

SOME ENCUMBERED EVENING

by Catherine Edwards

Catherine Chandler wriggled into the lycra leotard and stretched, adjusting the rounded neckline so that her long hair fell free. Her hair... she was still puzzling over how to get the headband to stay in place without showing. Philosophically, she shrugged and abandoned the problem while she stepped into black-sequined tap pants, careful not to snag the dark tights.

"Help," called a voice from the bedroom. From the tone, it was far from an emergency, but Catherine trotted obediently from the bathroom to answer the plea for help. What she saw made her quickly compose her face. Jamie was stuck halfway into the Marie Antoinette dress, helpless to shift it either down over her shoulders or back over her head. Far from helpless under normal circumstances, Jamie was immobilized by the tightly-laced corset. There was another muffled "Help" from the fold of fabric.

"I'm here," Catherine assured her young friend. "Put your arms straight up over your... there." While she talked, she tugged, and the heavy yards of cloth fell into place. The fitted bodice smoothed out over the corset and the full skirts hung gracefully from Jamie's slim hips. The young woman let out a sigh of relief and pulled her long, honey-colored hair loose, much as Catherine had.

"Oh, Jamie," Catherine said softly. "You look wonderful!"

Jamie surveyed Catherine's costume with raised eyebrows.

"Wow - you look super! Vincent will die!" Pleased and embarrassed, Catherine laughed.

"I hope not," she quipped, turning her back on Jamie. "Are my seams straight?" Jamie gave the hose a meticulous once-over.

"They look fine," she conceded at last. It was Catherine's turn to sigh with relief.

"Thank goodness," she breathed, and both women laughed. "Here," Catherine said briskly. "Let me lace you up."

Lacing the dress was only slightly better than lacing the corset.

"Thank you for letting me borrow your dress," Jamie said with feeling. "And the tickets," she added quickly. "I've never been to a costume ball before." She fought to remain upright as Catherine tugged, shaping the dress into the proper contours.

"It was nothing," Catherine assured her. "The NYPD New Year's Charity masquerade is a worthy cause. I was glad to get tickets for you and Mouse. Besides," she added in a conspiratorial whisper, "Father believes there's safety in numbers."

Jamie laughed - a little breathlessly because of the corset. "He wasn't very happy about this whole idea." She was silent for a moment, thinking. "Do you think he'll show up to keep an eye on things?"

Catherine snorted. "Don't be ridiculous," she insisted wryly. "I bought him a ticket to keep him quiet." Catherine grew thoughtful and stopped pulling on the lacings. "I wish he would come. I think it would be a nice, safe evening for all of us." She sighed and resumed her ministrations, giving the dress another substantial tug.

"Now I know why it took women so long to fight for equality!" Jamie insisted, stepping back quickly to keep her balance.

"And why is that?" Catherine queried, panting a little with her effort.

Jamie's voice was rueful, and she looked at Catherine over her shoulder. "They were getting dressed."

Their laughter was interrupted by a knock on the apartment door.

"That must be Mouse," Jamie murmured. "Or should I say 'Thor'?"

Catherine gave her a stern look. "Behave yourself," she admonished, then more loudly. "Hang on, I'm coming."

She tied off the lacing in a small bow and tripped to the door, flipping three locks and a deadbolt without thinking about it. The rasp of metal on metal made Jamie shiver, and she hastily began to pin up her hair.

A fur-and-leather-clad Viking was waiting outside the front door. Mouse stopped fiddling with his Viking hat as the door swung wide, grinning at Catherine with delight. As soon as he released it, the horn on his right slowly sagged until it was upside down. He looked darling.

"Catherine!" he exclaimed, eyeing her costume appreciatively.

Catherine laughed, stepping back to let him pass. "Almost. I'm having a little trouble with the ears. Where's Vincent?"

"Stopped to lace his boot," Mouse explained.

"I know how he feels," Jamie said ruefully. Mouse looked up, seeing her for the first time. His mouth fell open and he stared at the vision she made with something akin to awe. Jamie dropped her eyes shyly, and the creamy skin exposed above the low, shaped neckline flushed a delicate shade of rose.

"Hi, Mouse," she murmured. "How do you like my costume?"

"Better than good," Mouse whispered. "Better than better." He closed the distance between them in two short strides, taking her hand. "Jamie..."

"You look lovely, Jamie," Vincent said from the doorway. He fought the urge to stoop as he came through the door, shouldering into the room. Vincent managed bemused looks with Catherine. It was the first time he'd ever used the front door. She put both hands on his shoulder and stretched up to peck him lightly on the cheek. He turned and caught her kiss on his lips, curving an arm around her waist.

"Hi, Honey," Catherine said airily. "You look great."

He did. The crisp, starched whiteness of his peasant shirt made a wonderful contrast against the leveled brocade of the vest; the soft leggings tucked into high boots were magnificent on his long, lean frame. Fringed black suede gloves and the familiar dark cloak completed the look. Vincent eyed her brief attire with mixed feelings.

"Are you... ready?" he asked hesitantly. Catherine smiled and came down off her toes.

"Almost. I have to put on my boots, my mask and my ears." She started towards the bathroom again. "Oh," she added, "And my collar." Vincent watched her walk away, blinking at the seamed hose.

"That's all....?" he queried timidly. Catherine turned and shot him a warning glance.

"What would you suggest?" she demanded playfully. "A burnoose?" She disappeared into the bathroom.

"Well...."

"I told you he'd like it," Jamie called. In a few moments, Catherine reappeared - booted, masked and

'earred'.

Struggling to fasten the heavy gold collar around her neck, Vincent removed his gloves and reached for the chain. She handed it to him gratefully, holding her hair up off her neck.

"Watch the ears," she cautioned.

Deftly, his fingers worked the tiny clasp, and the shiny trinket fell into place. She turned to face him, pressing a kiss into the leathery palm of one hand. Quizzically, she studied the long, well-shaped fingers, the neatly trimmed nails.

"How do you do that?" she asked for the thousandth time. Vincent smiled as he led her toward the door, and his voice was full of mirth.

"Determination," he insisted, "and years of practice."

Mouse had partially recovered his composure. He tucked Jamie's hand beneath the crook of his elbow, awed and amazed by his good fortune. They walked out into the night.

Bruce lifted the shiny pistol from his soft-tooled leather holster and spun it deftly around on his index finger. Dick Grayson looked up from fastening his own holster strap around the knee of his dungarees.

"Gosh, Bruce," he exclaimed. "I know you could shoot, but I didn't know you could do that!"

Bruce smiled indulgently and slipped the pistol back into its holster.

"A good crime-fighter should know all about handling a weapon, Dick, even though it's almost never necessary to resort to gunfire."

"You're right, Bruce," Dick nodded. "I should have thought of that myself..." He trailed off as Alfred entered the room, resplendent in a tuxedo and red-lined cape. Bruce looked up as well, following his young ward's line of sight. With a flourish, Alfred tapped a plate-sized, black disc on the edge of the piano and it popped up to form a top hat. With a similar flip of his wrist, the small cylinder in his hand became a cane.

"Alfred the Magnificent at your service, sirs."

"Bravo, Alfred!" Bruce Wayne applauded his gentleman's gentleman.

Dick grinned delightedly. "Wow! You'll be the hit of the costume ball, Alfred!" he insisted.

Alfred looked grave. "I'm afraid not, Master Dick. That honor will undoubtedly go to your aunt."

"Oh, Alfred!" Mrs. Copper admonished, blushing like a school-girl. "You're awful!" She came down the staircase slowly, flustered by the praise. Dick and Bruce hastened to their feet, staring with mixed emotions at her costume. "Well, boys - what do you think?"

The dress itself was fire-engine red, but it wasn't the color that attracted the eye - it was the fringe. From shoulder to knee, the flapper dress was covered in black, shimmering fringe. Dark gloves, home and dancing shoes completed the outfit. On the usually conservative Harriet Cooper, the dress was definitely sensational.

"Aunt Harriet!" Bruce said slowly. Flabbergasted, Dick merely stared.

She giggled. "Yes - It's really me. Can you believe it?" She turned her back on them. "Are my seams straight?"

