Wild Oats
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Wild Oats
by CharlotteCordelier

Summary

Bruce Wayne drops out of college and consoles himself the way normal billionaires do: international travel and casual romantic encounters. Alfred consoles himself with chickens. It all gets way out of hand.

Written for NaNoWriMo, the first three works in the series are 100% complete. A BatFam origin story without capes but with all the heroism.
“Bastards are not favoured in equity as legitimate children. The court will not supply the defect of a surrender of a copyhold in a conveyance or devise by a father to a natural child, as it will in favour of a legitimate child.”


The trouble began, as all Wayne family troubles began, as indeed all Wayne families began, with a trip abroad. Foreign travel was known to be dynastically fraught. It was family legend that the first (and last) Puritan of the dynasty met his wife at Leigh-on-Sea, shortly before boarding the *Mayflower*.

Alan had met Katherine in Antwerp, taking the air on the first class deck of the *Republic*.

Patrick Morgan, fleeing the bitter Gotham winter, had met his bride in Havana.

Thomas had met Martha in the French Alps, after she’d beaten him to the bottom of Grand Couloir.

Bruce should have had the chance to meet someone in Istanbul or Molokai or on Machu Picchu. He should have had a great many things. In the absence of his parents, Bruce’s guardian did his best. Alfred Pennyworth was a man of steely resolve, bloody experience, and incorruptible dignity. But he was still only a man. With every weapon in his arsenal and the last iota of his will, he shepherded Bruce Wayne through Roxbury Fielding. Princeton was, alas, beyond him.

Bruce absconded from his dorm room shortly before Thanksgiving break, leaving no forwarding address, but sending a hastily written postcard from Pearson International Airport. It was a disappointment, to be sure, for Alfred’s ward to abandon his education. But he allowed himself to imagine what kind of woman the young Master Wayne might return with.

Alas, as in all things, their son was the exception that proved the rule.

Rather than embracing the Wayne familial cycle, he repeated it. Bruce met many women. In many places. Many, many times.

For years.

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After Bruce’s initial departure, Alfred truly believed that he would return at any moment. He shut up the other family rooms, but maintained Bruce’s room punctiliously. He had, after all, not gone so far. The second card was postmarked from St. Augustine and it only said: *I’m sorry*. And then a week later, another from Oaxaca that said: *I can’t come home yet*. Only then did Alfred begin to consider the ramifications.
It was a full six months of postcards before Alfred gave into his deepest, wildest longings and began keeping bees. If a retirement hobby was good enough for Sherlock Holmes, then it was certainly adequate for him. He was very good at it. A few months later, the modest kitchen herb garden began its expansion. In the summer and fall, he took up canning, with produce from local farms. All winter, he enjoyed his own preserves, his own dried basil and oregano and thyme.

At first, he had assuaged his conscience by recalling that all these changes to the grounds and then to the kitchen were minor and reversible. Master Bruce might find them somewhat peculiar. But as he spread homemade marmalade on hand-kneaded bread that had risen on the counter of said kitchen, Alfred Pennyworth came to the conclusion that he really did not give a damn.

In February, he began to order books and then, in what could only be described as a minor break with reality, coveralls and a hideous brown boot that advertised itself as Xtra Tuf. When not in use, these items were hidden in a cabinet in the pantry, next to his Walther PPK--his secret shames. In March, he cleared the conservatory for the incubation of seedlings and then he began to visit nurseries.

As he unloaded his cart, full of tiny biodegradable pots and soil and seeds, as well as a convenient kneeling pad, a handsome new trowel, and several bound books on greenhouse gardening, the cashier shook her head in commiseration.

“Empty nest syndrome, huh?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Sorry,” she said, flushing. “It’s just, when my Jenny went off to Stonybrook, I could hardly leave my bed for a week. Then one day, I got up, and decided I was going to start making my own laundry detergent. Then it was artisanal soaps. Two years later and I’ve got half a dozen chickens and enough zucchini to choke a donkey.”

Alfred considered.

“Sorry,” she repeated. “I didn’t mean to. Ramble. It’s just...your cart.”

“Are they difficult?”

“Sorry?” Again.

“The chickens. Do you find they require much labor?”

In April, he began work on the orchard. At night, he began to sketch out designs for a proper chicken coop.

