a platter heaped with sticky buns.

Lenorah and Alfred exchanged their own smiles as they followed behind her with the rest of the breakfast goodies.

"Okay, help yourselves to whatever you want." Lenorah called out to the rest of the group. "Are our little Santa's helpers ready to go?"

A chorus of yeses rang out from behind her as Dick, Heather and Sammie jumped to their feet and ran towards the tree. Dick helped sort out gifts while Heather and Sammie took them to their intended recipients. And soon enough, piles of discarded wrapping paper began to grow at everyone's feet. The children all had a greater number of gifts, so most of the adults waited to open their gifts until they had opened a few of theirs. Lenorah waited with the camera ready as Dick prepared to open his first gift - the box of tin soldiers. As soon as the paper was out of the way, his head shot up towards her.

"Tin soldiers!"

"They just begged to come home with me."

"Do you...do you think he's in here?"

"I don't know, we'll just have to take them out later and see."

"Thank you!"

Lenorah's reaction to Dick's gift was much the same as his had been to the soldiers themselves, though her eyes did end up a little more watery as she hooked the charm bracelet around her wrist. Bruce captured a nice candid shot of her pulling Dick into a bear hug across the pile of discarded wrapping paper, both with bows stuck to their hair (it was tradition Lenorah had stated). Everyone seemed to be enjoying their morning, Alfred being rather surprised with the gift from Dick. It was a collection of his favorite recipes from his mother's recipe box - all on their original cards. No one had quite understood Lenorah's reaction to Bruce's gift, nor the look she had given him.

She had given him a set of cufflinks with bats engraved upon them, with two small diamonds set in the eyes. He had not yet been brave enough to wear them, though she did not seem to mind much that the box stayed tucked away in a dresser drawer. In response to the cuff links from the year before, he had commissioned a set of jewelry to match them - sparking little bats of smokey quartz with black pearls and diamonds.

"Why bats?" Tina had asked.

"I like bats." had been the answer.

Bruce was much more awed by what she had given him - a restored collection of family photographs that had somewhat managed to survive the fire. It was a large impressive leather bound album, with the Wayne family crest worked into the cover. He felt the two gifts he had gotten her paled in comparison, until he caught the look on her face as she unwrapped the second gift. He had made sure Dick waited until the very end to hand it over, and had positioned himself across the room with the excuse of needing more coffee. Lenorah had given him a questioning look as the thin box was placed in her lap.

"Sorry, I kind of broke the rules a little this year." Bruce had answered with a half smile and a slight shrug.

"Bruce...you shou -"

Her protests died immediately, and her eyes slowly doubled in size as they were locked onto what she now held in her hands. Marsha was standing behind her right then, and gave voice to what was surely running through Lenorah's head right then.

"Oh...oh wow!"

"Well, what is it?" Martha asked from beside Bruce.

Wordlessly, Lenorah turned the box so the rest of the group could see the jeweled phoenix lying within. She only had eyes for one person though, and poured every ounce of emotion in her right then into that gaze.

"When you break the rules son, you sure do it in a rather impressive way." Ralph remarked.

"Lenorah, you have got to put that on!" Tina exclaimed.

"I...I don't think it goes real well with the Grinch shirt." Lenorah replied.

"So go change!"

"I don't want to be overdressed for dinner."

"Nonsense! Show it off honey." Martha added.

"Alright...except my legs seem to have forgotten how to work."

A few chuckles went around the room as Bruce stepped over the various piles of wrapping paper and gifts to help Lenorah to her feet. When she regained her feet, she wrapped him in a tight hug, murmuring thank yous in his ear.

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The living room was cleaned up when Lenorah returned from changing. She felt a little odd with the phoenix around her neck, but it was mostly a good feeling. It was one more thing that had a deeper meaning to the two of them, that connected them beyond the glittering gems. Studying herself in the mirror before returning downstairs, Lenorah had decided she would have to get Malorie to design a dress to match. Something that would blow the collective socks off at the next charity ball. A silly grin was plastered to her face, her gray eyes sparkling nearly as much as the necklace.

Bruce stood from tending the fire as Lenorah entered the living room. She had traded in her Grinch sweatshirt for a strapless top of dark red satin. The girls had to take their moment to gush over the necklace before she could make it the rest of the way across the room. He did not mind much, as it gave him time to simply watch her and the smile that seemed to be a permanent part of her face now. It had been a somewhat long and bumpy road, but they had survived it, and for the first time in a long while, Wayne Manor finally felt like a finished home. His eyes turned to the two ornaments on the mantle Lenorah had placed in memory of his parents. Often in the past, he had felt they would not approve of what he had done with his life - or at the least how he went about doing what he did. Lenorah had slowly changed such thoughts, telling him they would still be proud of him no matter what, just as she was. A gentle hand on his arm, and the faint light scent of her favorite perfume announced that Lenorah had finally been released.

"You really shouldn't have. Now I feel bad that you only got one gift."

"I could have bought everything in the store and it still wouldn't equal what you did for me."

"We have this terrible habit of one up-manship." Lenorah teased. "Thankfully I have a year to come up with something."

"We'll be married by this time next year, what better gift is there than that?"