"Are you... ready?" Dick said slowly, amazed at the transformation in his matronly aunt.

"Almost. I have to put on my hat and my mask."

"That's all....!" Dick began, but Bruce shot him a warning glance.

"I'll get your wrap," Alfred said hastily in the interlude.

"You look delightful, Aunt Harriet. We'll have to keep an eye on all the other bachelors," Bruce teased, while Dick swallowed and tried to regain his composure. Aunt Harriet waved his compliment away and disappeared into the bathroom to pin on her hat.

"Holy metamorphosis!" Dick muttered unhappily. Bruce smiled and slapped him companionably on the back, winking at Alfred as he re-entered the room.

"Aunt Harriet certainly looks nice," millionaire Bruce Wayne said gently. "As she always does."

"Yes - indeed she does," the dapper butler agreed. He cast a careful look over his shoulder. "Sirs," Alfred said softly. "I've taken the liberty of storing extra bat-clothes in the trunk of the car - just in case."

"Good thinking, Alfred," Bruce said immediately. "A good crime-fighter is always prepared. Speaking of which...." He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out three masks - one black and two white. He handed the black one to Alfred, a white one to Dick and took the other one himself.

"Remember," Bruce cautioned them. "No one is allowed in without a mask of some sort." Obediently, the three men donned the masks. Bruce and Dick donned their white cowboy hats and Alfred set the topper cockily on his head. When Aunt Harriet reappeared wearing the red-plumed hat and a brightly-sequined mask, they were waiting for her. Alfred drove them through the cool night into New York City.

"I feel like a bloody fool," Father said to his own reflection, wincing as he caught his own pun. He gazed critically into the mirror, smoothing his hair back in the typical fashion.

The dark evening suit had proven workable, and the teeth and cape were all he'd really needed to make a passable costume. Those had come from one of their old costume chests, the remnant of some ill-fated play. Gamely, Father had pulled the outfit together, determined to attend this party. He knew full well that Catherine had provided a ticket merely to silence his protests, but Father had no intention of sitting home this New Year's Eve - not when four of his '*wards*' were traipsing through heaven-only-knows-what in the world Above. He took one last cursory look into the mirror on the dresser.

"No wonder vampires can't see their own reflections," he muttered to himself. "They'd be too embarrassed to go out."

The sleek silver bird became a round-nosed omnibus with wings, taxiing clumsily down the runway. Inside the terminal, Elliot Burch waited, searching the sea of faces eagerly. Passengers dispersed, looking for luggage and cabs, and still there was no sign of the one he'd come to meet. Elliot pushed through the onslaught of people, feeling very like a salmon, and made the doorway. Still no sign. Quizzically, the young millionaire scratched his beard, pondering.

"Looking for someone?" a familiar voice prompted. Elliot whirled and stared into Bruce Abbott's laughing

face.

"Bruce, you old dead-beat!" Elliot accused, socking his companion soundly in the arm. Laden with luggage, Bruce was helpless to defend himself.

"Elliot, you old Scrooge - kicked any more old ladies out on the street?" That got him a look that would have stopped traffic for four blocks, but Elliot was lifting a large share of the load off his friend's shoulders, nonetheless.

"Very funny," Elliot snapped sarcastically. "Why don't you break out the whole stand-up routine?" They started towards the car, walking in comfortable silence. "How was your flight?" Elliot asked grudgingly.

"Great - a little turbulence, but otherwise fine." He eyed Elliot shrewdly, taking in the mustache and beard. "I like the beard - makes you look like a grown-up."

Elliot snorted, looking pointedly at Bruce's faded jeans and bulky sweater. "Unlike some people ..."

Bruce stopped and grinned ear to ear. "It's great to see you, Elliot - thanks for the invite."

Elliot looped a long arm around Bruce's shoulder and gave him a noogie. "Great to have you, man - and just in time. We'll start the new year off right!"

"Hey," Bruce complained. "Watch the hair. So - tell me about this Catherine Chandler....."

Catwoman had the annoying feeling that this party was going to be a deadly bore. Even the costume hadn't been as much fun as she'd hoped. Although the gingham print certainly played to her lithe figure and gamin good looks, there was no yellow-brick road waiting for her to follow. No matter how hard you tried, the honest life just wasn't as... well ... stimulating as battling the men in blue and the Caped Crusaders.

The Caped Crusaders... She heaved a sigh and pouted slightly. Half the men in New York, and most of the men in Gotham would've lined up to be the reason for one of those sighs, but Catwoman was oblivious to them all. Her heart beat for one particular man in blue - one who was married to his crime fighting. She was debating a half-hearted trip to the buffet when two familiar faces came bounding across the ballroom.

"Felix! Catspaw! I thought you two were still doing five-to-ten up the river!"

Felix grinned a Cheshire smile and chuckled.

"Time off for good behavior - if you believe it. How about you?"

Absently, Catwoman scratched his chin in a way that made him want to curl up on the floor and purr. Catspaw watched enviously.

"The same," she answered distractedly.

"So what are we waiting for ..." Felix began.

She snapped back to the present. "And I'm watching my step this time, boys - no funny business tonight. I intend to spend the new year on the outside of the jailhouse. Understood?"

Disgruntled and disappointed, the two petty thieves hung their heads, scuffing toes on the freshly waxed floor.

"Yeah, right," one muttered. "Gotcha," the other mumbled.

Catwoman smiled a dazzling smile. "Good. Now scoot boys - Catwoman's just here for the party tonight,

so ..."

"Hey, Catwoman," Felix interrupted. "Dig the lady coming through the door. Is she one of us?"

Catwoman stopped and turned toward the ballroom door as Catherine Chandler paused under the arching doorway to adjust her sequined mask. Frowning, Catwoman studied the black-clad lawyer as Catherine greeted Commissioner Gordon and his wife.

"No," Catwoman said at last. "But I like her outfit."

Jamie, Mouse and Vincent followed Catherine into the brilliantly lit room. Spellbound by his feline good looks, Catwoman watched Vincent from a distance.

"Forget the outfit," Catwoman murmured absently. "Who's she with?"

"By Jove, Elliot," Bruce began admiringly, stepping up behind his friend. "You look incredible in that outfit." There was no denying it. The black velvet slope and gold brocade jacket were magnificent on his lean frame, and the tights lent themselves to his finely-muscled legs. His high, starched ruff set off his dark hair and eyes, but it was the hat, the gorgeous, extravagant, hand-made hat that made the outfit.

"Thank you," Elliot said smoothly, turning slowly to face the familiar voice. "I knew you'd like ..."

Bruce Abbott not only liked it - he was wearing it. In almost every detail, the costumes were identical, save for the splendid hat. Bruce grinned from ear to ear.

"Great minds think alike, and all that," he teased. "Isn't this great?"

"No," Elliot growled. "It is not great! How did you ... where did you get that outfit? The sales clerk assured me there wasn't another one like it in the city."

"There probably isn't," Bruce answered calmly, enjoying himself. "I brought this one from California with me. I had to sweet-talk the wardrobe mistress out of it for the weekend." Elliot glared at him but the rakish actor only laughed and patted his friend's arm in a comforting manner. "Lighten up Elliot - it's not that bad!"

"It is that bad!" Elliot insisted. "He looks like the guys on the cough drop box!" He crossed his arms, completely disgusted.

"Well, look on the bright side," Bruce dead-panned.

Slowly, the young entrepreneur turned to stare at his friend.

"What bright side?" he demanded.

"You've..... got a better hat?"

Whether or not Elliot would have slugged him in a moot point, for at that precise moment in time, Bruce spied Catherine and Vincent as they moved to the rhythm of the band.

"Hey, look!" Bruce grabbed his arm and pointed. "Over there, on the dance floor. Isn't that your lady love in the catsuit?"

It was indeed, and her costume almost made Elliot choke. There was at least one person here tonight who looked better in tights than he did, and when she danced....! He looked close. Who was she dancing with? Beneath that mane and mask it might be anyone - anyone at all. He started across the floor.

"Radcliffe!" Joe hailed her from across the crowded room, all but tripping over his sword. Catherine

squeezed Vincent's hand, whispering furtively in his ear.