Meanwhile, in the dwarf wheat fields of Middle America, Bruce Wayne was buying a box of condoms in a one-stoplight-town’s lone gas station. He’d have to have been looking rather closely at the box to see that they were expired, as the date stamp had been smeared with the residue of motor oil. He was not looking closely. He paid with a large bill and leaving the change, as he hurried back towards the towering, striped tents pitched just beyond the squat brick buildings of town, and the dark-eyed woman waiting there.
Master Bruce never called. The postcards arrived sporadically. They were brief to the point of brusqueness. Occasionally, he wrote them in foreign languages. Twice from Tianjin, and once from Macau, they arrived smelling of Moonlight in Heaven. Alfred, his shame swamped by his curiosity, carefully sniffed every succeeding postcard but never caught it again.

Only once did Master Bruce express a true, uncorrupted sentiment. It came in a postcard with a photo of the Staronova synagoga and it reeked of liquor.

*I miss everything, Alfred.*

He kept them all in an antique, japanned box decorated with a delicate gilt willow tree. When they began to become disorderly, he bound each year’s missives in blue silk ribbon. In the winter, when he was melancholy, he would bring them out and read them with his afternoon tea and marmalade.
Chapter Summary

As his Mandarin improved, and he began to understand more of the Beijing dialect, he realized he was viewed more like a large, clumsy, harmless, and adorable puppy. Maybe a Newfoundland. It didn’t matter if he had just stepped away from a particularly good Baguazhang lesson, if he had a black eye or a split lip.

China felt like another planet to him. Its size and noise and streets tore at the illusions he had about his own competence and experience and self-knowledge. For the first time in his life, Bruce found himself an object of attention and speculation not because of who he was, but what he was. As a white man of a certain size and shape, he stuck out like a sore thumb and found himself pointed at and discussed in low tones, the way some people might point out a precocious child in public.

As his Mandarin improved, and he began to understand more of the Beijing dialect, he realized he was viewed more like a large, clumsy, harmless, and adorable puppy. Maybe a Newfoundland. It didn’t matter if he had just stepped away from a particularly good Baguazhang lesson, if he had a black eye or a split lip.

“So big! So handsome!” said one older woman to her friend, as she handed her a paper Starbucks cup.

“Do you think it’s true what they say about white men? That the larger…”

Bruce turned the corner, knowing the tips of his ears were turning scarlet. He had already overheard several iterations of this conversation, and it never ended well for his pride. His pride, at the moment, couldn’t afford to take any more abuse. When he had left his dorm in the middle of the night, with nothing more than his backpack, he had imagined that he would just get some air. Take a break. Possibly bum a smoke, or a joint. Take a road trip, Atlantic City maybe. Get some distance and perspective. Then he could go back and finish college and rub elbows.

Six months ago, he had been in Recife when it hit him: he was never going to get far enough to get that perspective, to get that free. Wherever you went, there you were. Bruce had proceeded directly to the nearest bar and drunk enough caipirinhas to believe that he could both speak and understand Portuguese. It had been a lot of caipirinhas.

“I don’t know what kind of man I’m supposed to be,” he’d said to the man on the bar stool beside him.

The other man had nodded and said something that sounded sage.

“I know, I know.” Bruce had taken another drink. “It’s just, what’s the point? I don’t want to go home the way I am. I want to be better. I want to be a good man.”

His new friend had clapped him on the shoulder and spoke earnestly.
“I don’t feel like a good man. But how do you learn that? How do you become good?” He had maybe been starting to raise his voice a little.

Another friend had joined him now.

“I have so much! It’s not fair that I don’t know what to do with it.” Definitely yelling now. “I don’t want to be like this. But I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to be good.”

Now his friends were helping him towards the door. Why? Hadn’t he paid for his drinks?

“I can buy more,” Bruce had said, suddenly despairing. “I have so much money. I just want to be good.”

They had deposited him firmly, but not unkindly, on the sidewalk outside. It had been fall in Brazil. Spring in Gotham. But he couldn’t go home. Not until he was good.

This commitment, however muddled, was earnest, surviving even the debilitating hangover that followed. From Recife, he made his way across South America, worked on a coffee plantation, survived a minor bus plunge, and climbed Machu Picchu. In Lima, he sent a few postcards and bought a plane ticket to Macau.

In Beijing, he wasn’t sure he was learning much about himself. But he was becoming more comfortable with confusion. He was confused a lot. One night, he mixed up times and missed curfew at his hostel, and ended up walking all night long. Eventually, he settled onto a park bench to watch the sun rise. As it did, a stunning woman in head to toe lycra ran past him. Bruce took a moment to appreciate the view, then quickly turned his eyes back to the dawn when the runner suddenly looped back to him.

“This isn’t a safe park for foreigners,” she said, in perfect English. She wasn’t even breathing hard. Her entire physical presence spoke of competence.

“I’m alright,” he said, somewhat surprised. “Thank you, though.”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Big fellow, aren’t you?”