"Oh, even more brownie points. You always know the best things to say."

Two smiles met in a kiss, one that did not last very long before being interrupted.

"Lenorah! Look...He was in the box!"

Dick was running towards them, a small tin soldier held aloft in an excited hand. The very last soldier to come out of the box, just as in the story, had been gifted with only one leg. Lenorah had certainly not expected such, but it was a wonderful surprise.

"Alright you three, smile for the camera." Martha called out.

Turning to face her, Bruce and Lenorah wrapped an arm around each other, with their other hands resting on Dick's shoulders standing before them, the tin soldier still clutched in his hand. That picture soon became one of the most treasured in their new little family. It brought them cheer in times of darkness, which never seemed to be gone long from their lives. They only needed to see it to remember what they had with each other, and those that silently watched over them from afar.

Original Posted Author Notes

Chapter 1:

Welcome to my little story here. This came about after an evening of putzing around the house with the movies playing and a "What if" popped into my brain (after doing the happy dance when a certain woman is blown to little itty bits...but that's a rant for another day). This story is completed already, and I will be posting probably once a week until all 28 parts are up.

This story is rather lacking in crime fighting action if that's what you're looking for...and is probably borderline cheesy ass romance without me intending it to be that way (I honestly did not set out to make a romance novella). It was mainly an exercise in playing around with characters - sticking them in a box with some props and seeing what they decided to do. The focus was on Mr. Wayne and what he might do with a woman in his life who didn't have a problem with his other half. And Robin too after a while...taken from the original Dick Grayson model.

Mostly just mindless drivel I suppose (this whole author note is at least), but hopefully written alright for an enjoyable read for those of you interested. Mostly movieverse, with some comic elements tossed in here and there. I was more of a Spawn fan during my comic collecting days....so I'm not the most knowledgeable Batman writer here, but I did do as much research as I felt was needed for certain backgrounds on some characters. Everything else I just pulled out of my ass and slapped down on a page.

Chapter 2:

I know...I said something about posting once a week. Then vacation started, it's the holidays, and I figured what the hell. So you'll get a few extra chapters posted this week before I have to run off for family time. (you're free to think I'm crazy, my husband already does)

I hope I can manage to keep those interested parties interested in my twisted little romance story here. =)

Chapter 13:

Realized I've posted all this and forgot to thank you reviewers, favoriters and alerters. Bad author! No cookies for me! Glad to know you're all liking this so far. =)

To answer a few things - of course I'm still updating! The writing is complete, just me posting a few chapters every now and then until they're all up here. I'm also planning to put together a PDF download when I'm done posting to FF.net for people to keep for their very own and read whenever they want. /wink wink

I have a few extras for the story up on my site for those of you that are interested. Go to the homepage link on my profile page (or copy the one down below replacing the spaces with dots) then hop & skip through the following clickables:

Realm of Savage homepage --> [www realmofsavage com](http://www.realmofsavage.com)

Misc. Fun Stuff (down towards the bottom on the left) -->

Fan Fiction Goodies -->

Pick the link for the story you're interested in (right now the only working link is for this

story)

There's more blathering from me, a few images to start off the gallery for this work, and whatever else I end up thinking up. The PDF will go up on these pages when it's ready.

Might also interest some of you that I've started work on the next story that comes after this one...will be a few months before it's anywhere near ready since I like to have things finished and through a few rounds of editing before posting. But things will continue, for a few more stories at least...until y'all get sick of me and my drivel.

Chapter 17:

Hey hey! Happy New Year everyone. Thought I'd give those of us not out partying something fun to do tonight. So here's another chapter to read. =P

hg-always - Dang girl! You didn't have to review every chapter, but thank you. Of course shower sex isn't illegal...Lenorah had consumed quite a bit of wine, and she likes to tease people on occasion. ^_~

The villain guess is correct....though he kinda sorta disappears until the next story due to other events that um...well...I kinda sorta forgot to keep including him after I first introduced him. That was my bad, I decided to concentrate on Dick and that end of things.

Chapter 18:

There's a lot of pointless crap in this chapter aside from a few conversations. But as revisions I've planned call for a total re-write from page one, I've resolved to just post this as is for now. When I get the changes made (it honestly makes for a better story, and should have been done before I started posting this, but part of me just wanted to get this out regardless). This version of the story won't vanish entirely, I'll have it PDFed on my site, so don't panic. Probably crazy for doing so, but this could be much more than it is in its current form...and I've never been one to leave well enough alone when it comes to my writing.

That and a few things need to change before I can write the first follow up tale. I have started it, but it's feeling very forced and is fighting me at every step of the way. I didn't have a problem with this one on just getting the ideas out, and while I have a clearer picture of the next one, it's just not cooperating. Revising this story doesn't guarantee I won't still have issues with the next, but changing a few things and developing things that didn't get much time the first go around will help - if nowhere else than the mushy grey matter between my ears.

Chapter 20:

I know, this is really short. It's just how things ended up when I sat down to divide this story up.

Review comments - doing something big, showy and flashy would have been a sure fire way to get Lenorah to say no. Gotta remember our little socialite here is more a jeans & t-shirt, greasy spoon diner type girl. That...and I like private moment proposals (just like mine was) than something with a lot of pomp and circumstance.