"That's Joe," she hissed. "The one in the pirate costume."

Almost imperceptibly, he nodded. Vincent had frozen up during his first few moments in the huge ballroom, but had gathered his composure since, greeting the Gordons easily. Still, meeting Catherine's employer and friend ...!

"Hi, Joe - I didn't know you were the swashbuckling type," Catherine teased.

"Only in my dreams," Joe laughed. He gave Catherine's costume a stern once over. "Speaking of dreams, Cathy. Does your father know..." His eye patch flopped back down over his eye, impairing his vision. He adjusted it hastily.

"This is Vincent," Catherine said quickly. Vincent was both disappointed and relieved that she did not try to explain. "And my friends Mouse and Jamie."

"Joe Maxwell," Joe offered his hand and looked Vincent directly in the eyes, sizing him up. Gingerly, Vincent accepted the hearty handclasp offered and found his expectations of this man confirmed. This was a man whose friendship for Catherine had meant her salvation on more than one occasion, a man whom Catherine trusted and cared for. Vincent returned the pressure on Joe's hand warmly before releasing it. Joe nodded politely to Jamie and Mouse, before they drifted off to join the dancing.

"You know the Gordons," Catherine interjected, playing the hostess.

"Of course," Joe murmured, extending his hand once more. The commissioner and his wife were lavishly robed in Roman garb, replete with gold braid and golden masks. Mrs. Gordon's toga fell to the floor, but the Commissioner's shorter tunic revealed two finely-muscled calves above his thongs. A laurel wreath rested majestically on his salt-and-pepper hair, and he returned Joe's handshake eagerly.

"We're hearing good things about the work you're doing here, young man. Anytime you get tired of New York, Gotham can always use another first-rate lawyer," the older man insisted. Joe laughed easily, pleased by the praise.

"How are things in Gotham?" Catherine asked, easing back into the conversation.

"Colorful," Mrs. Gordon said wryly. Everyone laughed. She was a stunning woman, and her eyes were full of good humor and warmth. "But things seem to be toning down, thanks to the Caped Crusaders."

"Batman and Robin," Catherine murmured. She looked up at Vincent. "I met them once at a charity benefit for the Bruce Wayne Children's Hospital." She laughed and shook her head slightly. "It was just for a moment - I'm sure they wouldn't remember."

Vincent was silent for a moment, thinking his own thoughts. "No," he said at last. "I'm sure they wouldn't remember."

"They're great to work with," Joe added, not to be outdone. "Very professional fellows, if you don't mind the capes. I worked with them on an art theft case a few years back, when the Bruce Wayne Art Museum was robbed. We extradited some joker who was hiding out in Brooklyn and they took care of the rest."

"Speaking of Bruce Wayne," the Commissioner began. "I understand he's going to be here with his youthful ward, Dick Grayson. I know you've been wanting to meet him, Cathy - I'll try to introduce you."

"Would you? I can't believe I've never managed to meet that man. He served on several benevolent committees with my father, but somehow we've never actually been introduced. I know Dick - Gotham University debates with the University here. He competes against my friend Michael." She smiled up at Vincent. "Our friend Michael," she amended. "Anyway - I'm really looking forward to meeting Bruce."

The orchestra began to play an old love song; the Commissioner and his wife exchanged looks. They excused themselves in short order and wafted onto the floor in the vicinity of Jamie and Mouse, who were swaying cheek to cheek. Mouse's Viking hat still had one dangling horn, but neither of them seemed to notice.

Smiling, Vincent held out his hand to Catherine. She slipped her small one inside it, letting him lead her onto the floor.

A split second too late, Elliot arrived just in time to catch Catherine's last words. Looking forward to meeting Bruce ...! How the hell could she have known he was even coming? That scalawag actor seemed to know everyone! And why hadn't Bruce said anything? He scowled blackly and turned toward the door. This evening wasn't exactly going like he'd planned.

"I like your cape."

Alfred looked around in surprise, meeting Father's blue eyes, all a-twinkle with mischief. He regarded the neatly dressed vampire with delight, blinking at the rather realistic looking fangs Father had donned. Their capes were identical, and Alfred returned the teasing look, recognizing a kindred spirit.

"Yes," he said somberly. "But you have such a nice smile...."

They shared a laugh, extending their hands in friendship.

"Call me Alfred," the butler said simply. Father returned his hearty handclasp.

"Please," he responded in kind. "Call me Jacob. I'm afraid '*Count*' is much too formal..."

Alfred chuckled appreciatively, reaching for a delicate cup and filling it deftly with foamy punch before handing it to Father. "I must confess," Alfred imparted, "that I feel a trifle silly in this costume, but it is for a good cause."

"Yes," Father agreed, thinking of Vincent and the chance this night held for him. "It is for a good cause."

They were silent for a moment while their eyes searched the crowd for their various charges.

"I came to keep an eye on my employer's young ward, and to escort his aunt to this affair," Alfred said quietly, relaxing once he spotted Dick talking to the Commissioner and his wife. "But if the truth were known, I'd much rather be home with a good book and a stiff mug of Earl Grey."

Father's head snapped around sharply.

"Hmmm," he murmured wistfully. "Me, too."

"Hello, Cathy," Elliot said smoothly, sneaking in to plant a kiss on her cheek. He cornered them as they came off the dance floor.

"Elliot!"

Vincent felt the short hairs on the back of his neck stand up at the sound of his name on Catherine's lips, and he definitely did not like this man kissing her. As if reading his thoughts, Catherine's tiny hand sought his large one, reassuring him and silently pleading with him to behave.

"Oh, Elliot," she was saying. "How dashing you look. Your costume is wonderful - I've never seen anything

like it."

'Just wait,' Elliot thought grimly. *'You will.'*

Now she was tugging on him, and Vincent turned obediently.

"Sir Elliot," she teased. "Please say hello to Vincent. Vincent - this is Elliot Burch, a good friend of mine." Her eyes were huge and she was looking at him so trustingly....

"My pleasure," Vincent said smoothly, accepting the offered hand. "Catherine's told me so much about you." Catching sight of the hirsute hand, Elliot almost snatched his hand away, but caught himself in time, feeling foolish. An excellent make-up job, to be sure, but hardly worth a fuss... Who was under there anyway, and what had Cathy told him about....?

"Oh, Vincent," Catherine said breathlessly. "I'm parched. Would you be a dear and fetch me a glass of punch?" She nodded toward the punch bowl, catching sight of Father for the first time. Vincent had seen him too, and they exchanged startled looks. He strode quickly toward Father and the punch bowl, away from Elliot's penetrating gaze. There was a split second where Catherine seriously debated sitting down right on the floor and have quiet hysterics. This uncomplicated evening was fast becoming too sticky for words, as the whole known population of New York, Gotham and parts Below converged upon this social event. If she ran into one more person who knew her.....

"Cathy? Cathy Chandler?"

Elliot's next question was lost as Catherine whirled toward the sound of her name. A coin-and-chiffon-clad Arabian dancer stood before them, dark eyes flashing above a jeweled veil. Catherine would know those eyes anywhere.

"Barbara Gordon? Is that really you?"

The two women embraced enthusiastically. Catherine took a step back and regarded her friend sternly.

"What happened to *'I'll call you back - we'll do lunch sometime'?*" She demanded. Barbara had the good grace to look sheepish.

"Things have been rather... hectic in Gotham." She regarded Catherine's companion appraisingly. "Hello, Elliot."

"Barbara, how nice to see you," Elliot said easily, leaning to kiss her cheek. "It's been a while." Would he never get five minutes alone with Catherine? "I was just about to say..."

Barbara gave Catherine a furtive look that said *'Let's get away from this crowd and really talk.'* Catherine nodded slightly.

"If you'll excuse us, Elliot...." She linked an arm through Barbara's and they scampered off.

"You look terrific!" Catherine said, admiring the exotic Arabian garb. Barbara gave the Catwoman costume a once over.

"So do you, but I can't say I'm not wild about your costume...."

"Oh," Catherine said airily. "Still playing Halloween dress-up twelve months out of the year?"