Bruce sighed and blushed to the roots of his hair. She smiled and muttered something in Mandarin that he didn’t quite catch.

“Hn?”

“Can I interest you in breakfast?”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly--”

“When was the last time you had real American scrambled eggs and bacon?” she asked.

Saliva flooded his mouth.

“I’m Sandra.”

“I’m Bruce.” He considered his options. “Real bacon?”

The woman, Sandra, laughed and he realized she wasn’t just fit, but beautiful.
As the sun was rising in Beijing, it set in Gotham. A young woman in a bar was celebrating with her friends, a College Board envelope in hand. Her MCAT scores were excellent. Her GPA at Princeton was equally sterling. She was going to get into med school. She was going to be a doctor.

Across the room, a rough looking man with black hair was selling adderall to one of her classmates. They’d all bought from him occasionally, but she couldn’t recall his name just then. Had he ever told her what it was? He looked good, though, in a Knights t-shirt and worn jeans. He wasn’t the kind of man that doctors went home with. But she wasn’t a doctor yet.

“Another,” Sheila said to the bartender. She tossed the tequila down, dropped a twenty, and went to learn the dealer’s name.

Alfred might have continued in eccentric and pastoral solitude indefinitely, except for the day his back gave out. He was in excellent physical condition, for a man of his years. In fact, since he had taken up his outdoor pursuits, he was in better form than he had been in decades. He didn’t breathe heavily when he climbed the stairs, or grunt with effort when he turned the mattress in Master Bruce’s rooms.

These thoughts were very little comfort to him as he lay on his back in the garden, his hoe on one side, and the row of zucchini on the other. Alfred waited with the patience of a saint while low back spasmed almost continuously. His heels dug in the dirt as he waited for it to pass. He’d been shot before, and in his recollection it seemed a damn sight less debilitating than this. After a small eternity, or perhaps half an hour, he was able to rise to his knees and, using his abandoned hoe as a support, hobbled back to the house.

He made his way to the kitchen phone, and the small directory beside it. And then it struck him--there was no one to call. Suddenly, his pastoral solitude seemed more like exile. All his medical supplies were in his own room, but that was up a flight of stairs. Might as well be the moon. Alfred considered his only option. They hadn’t spoken since Bruce’s departure, but he prayed that Leslie would still take his call.

“Well, well, well,” she said smugly, half an hour later. “How the mighty are fallen.”

“Gracious as always, Dr. Thompkins.” Alfred said dryly, from the kitchen floor.

“What are you doing down there, Alf?”

“You know I loathe that--” The spasm began again and he ceased to speak, mostly to avoid taking the Lord’s name in vain in front of a lady. Some things were bred in the bone. To her credit, she ceased taunting him.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Oh, an hour or so.”

“Not the back, the hobby farm you’re running here.”

“I beg your pardon.”
“Do they not have hobby farms across the pond?”

“I say-- What are you doing to my trousers, Madam?”

“I’m going to give you a muscle relaxant and some steroids to help with the inflammation. If you’re a very good boy, I’ll let you have some ibuprofen later. Hold still, Pennyworth. My, my, you must be doing all the work yourself. This gluteus maximus is more developed than I recall.”

“You are a dreadful harridan.”

“Be nice, or I won’t give you the baclofen.”

“I should have called someone else.”

“Oh, Alf. You and I both know you don’t have anyone else.”

“You are a virago determined to destroy my spirit under the false flag of a medical license.”

“And you are a curmudgeon with what appears to be some sort of latent homesteading fetish. Please, tell me there’s not livestock. Tell me I’m not too late.”

“The Rhode Island Reds arrived last week. I expect the Australorps tomorrow.”

“Oh Christ. It’s worse than I thought.”

“I’ve placed a deposit on a Guernsey calf with some sort of commune in New Hampshire. I’ve already had an acre of pasture sown with the right grasses.”

“Alfred, this is now an intervention. Come on, let’s see if we can sit you up.”

Carefully, she helped him to a relatively upright position, leaning against the fading wallpaper of the kitchen. There was some profanity involved this time, but together they managed. Now he could see her properly, her salt-and-pepper bob and determined eyes.

“He doesn’t call, Leslie.” It was an unplanned confession.

“I know.”

“He sends postcards.”

“I got one,” she said. “From the Thackray, in Leeds.”

“I didn’t get one from Leeds. But he’s sent me three that smell of extremely costly perfume. I don’t suppose it’s his.”

“Have you eaten today, Alf?”

“I had a hearty breakfast.”

“Well it’s six now, and I think the muscle relaxants might be making you a little goofy. You got anything to eat around here?”