The re-write is going rather well...and my characters and I are actually having more fun this time around. Sorry to make you all my guniea pigs on this, but it has helped - and I'm sure that if you've enjoyed this version, you'll enjoy the new one. Though it will be a few months yet before that's ready to go.

Chapter 22:

Sorry, I'm sure y'all thought I'd gone and forgotten you. I haven't, just had some other things distracting me the past couple weeks. Doesn't look like it will get any better in the next few months, but I'm going to try and remember to post once a week again until all parts are up. And there aren't many left in this version of the story. Will probably end up being a little longer when I get the re-write done. One of my non-fanfic efforts has been sneaking back in for some attention lately (darn vampires) and so I've been working on getting that first draft finished up.

Now, I know some of you might not like this - but there will be no Robin for a while yet. Dick is only twelve right now (I fudged some artistic license) and originally Robin was brought in for the teen crowd. That is not to say that he won't find things out in the near-er future...but no Robin at least until he's around 16 or so. Trust me...Lenorah's been glaring at me for even suggesting that. I know they made him a little younger in the animated series, but that just doesn't jive with what Bruce and Lenorah have let me know will happen. And those two can be down right scary when they want to be.

But hey, that means you'll get a few more Batman stories out of me...that's a good thing right? Since this one seems to be going over better than the other one I've posted here. Funny really - but probably because that one does not feature the main cast right away as is normal with most Anime fics. Doesn't bother me, I like it at least.... =P

Chapter 23:

Sorry...I almost forgot to post this week. These last few chapters are ones I haven't been all that happy with since I wrote them. But the re-write will take care of that I suppose. It's coming along pretty good right now, so should have something by summer I'm guessing.

Anywho, enjoy!

Chapter 24:

Hey hey. Only four more chapters after this one.

If it makes anyone feel any better, the rewrite is already much longer and still not finished yet. So yeah...it's also seeing some, well, massive changes to character line up. Our main ones are still there, but some of the secondary line has been replaced in a way that makes much more sense really. Will see how things are after a trip through beta read land though before I post it. Since the main vein of the story hasn't changed I just can't post it as a new thing - so this will be replaced eventually. (I know, darn meddling authors...)

As I said, this version of the story will not disappear into the ether, you'll have a PDF available when we're done here. That should hopefully fend off at least half of the tar and feather brigade.

Chapter 27:

Bet you people thought I'd forgotten about you this week. I didn't...just distracted myself with a little something called Bioshock 2 (awfully fun...just like the first. I'm addicted to these games, and Onechanbara...can't go wrong with scantily clad samurai chicks killing zombies...though my husband thinks I'm crazy cause I love to run around with the jiggy boobs on parade and lots of blood splatters on the screen. That and Lego Batman - which is too short and needs to be longer, or sequelized or something. Funnest game ever!).

Took a break from playing tonight since I went and found myself a few new mangas/manhwa to read .Ooku and Bride of the Water God - both very good and I'm looking forward to more of these two. More mature theme/story to these two, not that I don't enjoy a bit of fluff from time to time (picked up more Vampire Knight as well...though I haven't read those all yet). Now on my second Korean manhwa to collect, really like the artwork and stories in these. Demon Diary is a fun one...but I'm getting rather off topic.

There's only one more chapter after this - but the story will not be marked complete until the rewrite is all posted and such. I'm not done with it yet, as the ending is much changed thanks to me removing some characters in favor for others - as well as stretching things out a bit more so it's not quite so rushed feeling. Have to admit when I was finishing this up before NaNoWriMo that I was just plunking down words really to see if I could do 50,000 in two weeks before November hit. Gave me something that was mostly done, but could have been better...though y'all seem to be liking it relatively well thus far, so it can't be all bad.

If we're all lucky, I'll use this October to whip out the sequel story to this one in the same vein - though I'll make sure I go through the rewrite before I go and post it...save us all some trouble there. When I post the last chapter here sometime next week, I will also have the link setup in my profile so you can download a PDF version of the story to read whenever you like. Might even have some illustrations in it...at least a cover graphic thingy. If I ever get really on the ball, I'll finally figure out my Manga Studio software and maybe do an actual comic version of the story. But don't hold your breath on that one...too many damn projects, and never enough time. If I was rich and retired...but that won't be for another 30 years or so...and I doubt I'll be rich. (ha ha ha)

Chapter 28:

Uh yeah...so here now is the slightly lame ending to this version of the story. I'm stuck right now trying to finish up the rewrite. Nothing feels right at the moment, and I haven't even made it to flippen Christmas yet. /sigh

In other words - don't turn off your notifications for this story here if you want to find out when the rewrite is posted. I don't have the PDF done yet as I'll have to get this transferred to my main computer and get some images and such done up and make it all spiffy like.

I'm trying really hard to get it all finished up as quickly as possible, and not letting myself get too distracted with a Jane Austen fic I've had bumming around my brain for a while. Anyway, I'm still writing...only slightly distracted by Something, Something, Something Darkside that the husband is watching right now. =(