"Yes," Barbara countered. "Still dating tall, dark and hairy?"

"None other."

For the space of a giggle, the two women looked at each other solemnly, then burst out laughing. In sheer delight at seeing a familiar face she could really talk to, Catherine hugged Barbara again.

"He's here tonight," Catherine confided.

"No - really?" Barbara's eyes were wide and she whirled, searching the sea of faces for a distinctly different visage. Catherine turned her slightly so that she faced the punch bowl. Vincent, Father and Alfred were clearly visible, talking in jovial of somewhat subdued tones. A look of pure delight crossed Barbara's face and she grabbed Catherine's arm.

"He's talking to Alfred!" she whispered excitedly. "That's my friend Alfred, Bruce Wayne's butler." Her brow furrowed slightly. "Who's that with them?"

Catherine leaned over Barbara's shoulder conspiratorially. "That," she said with emphasis, "is Father." Barbara's mouth dropped open.

"No - really?"

"Himself," Catherine added. She shot Barbara a teasing look. "Is there an echo in here?"

Barbara socked her friend playfully in the arm. "Oh, hush," she admonished, starting for the punch bowl and dragging Catherine with her. "Come on - I'm dying for a glass of punch."

"Purely coincidental," Catherine murmured, dogging Barbara's heels. The diminutive librarian stopped short. Catherine crashed unceremoniously into her back and they all but tumbled to the floor, laughing at themselves.

"For heaven's sake, Barbara," Catherine said in exasperation. "What is it now?"

Barbara sighed wistfully, completely ignoring the question. "You know," she said petulantly. "I'm beginning to think all the good men are already taken."

Catherine took the lead, pulling Barbara after her.

"Nonsense," she insisted. "You just have to know where to look....."

The evening went on. Alfred, Father and Harriet Cooper had absented themselves from the main ballroom and were heartily enjoying themselves in one of the more quiet parlors. A half-played game of chess sat between the two gentlemen, and the rich, pungent aroma of Earl Grey tea filled the tiny corner of the room. Quite contrary to expectations, Father was having the time of his life.

'I'd forgotten,' he thought to himself. *'How much I missed about living Above.'*

"What part of New York do you live in?" Harriet was asking politely. The question almost caught Father off guard.

"Oh, I, uh, don't actually like in New York...." he hedged.

Alfred reached for the cream. "Oh," he said easily. "You don't live in the city proper?"

"No," Father mumbled. "I don't live in the city proper."

Mrs. Cooper looked stern.

"I suppose it's time for confessions," she began slowly. Alfred and Father paled. How could she possibly...! "I told you I live in Gotham, but the truth of the matter is that we live about fifteen miles from the city. My nephew is millionaire Bruce Wayne's ward. We actually live in stately Wayne Manor, but we think of Gotham City as home."

Weak with relief, Father let out the breath he'd been holding, remembering all over again the risks of

interacting Above. *'He was'*, he thought for a moment, *'getting too old for this sort of thing.'*

"Check," Alfred said solemnly. "The game is almost up."

"Pleased to meet you," Commissioner Gordon was saying, clasping Elliot's hand firmly. "I think my daughter had met you before."

"We've met," Elliot acknowledged. "Part of my private literature collection has made its way into the rare book section of Gotham City's excellent library. I met your daughter when they dedicated the new wing."

"Of course," Mrs. Gordon said smoothly. "Barbara mentioned your generosity."

"She's too kind. And this is Bruce Abbott, a friend of mine from Los Angeles. Bruce, this is Police Commissioner Gordon and his wife."

"My pleasure," Bruce said politely. He bowed low over Mrs. Gordon's hand.

"Your costumes are quite striking," the Commissioner remarked with approval. "It must have been difficult to find identical costumes - how on earth did you manage?"

"It's - not as hard as you might think," Bruce interjected quickly. "We were quite - surprised ourselves."

"Well, you certainly look splendid," Mrs. Gordon assured them. "I've always been a fan of Lewis Carroll's work."

Bruce was grinning ear to ear. "Me, too," he added hastily, and hustled Elliot off. As soon as they were out of earshot, Bruce began to chuckle madly, holding onto Elliot's arm.

"She thinks - he said at last, wiping away the mirthful tears, "she thinks we're Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum!"

Elliot jerked his arm free. "I caught that part," he snapped.

Bruce managed to look injured. "Well, I thought it was funny."

His companion sighed deeply and stared across the crowded room.

"Dick? Dick Grayson?" Catherine excused herself from the small group of chatting people to greet the young man.

"Hi, Miss Chandler. I didn't know you were going to be here."

"I didn't know you were going to be here until the Commissioner told me." She put a friendly arm around his waist and squeezed. "That hat is marvelous - I just love your costume."

"Yours is... interesting, too," Dick managed. Truth be told, he'd had quite enough of Catwoman to last him a lifetime.

"So, how's the debate team doing?" Catherine demanded.

"We're doing great," Dick insisted. "And tell Michael that we're ready for them anytime they want some real competition."

"I'll tell him," Catherine promised, "but, you know, he told me almost the exact same thing...."

"Hi, Catherine!"

"Catherine!"

Mouse and Jamie came bounding up. "This is super!" Jamie gushed.

"Better than good - better than better!" Mouse added for emphasis. Catherine grinned at their flushed faces and bright eyes.

"Dick, this is Jamie and Mouse. Jamie and Mouse, meet Dick. Dick knows Michael - they've debated before."

Jamie dropped a curtsy, lowering her long lashes shyly, and Mouse offered his hand. Dick could only stare, grasping but not feeling Mouse's hearty handshake.

"Pleased to meet you," Jamie murmured, cheeks flushed prettily.

"My pleasure," Dick mumbled. He caught himself and released his hold on Mouse's hand. "It's so nice to meet you. Both."

Watching Dick, Mouse decided that he did not care for this situation. He made for the buffet, tugging Jamie after him. Still blushing under Dick's intense scrutiny, Jamie followed.

"Dick?" Catherine touched his shoulder. Embarrassed, the young ward shook himself back to the present.

"School is fine," he said distractedly. "Just fine."

"That's odd," Alfred muttered thoughtfully. He tried again, pushing the quarter through the proper slot like he had on the other phone. It clanged straight to the change bin and he fished it out again. He picked it up and stared at it, finally satisfied that there was nothing wrong with the coin.

"I suppose I'll just have to call my cousin Archie collect." He picked up the receiver again and hit 'O'. Nothing happened. Suspicious now, Alfred tried every other phone in the lobby. None of them would so much as offer a dial tone. Glancing around, he noticed a rather curious absence of hotel attendants.

'This is very odd,' he thought to himself. 'I think perhaps Mr. Wayne might want to know that every phone line leading out is dead, and there are no bell-boys to be found.' He crept back into the party, his expression grim.

"You're certain?" Bruce Wayne asked solemnly. "All of the phone lines?"

"Every one, Sir. I don't mean to be an alarmist, Mister Bruce, but a crook could make a pretty haul tonight if he were to incapacitate the participants at this dance. Almost all of the Gotham and New York police departments are represented here tonight. An incident could be devastating."

"Quite so, Alfred. You were right to contact me. Have you seen Dick?"

"Talking to a rather nice young lady in a catsuit." He pointed to where Dick and Catherine stood. "Would you like me to say something....?"

"Please. Have him meet me in the coat closet in exactly five minutes. I'll go fetch the bat-clothes from the car and meet you both shortly."

"Very good, Sir," Alfred said at once. He started across the floor.

Changing clothes in strange places had become rather common. After years of crime-fighting, Dick was used

to making quick transformations in odd places. Thinking of Jamie, Dick wondered fleetingly what it might be like to attend a social gathering without his alter ego. It was hard to wrangle a date when you spent part of every social event changing clothes and pounding criminals. His regrets were only momentary, however, and he listened carefully as Bruce outlined his suspicions. While they dressed, Alfred gave them a quick run-down of what little he knew or had noticed.

"Thank you, Alfred," Bruce said solemnly as he pulled on a batboot. "Please see to Aunt Harriet's safety if anything should happen."

"Of course, Sir," Alfred assured him, and slipped out.

"Gosh, Bruce - do you think there's really going to be trouble?"

Bruce Wayne nodded grimly, holding his cowl in both hands.

"I don't know what's up yet, but my seventh sense has been signaling trouble all evening. I think it best if Batman and Robin..."

The doorknob began to turn and voices were heard.

"What do you mean, watching you? Watching you how? Have you ever seen him befo..."

The closet door swung open with no warning at all, and Vincent and Catherine whipped inside. With a gasp, Catherine stopped short, staring at the unmasked Caped Crusaders with wonder and disbelief. Vincent loomed behind her protectively as she gasped, then he saw what she saw. Hastily, he hauled the closet door closed and locked it.

The quartet stared at each other for a full minute in absolute silence. Catherine could hear her heart pounding, but her voice, when she found it, was surprisingly normal.

"Dick... Then you must be... Bruce Wayne, I presume." Falling back on habit, she extended her gloved hand. "I'm Catherine----"

"Chandler," Batman finished, fastening his cowl. His gaze turned to Vincent, and his eyes were piercing in their intensity. "I never forget a face."

"No," Vincent said softly. "I didn't think so."

Catherine was staring at Vincent. "What is it, Vincent? Do you ... have you... met before?"

"Once," Vincent murmured, so low Catherine had to lean forward to hear. "In the subways on the edge of the city." Bewildered, she turned from first one to the other, trying to read what happened in their faces.

"I never said *'Thank you,'* before," Batman said solemnly. "Thank you, Vincent." Having donned his mask at last, Robin exchanged puzzled looks with Catherine, but the urgency of the moment kept them from inquiring further. Catherine held tightly to Vincent's hand.

"A man has been watching Vincent. I'm afraid he may be endangered."

"We may all be in danger, Miss Chandler. The phone lines have been cut. We have reason to suspect the hotel employees may have come to some harm."

Catherine whirled to look up at Vincent.

"Father! He was with Alfred!"

"Alfred will see to him," Batman hastily assured her. Vincent closed his eyes in silent relief and reached to clasp Batman's arm.

"What can we do?"

Batman looked up quickly, surprised by the offer.

"Besides safeguard your secret," Vincent added pointedly.

Batman allowed himself a small smile as Robin stepped up beside him.

"If there's trouble, the most important thing is to keep the citizens safe. Since we don't know who or what we're up against yet, anyone could be at risk."

Solemnly, Vincent nodded. "We shall do what we can," he promised. Batman returned the grip on his arm, looking him in the eye.

"We'll count on you."

"Gosh, Batman," Robin muttered as they made for the door. "I'd feel a lot better if Batgirl were here, too."

"Oh, she is," Catherine offered helpfully.

As one, Batman and Robin whirled to stare at her.

"I mean, she probably will be," Catherine back-pedaled.

Eyes narrowed beneath the cowl. Batman regarded her closely.

"What makes you think so?" Could this be her? The hair color was close, the height almost perfect, and the legs... It was a distinct possibility.

"Oh, nothing really," Catherine said, grasping at straws. "You know how Batgirl loves a good fight." She was appalled by what she had almost revealed. Did everybody here tonight have a secret?

There was a loud pop - like a gunshot - and the room outside erupted into pandemonium.

"Holy precognition, Batman!" Robin exclaimed. "It looks like your seventh sense was right!"

The quartet leaped for the closet door.

Practically every person in the ballroom was covered in string - gobs of it - in all sizes and thicknesses. While they watched, a dark-clad ruffian shot a peculiar pistol at a small knot of people. Cord of all kinds shot forward, masking the knot more literal than figurative. New York and Gotham City's finest were completely immobilized by the strange weapon, struggling to loose the bonds that held them and lay hands on the culprit.

Vincent, Catherine and the Caped Crusaders crept forward without being seen, working toward the man responsible for the mess - a man known to many as the Stringer.

The Stringer didn't look like your ordinary crook. He was quite well dressed - almost fussily so. The dark suit and tie lent him an air of respectability. Were it not for the fact that his initials were boldly emblazoned across his back, C.B. Stringer could easily have faded into a typical executive board meeting. Indeed, it was his innocent appearance that caused him to be deadly dangerous to all but the most determined foes.

Behind him ranged a seedy group of thugs, also rather conservatively dressed in dark pants and sweatshirts. Like the Stringer, the back of each crony's shirt bore his name in large, tacky letters; Network, Pilot, Promo, Ratings.....

"Look, Batman," Robin whispered furtively. "Down on the end. It's Nielson - and there's Ratings. I always thought they were a myth."

Batman shook his head in wonder. "Evidently not." Batman murmured thoughtfully. "But I never would have believed it."

"Allow me to introduce myself," the petty villain began. "My name is C.B. Stringer and I've come to put a snag in the line. So sorry to spoil the fun," the Stringer said with a smirk, "but I'm late to make a donation to my favorite charity - me! You've been so kind to collect it all for me. I really must express my thanks. Money, after all, is the bottom line."

"Hey, Boss," Ratings complained. "I thought I was the bottom line."

"Shut up, you imbecile," the Stringer growled. "Let's tie off the loose ends of this caper and scoot."

"Not so fast, Stringer," Batman began, stepping from the shadows. The dark-suited outlaw grew deathly pale, but the fear on his face quickly turned to a sneer.

"I should have known you'd show up at a costume party, Caped Clods. Here -- let me help you with your attire."

Before Batman could react, the Stringer fired another of the peculiar weapons at him, and the masked man found himself wrapped from shoulder to knees in coils of string. Vincent calmly sliced the bindings open and Batman sprang forward. With a cry of alarm, the Stringer took another wild shot and dove for cover. Armed with a nail file, Catherine began to help Vincent cut people loose, and the fighting began in earnest.

"This way, Batman!" Robin called excitedly. "He can't get away from us now!"

When the fighting began, Catwoman's first impulse was to head for the quickest exit and race for the getaway car. On the heels of that impulse was the certain knowledge that whatever the problem was tonight, it wasn't her fault. It was a new experience, and the sensation caught her unawares. She stood her ground.

Or tried to. Two wrestling men - one in dark clothes and the other in the garb of a priest - came sailing toward her and she side-stepped quickly to avoid being crushed against the wall. The voluminous hem of her Dorothy-from-Kansas costume was pinned by the weight of the fighters to the wall. While they grunted and slugged at each other, she pulled and tugged on the checked cotton to no avail. With a fierce growl and a yell, the pummeling pair came crashing toward her, threatening to tug her into the battle. Desperate, she did the only logical thing; she took one sharp claw and slit the dress down the front, daintily stepping out of it. Her catsuit, as always, was underneath. Luxuriously, she stretched, glad to be back in street clothes. Pouts aside, stretching was one of her most attractive features. She found a nice quiet niche and watched the action unfold.

Jamie put her hard little fist right into Pilot's big nose, making him howl. Behind her, she heard Mouse's whoop of delight turn to a cry of surprise. She whirled and, all too late, realized her mistake. Pilot grabbed her around her trim waist, pinning her arms to her side, and began hauling her toward the corner where the bulk of the Stringer's prisoners were. If it hadn't been for the corset, Jamie would probably have been able to free herself, but her mobility was severely limited by the beautiful gown. She kicked and flailed madly, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Mouse! Mouse - are you okay? Let go of me, you oaf, before I ... Vincent! Catherine! I said take your hands off of me, you..."

There was a blur of movement, and the weightless, dizzying sensation of flying, and Jamie found herself standing next to the punch bowl, which - miraculously - had not been knocked from its perch. To her complete embarrassment, she was clinging to the Boy Wonder's shoulders for dear life. Robin grinned at her.

"Are you okay?"

Jamie stared for a long moment at the young masked man at her side, and the chandelier in his hand, gradually putting the pieces together.

"Oh, yes," she stammered at last, hastily withdrawing her embrace. "I'm fine." She took a deep breath and grinned at him. "Thank you," she added primly. "That was kind of fun."

Robin tipped his mask to her and took a firmer hold on the chandelier. "A good crime-fighter," he said solemnly, "Is always prepared." He sailed gracefully into a group of flailing toughs, freeing Mouse in the process. Jamie leapt off the table and flung herself into the battle beside Mouse. She did not intend to be taken unawares again.

"It's a good thing," Bruce reflected absently, as he dodged a particularly well-aimed punch to his midriff. "That I occasionally do my own stunts. Otherwise, I'd be out for the count by now."

He dispatched the felon carelessly, tossing him into two more trouble-makers. His position by the door allowed him to dodge in and out, and stop any party-poopers who might attempt to evade the long arm of the law by making a run for it.

"This is fun!" Bruce declared suddenly. "Elliot sure knows how to pick the parties!" The next blow sent him reeling, falling back against the wall. By sheer luck, the fist had missed his chin and socked his shoulder solidly. "Soreness I can deal with, but I can't afford a black eye right now - not with tryouts coming up." He came back swinging, knocking the smug expression clear off Ratings' face. Ratings sank sluggishly to the ground and passed out.

"Huh," Bruce grunted, rubbing his fist. "I always wanted to do that."

True to her reputation, Batgirl arrived as soon as the fighting was in full tilt. With a dancer's grace, the nimble crime-fighter threw Nielson into Catherine's waiting hands. Catherine cracked him over the head with the hard heel of her boot and he sank slowly to the floor. The two women exchanged looks.

"Nice work," Batgirl said, with obvious approval. Daintily, Catherine stepped back into her boot. She gave Barbara a careful once-over.

"Nice outfit."

They grinned wickedly, and plunged back into the fray.

To his relief, Elliot found himself back-to-back with Joe Maxwell, slugging for all he was worth. Despite their differences, Elliot could think of no one he would rather have backing him. From across the room, Elliot watched Catherine down Nielson with her shoe. Well, he amended hastily, almost no one.

"How y'doing?" Joe yelled over the din.

"Couldn't be bet..." The sharp crack of a fist beneath his chin caused Elliot to taste blood and reassess his position. "I'm doing okay," he mumbled. "Let's try to work toward the door!" Bruce was there, and doing respectably, but the three of them together just might be able to turn the tide in this section of the huge room.

"Gotcha!" Joe called, pushing the eye patch back up for the three-millionth time that evening. This was turning out to be some kind of party.

With a *CRASH* and a *THUD*, Robin fell gracelessly to the floor, closely followed by Promo's bulk. Only Catwoman's lightning-quick reflexes kept her from being caught in the violence of their struggle.

"Get him! Get Robin!" she hissed automatically, momentarily forgetting herself. Batman leapt to his friend's aid, shooting Catwoman a venomous look.

Hastily, she recanted. "I mean... Get him, Robin! Get him!"

In short order, Batman hauled Promo to his feet and smashed him into a table. To prove her good intentions, Catwoman helped Robin to his unsteady feet, brushing dust and plaster from his shoulders in a companionable way. Suspiciously, Batman watched, her finally satisfied that she was helping.

"All right, Old Chum?" he inquired gently. Robin shook his head to clear it, and smacked one green-gloved fist into the other.

"I'm fine, Batman - raring to go!"

Batman's smile was fleeting. "Good," he said. "Let's go!" He leaped back into the mass of struggling humanity while Robin picked his way over the smashed table.

"Oh, Robin!" Catwoman called. "You've got a run in your tights." Robin whirled a split-second before he heard her laughter ringing in his ears.

"Sorry Sweetie," she purred. "My mistake."

"The tea is excellent," Father insisted. "And the company, superb. Gallantly, he kissed Mrs. Cooper's hand, making her giggle.

"Indeed," Alfred agreed, taking a sip of his own dark brew.

"Yes, this has certainly been splendid," Father said with a sigh, "but I think it's time I took my leave."

Bruce Wayne's gentleman's gentleman almost choked on his tea, gasping and sputtering until Aunt Harriet thumped him soundly on the back.

"Oh no, Sir," he managed at last. "Please don't go out there - I mean, please don't leave yet. We've barely begun our fourth game."

"And you've beaten me soundly two out of three," Father chuckled. "A wise man knows when to cut his losses and move on. My reputation as a chess player has been sorely abused tonight."

"Another cup of tea, perhaps?" Alfred tried desperately. He saw the hesitation in Father's eyes and pressed his advantage. "Surely you won't pass up another mug of this excellent beverage." He managed to sound as though he would take it personally if Father refused.

"Well, I....."

"Oh, good!" Aunt Harriet said warmly. "We've only just begun to talk about Homer, and I do so love a good conversation about literature."

Alfred mopped his forehead, grateful for the unexpected help. '*He was*', he thought for a moment, '*getting a bit old for this sort of thing.*'

"Your mug, Sir," he said gently, "and I'll refill it. No need for you to get up at all."

Father relaxed and allowed himself to be plied with the fine tea and the delightful, witty conversation.

"And to think," he chided himself, "I was afraid something could go wrong."

Joe dodged fists and furniture, staying just out of reach. Strangely, he found he was rather enjoying himself. It had been years since this tough kid from Queens had gotten the chance to beat the stuffing out of anything more formidable than a vending machine. There was a flash of purple and yellow to his left, and he dodged a flying bowl to shoot a careful glance in that direction.

Batgirl! While he watched, she pirouetted gracefully and kicked Network's lights out.

'Now there's a woman,' Joe thought fleetingly, *'that knows how it's done.'*

He was never really certain what happened next. One minute he was ducking what appeared to be part of a chair, and the next he found himself with an armful of female crime-fighter.

"Quick - pick me up!" she hissed. Obediently, Joe placed his hands just below her.... utility belt and lifted Batgirl into the air. In one smooth movement, she brought the full force of her powerful legs crashing into the Stringer's chest. He smacked soundly into the table. The punch bowl, which had survived everything else, tipped slowly over, dousing him in frothy pink brew. Gasping for air, the Stringer cursed them all, still struggling gamely to get to his feet.

Like a shadow, Vincent appeared behind him, and pushed him back down to the floor, holding him with a grip that was far from gentle.

"We will not be terrorized," Vincent insisted quietly. "You have no power here." Their eyes met, but there was no remorse in the Stringer's eyes - only incomprehension. Vincent held him easily until the Caped Crusaders arrived. Robin slapped a pair of batcuffs on him and they hauled him unceremoniously away.

By the time Joe caught his breath, Batgirl had disappeared.

"Now, where did she go?" Joe mumbled, scratching his sore head.

"Where did who go?" Catherine asked pertly, appearing at his elbow looking none the worse for her ordeal. She was smiling impishly at him.

"Batgirl," Joe said absently. "She was just here a minute ago. How did she ... where could she have gone?"

Vincent joined Catherine, hovering protectively over her slight frame. "I can think of a number of places," he said quietly, with a ghost of a smile playing around his lips. "But the most obvious answer is home."

He looked at Catherine solemnly. "Perhaps we should...?"

"No." Catherine was adamant. "I refuse to be forced out. We'll leave when we're good and ready, and not a moment before." She gestured around the room, where hotel workers were already beginning to set the room to rights. As if on cue, the band began to play again. Their eyes met, and held. "Vincent, we've survived this long," Catherine murmured. "Surely we can last out the dance."

There was something in her eyes, something in her voice, that made Joe realize that this was not just Cathy's escort - this was Cathy's date - and for a split-second, Joe felt a twinge of regret. He watched them as they made their way to the dance floor, hands clasped tightly, fingers intertwined. Vincent's cape swayed gracefully as he strolled across the crowded room.

Joe sighed and rubbed his aching head. *'I wonder,'* he thought fleetingly. *'How'd I look in a cape.....'*

"Tired of Oz, Catwoman?"

She didn't even look up from filing her delicate-looking claws.

"Maybe," she said airily. "But I don't think we're back in Kansas yet, Batman." She eyed him speculatively. "I figured since you were going '*au natural*'," she waited while he blushed. "I would, too. Any objections?"

"None," Batman admitted. "I just thought ..."

"Good!" Catwoman snapped. "Then back off, Batman!" She stalked majestically away, leaving Batman smarting, and quite alone on the dance floor. Grimly, Batman sighed. There had to be more than one way to win a cat....

Jamie's eyes were shining, and she smiled at Robin in a way that made his collar feel tight. In that fairy-tale dress, with her hair falling free from its neat coiffure, she was the most beautiful, magical thing he had ever in his life seen.

"Thank you, Robin," she whispered. "You were terrific."

"It was nothing... really," he mumbled, grateful that his voice didn't crack. She put her hand on his bare arm, and gazed at him with eyes as deep and brown as chocolate.

"No, really. You were there just when I needed you. I don't know what I would have done. If there weren't so many people here, I'd - oh, to heck with all the people!"

Before he realized her intent, Jamie took his face between her two soft hands and kissed him - kissed him right down to the pointed toes of his green boots. Everything in the room turned inside out and righted itself before she pulled away. The power to move one iota was beyond him, and Robin simply stood there with his eyes closed and his pucker out.

"Thank you, Robin," she repeated. "We won't forget you."

'*WE? We, who?*'

Robin opened his eyes to see Jamie tucking her arm through Mouse's, her tousled head leaning on his shoulder.

"Holy oscillation," he managed at last. Mouse put a sympathetic hand on Robin's shoulder and looked him in the eye. He knew - better than anyone did - what one of Jamie's kisses could do for your state of mind.

"Said the same thing," Mouse offered helpfully, then turned and took Jamie away.

"I'd love to," Catherine said simply, and let Batman lead her to the floor.

"Miss Chandler, I'd ..."

"Catherine, please. I hardly think it's the time to get formal, do you?"

Batman smiled. "Perhaps not," he agreed. He was silent for a moment before trying again.

"We will be grateful for your silence," he said at last. "If our secret should be revealed ..."

"And we would be grateful for yours," Catherine interrupted. Batman shot her a quick look, and she saw that she had read him all too well. "Vincent told me what happened. I know what you know - what you've kept to yourself for his sake. Keeping your trust seems like all too small a price to pay for what you've done for us."

Once again, Batman smiled. "It would seem we understand each other."

Catherine nodded slowly and caught his eyes. "It would seem so," she agreed. "But if I may be so bold, I think you're dancing with the wrong cat." She inclined her head slightly to where Catwoman stood, feigning disinterest in the dancers.

Batman sighed, and his sigh was all the confirmation Catherine needed for her suspicions.

"Why don't you ask her to dance?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. "I did," Batman said at last. "She... said no."

"And you're giving up?"

"Well, I ..."

"She's been watching you all evening. Ask her again, and make it stick. You may have to convince her you're sincere."

Batman's voice was very dry. "You sound like someone who knows," he teased. Catherine tilted her head toward Vincent, who was standing well back from the dancers, waiting for her.

"Persistence pays off," she said simply. They grinned at each other. "Besides," she said lightly. "I always did like a man in a cape."

The Caped Crusader almost laughed - almost. "And I," he said solemnly, "have always had a particular fondness for cats."

Featherlight and teasing, something touched Catwoman's shoulder. She whirled, and a powerful hand clasped around her arm, closely followed by the no-nonsense click of a batcuff around her wrist. Surprise gave way to indignation.

"But - Batman," she protested. "I haven't done anything!"

"Exactly!" The other cuff clicked around his wrist. With his free hand, Batman pulled her firmly into his arms.

"But - you can't hold me without charging me with something...." She trailed off, becoming aware of the way he was holding her, and the many implications of his action. Catwoman looked up into the snapping depths of his eyes.

"Hurry," she purred huskily, teasing him. "Charge me with something."

Looking stern, Batman steered her onto the dance floor, holding her closely while they began to move to the music. He started to speak - fell silent - and tried again while Catwoman looked at him quizzically.

"You're absolutely right," Batman began uncomfortably. "I don't have any authority to... hold you, but..." He trailed off, looking away as he groped for the correct words.

Catwoman moved her gloved hand from his shoulder to the side of his cowl, turning his face back to hers. "Batman.....?" she prompted.

"---but just once, Catwoman, I'd like to spend an evening with you that doesn't end with you going to jail."

Stunned and overwhelmed by his confession, Catwoman stared for a full ten seconds while Batman waited.

"Why Batman," she murmured at last, lowering her long lashes coyly. "I didn't know you cared."

He sighed with exaggerated long suffering, frustrated by her teasing. "I'm not joking," he insisted, setting his jaw stubbornly. Compared to deciphering female behavior, battling arch criminals was a snap.

Catwoman eyed him with open skepticism. "What about Robin?" she demanded suspiciously.

Batman looked her squarely in the eye. "Robin's a young man now - almost grown and ready to leave the

nest."

Catwoman blinked in surprise. "You're serious!" she whispered, incredulous.

"Why, yes, I ..."

"But, but ..." Catwoman began to pull away, but Batman tightened his hold around her slender waist. Her escape thwarted, she grew still in his arms.

"Catwoman," Batman reminded her gently. "Don't tell me you have cold paws now - you've been asking me out for years."

"Yes, I know," she blurted unceremoniously. "But you never said yes before, and I, well, I..." Nervously, she looked away.

He looked down and under until he caught her eyes. "Well?" he prompted.

"Oh, Batman," she began with false brightness. "You love the law - I love to break it. It would never work. What ... what would we....talk about?"

The music was right, the moment perfect. Batman dipped her, her long hair almost sweeping the floor. Catwoman clung to his broad shoulders, gasping in surprise. Their faces were only inches apart, and their eyes met for one timeless, perfect moment.

"Oh, I don't know - crimes of passion?" Batman suggested, teasing her openly. Abruptly, he straightened, pulling her back onto her long legs. Her cheeks were flushed and her dark eyes were wide. Over her shoulder, Batman saw Catherine and Vincent waft by, swaying dreamily to the music. He grew suddenly serious.

"Catwoman," he said slowly. "Other couples overcome.... minor differences like ours. We could make it work."

Completely outmaneuvered, Catwoman sighed and nestled against his chest, rubbing her cheek against the bat insignia on his batsuit. "Well," she murmured. "I guess it's better than jail."

Batman hauled her against him, looking at her sharply. She laughed and ran a teasing claw along his strong jawline. Sheepishly, he realized he was being teased. The cuffs that bound them were no longer necessary, and he unhooked them deftly and hung them on his utility belt.

"I suppose I deserved that ...," he began. The clock struck midnight, startling them both. Across the room, masks came off and couples kissed in celebration of the new year. Watching him, Catwoman removed the sequined mask she wore, revealing the exquisite planes of her face and the delicately sculpted eyebrows. She pursed her lips.

"Don't you think...?"

Eyes closed, Batman and Catwoman leaned together, bumping noses. They shifted the angle slightly and their lips met at last. It was worth waiting for.

"Happy New Year," Batman murmured.

"Whatever," Catwoman answered dreamily. Careful of her claws, she slipped one finger beneath the neck clasp of his cowl, slipping it back and---

Roughly, he caught her hand. reacting to years of protecting his identity under all circumstances. He shook himself slightly, and twined their fingers together to make up for his abruptness.

"The cowl stays, Catwoman," Batman insisted firmly.

Catwoman smiled mischievously and kissed his gloved hands. "And the rest...?"

Batman blushed to his cowl-line, flustered. "We can... talk about that later," he blustered.

Catwoman sighed and twined her arms around his neck, burying her face in his cowl. "Oh, Batman," she whispered. "You're so cute when you blush."

The chimes at midnight clanged shrilly, interrupting the Commissioner's earnest conversation with Joe. He turned and smiled at his wife, reaching for her hand.

"If you'll excuse us a moment...," Commissioner Gordon began.

"Please - go ahead," Joe insisted. *'Everybody else is,'* he thought grimly.

"Honestly, you two!" Barbara Gordon teased her parents. Hastily, somewhat abashed, the Commissioner broke off the kiss and turned to look at his only daughter. Joe wasn't looking - he was openly staring at the vision she made. The eye patch made its inevitable descent and he hastened to fix it.

"Barbara!" Mrs. Gordon admonished, reaching out to give her daughter a quick hug. "I knew you were here, but I haven't seen you all evening. Did you see all the excitement? How beautiful you look. Are you having a good time?"

Numbly, Joe nodded in silent agreement.

"You look great, too, Mom. Pretty good." Barbara shrugged and smiled, ignoring the first question completely. "I'm just disappointed that there aren't more men my age. Bruce Wayne was here but he left early - the old fuddy-dud. Poor Elliot is so busy mooning over Cathy, he isn't making very good conversation."

"What about his friend - the actor, from California?"

Barbara wrinkled her nose. "He's... not exactly my type. And if I have to dance one more dance with Chief O'Hara's nephew I'll ..." She trailed off, staring back at the swashbuckling pirate standing at her father's elbow. "I'll ... Hello."

Mr. and Mrs. Gordon exchanged pleased - if somewhat startled - looks as their daughter stepped forward and offered her hand to the young deputy district attorney. Commissioner Gordon jumped in hastily to make introductions.

"Joe - I don't believe you've met my daughter, Barbara."

"No, I don't believe I've met your daughter, Barbara," Joe repeated stupidly, folding his fingers around her tiny hand. "I didn't know you had a daughter." *'How did I not know you had a daughter like this!'*

"This is Joe Maxwell, deputy district attorney for Mr. Moreno."

Barbara put her other hand on top of his. "What a coincidence," she said slowly. "My friend Cathy works for Mr. Moreno, too."

"Cathy Chandler?" Joe asked.

She nodded, smiling a dazzling smile. "Yes - do you know her?"

"Sure - I know Cathy." Barbara's dark eyebrows lifted slightly and Joe hastened to explain. "Cathy works in my office. She's one of my investigators. How did ... how do you know her?" *'So Radcliffe knew her too! Huh, shows you who your true friends are!'*

"I spent a semester at Radcliffe," Barbara explained. "We roomed on the same hall in the dorm."

"No kidding," Joe said, mentally kicking himself for his inability to say anything intelligent. The chiming of midnight ceased with a final gong, and the room grew quiet for a moment before the hubbub resumed. The pause gave Joe a chance to recoup.

"Would you ... could I buy you a late supper ... or an early breakfast?" he volunteered. To his incredible delight and relief, Barbara squeezed his hand and smiled warmly.

"Supper sounds wonderful!" she insisted. "I'd love to, Joe." Crime-fighting made her hungry, and it had been a while since her late lunch. Besides - she would have gone sky-diving at dawn to get to know this charming, flustered gentleman a little better. Joe tucked her hand under the crook of his elbow and smiled at her, not quite believing his good fortune. Barbara leaned forward then kissed her father's cheek fondly, then her mother's.

"Have fun, Sweetheart," Commissioner Gordon murmured.

"Take a wrap," Mrs. Gordon cautioned. Barbara sighed and rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

"I have one, Mother - it's in the coat room. As for you two - behave yourselves." She put her other hand on Joe's arm and let him steer her toward the entrance.

"Mothers," Barbara sighed, shaking her head. Joe laughed.

"I know what you mean," He chuckled. "My mom's the same way." He smiled at the woman on his arm. "Do you like Italian food.....?"

Disconsolately, Dick Grayson poured himself another glass of punch. After Jamie and Mouse had left, he'd gone looking for Batman, but Batman was dancing with Catwoman, in a way that had made him loathe to interrupt. Near them, Vincent and Catherine were also dancing cheek-to-cheek, unmindful of the crowd. Alfred and the man Catherine and Vincent called Father were still playing chess and solving the world's problems over steaming cups of Earl Grey tea. Even Barbara Gordon, whom he might have asked to dance, had left on the arm of Catherine's boss, Joe. He'd made the transformation into Bruce Wayne's youthful ward, complete with holster and hat, and wandered over to the buffet.

'I might as well take off this silly costume and go home with Aunt Harriet,' he thought dejectedly. Dick lifted his glass, almost spilling his punch as someone tapped his shoulder. He turned, finally succeeding in sloshing his punch on the table. It was Jamie, Catherine's friend from the tunnels, and she was smiling at him. She caught his hand.

"Mouse and I and some of the others are going out to watch the fireworks. I came to see if you'd like to come, too."

Gratefully, Dick accepted. "Gosh - would I!" he said with feeling. He took her offered hand, and smiled back at her.

"That's great, Dick," Jamie said quickly. She started to turn, then paused and looked him impishly in the eye. "Or should I say, *'Robin'?*"

All the color drained from Dick's face.

"I - I don't know what you mean?" he stammered. Jamie leaned forward and ran her finger along the corner of his mouth, holding it up for him to see. The evidence was unmistakable.

"My lipstick," Jamie said matter-of-factly.

"Holy giveaways," Dick moaned. He started to pull free, but Jamie tightened her hold on his hand.

"Wait, Dick - hang on a minute," she insisted. "I'm not going to tell anyone. You've been... incredibly sweet to me all evening. As far as I'm concerned, you're a Tunnel dweller at heart, and that makes you family." She smiled suddenly, and Dick stopped trying to pull free. "Besides," she added shyly, "for a Topsider, you're kind of cute."

Dick gazed at her uncertainly. "Really?"

"Really." She studied him critically for a long moment. "When you're not wearing that hat," she added ruefully.

Sheepishly, Dick removed the ten-gallon hat and tucked it under his arm. "Better?"

Jamie nodded and sighed. "Better." Giggling, they ran to join the other young adults on the roof.

"See," Catherine teased. "I told you nothing would go wrong."

Vincent pulled her closer and sighed into her hair.

"I'm glad you feel that way. I'll let you explain everything to Father when he sees the state of this room."

"Oh." Catherine's voice was very small. "I'd forgotten about him being here." She looked up worriedly. "Do you suppose he'll be very upset?"

Vincent shook his head, gazing into her eyes. "No. I think he would be terribly disappointed if nothing catastrophic went wrong." He gazed around the disheveled room. "And I certainly think this will qualify."

Catherine giggled and nestled into his arms, pressing her face against the comforting thump of his heartbeat. The band began to play the theme from South Pacific, and she found herself murmuring the words.

"Some enchanted evening....."

Vincent smiled down at her, and curved his arms even closer around her.

"You will see your true love... You will see your true love across a crowded room... and then you will know..."

The clock struck midnight, and Vincent put a rather effective end to the song in the most appropriate way, surprising them both. When the kiss ended, Catherine looked up at him in wonder.

"Wow," Catherine said softly. "What would you do if I sang the rest of the song?"

Vincent leaned down and whispered something in her ear. Catherine gasped and laughed, but she snuggled against him warmly.

"My singing," she insisted, "is not that bad."

"Who is that guy anyway?" Elliot muttered, more to himself than to Bruce. Bruce smiled indulgently and slapped his reluctant twin on the back.

"Look, Elliot - I'll admit she's gorgeous, but there are lots of other women here."

"Not interested," Elliot murmured. Catherine's date in the cat mask stooped to whisper something in her ear as they danced, and Elliot could hear her musical laughter in response. He sighed despondently and Bruce began to tug in earnest on his companion's sleeve. Through sheer determination, Bruce peeled Elliot's attention from the dance floor.

"C'mon, Tweedle-Dum," Bruce said gently. "I'll buy you a drink."

There was one final sigh that seemed to waft up from the very depths of Elliot's being, and the entrepreneur let himself be led from the ballroom. They had almost made the hallway when Elliot stopped cold, his expression thoughtful. Bruce jerked around to see what was wrong.

"And just who," Elliot demanded, "are you calling Tweedle-Dum?" A ghost of the old smile played around his mouth. "If one of us is Tweedle-Dum - I can tell you right now it's not me."

Bruce rose to the challenge, grateful for his buddy's rising spirits. "Well, it's certainly not me---"

"Oh no---"

"Oh yes---"

Arm in arm, they started off again.

"You know," Elliot began wistfully. "I wonder if she has a twin sister..." His companion thumped his shoulder in a comforting manner.

"Forget it," Bruce insisted. "That kind never does."

Some Enchanted evening...

You will see your true love...

You will see your true love across a crowded room...

And somehow you'll know---

Right there and right then---

You'll see him again and again and again...