“There’s leftover lasagna in the refrigerator. I made the pasta myself. The sauce ingredients are all from the garden.”

“I’d poke a little more fun about that, but I bet it’s fucking delicious.”
“Language, Leslie,” he said, with a smile. The baclofen must be doing its business.

The lasagna was, in point of fact, fucking delicious.

Bruce had begun to make his may west from China, following the Silk Road, more or less. He met Mahala trekking on foot somewhere in Tibet, more or less. Something about the way she said her name made him think it wasn’t her real name. But he was going by Thomas, and had been since he’d snuck out of Sandra’s flat apartment months ago.

Mahala was stunning, desi, and sharp as a tack. The sex was...if not rough, very athletic. The air was thin and he gasped heavily while she scraped gouges into his shoulderblades. They were seated, with her in his lap, legs wrapped so that her ankles met at the small of his back. She was crooning in Urdu or maybe Arabic--he couldn’t quite catch it over the sound of the wind against the tent walls.

Maybe it was the altitude or the prayer flags or the fact that he’d been meditating twice-daily on saṃsāra. But he had the feeling that she had been waiting for him here. And that they would meet again. After a week, Mahala left him without fanfare. Bruce kept meditating. And he kept expecting to see her again.
“Well.” Leslie opened her mouth and closed it. She opened it, paused, and closed again. “It certainly looks…”

Alfred lifted his chin, tapping his idle fingers lightly against the waist of his wool blend trousers. He’d bathed, groomed, and dressed himself to the standard of an English country gentleman. A squire of middling means with enough leisure time to see to his own livestock.

“It’s very…” She cleared her throat.

Finally he turned, spearing her with a look. She looked tired, as usual, but also somewhat bemused now that she was out in the open air of the manor grounds, sunset approaching. The light soften the lines of her face and he hoped it did the same for his.

“Frankly, Alf, I think it might be nicer than my little townhouse.”

He made a vaguely pleased noise of satisfaction, and turned back to survey his new, hand-built, elevated, fence-skirted, three level chicken coop.

“It is a first effort,” he said dryly. It was a first effort, but the design, planning, and execution could have rivaled a rocket launch.

“Can I make jokes yet? Or are we still being serious?”

“Proceed.”

“I knew you wouldn’t wing it, but this is a veritable Cluckingham Palace.”

“Very good.”

“How do they get in? Where’s the hentrance?”

“Extremely witty, I’m sure.”

“I hope it’s not haunted. No one likes a poultry-geist.”

“Bit of a reach there, madam.”

“I hope you’re still drawing a salary, because this can’t have been cheep.”

“How much longer can I expect this to go on?”

“I think I’m about done. It really is a nice hutch, Alf.”

“Cooop.”

“I just hope chicken farming is all it’s cracked up to be.”

“If you don’t give this up at once, Leslie, I cannot possibly allow you to hold them.”
“They let you hold them?” she turned, her mouth open.

“They are very well mannered ladies.”

Leslie grinned with delight and ten years dropped from her face.

“We’ll begin with Miss Prism. She seems to be the best behaved.” He approached their fenced in run with mild confidence. Miss Prism, a fine Buff Orpington specimen, was all that could be wished in domestic fowl. Alfred lifted her gently, but firmly, and guided her into Leslie’s arms.

“I don’t know…”

“Just tuck her there, between your arm and your side. Beak facing out. There you go.”

“She’s so...soft.” Leslie looked at him with undisguised pleasure.

It had been the happiest accident, his back going out. Otherwise he might never have had a reason to call. And he would have no one to share Miss Prism with.

“Now, you may hold Gwendolen next. But Cecily will have to wait for your next visit. She’s rather naughty indeed.”

“My next visit?” Leslie asked, stroking Miss Prism very lightly.

“I hope I don’t have to build another coop to entice you, but I could always purchase a rooster and take up breeding.”

“Breeding?”

Alfred felt himself color very, very faintly.

“You don’t have to build another coop,” she said softly, and sidled up to him, brushing his shoulder with hers.

“Too kind,” he muttered, suddenly at a loss, staring at his shoes.

“But Alfred?” She waited until he met her eyes. “You do have to let me name the next chicken.”

Janet was a mistake. Bruce knew it shortly after they’d fucked the first time that evening. But he didn’t leave. He was still thinking about Mahala, still dreaming about the smell of incense in thin mountain air. So when the blandly pretty, sandy-haired woman across the hotel bar started buying him drinks, he just sort of...followed along.

“Wait,” he said in the elevator, narrowing his eyes. He’d been traveling for a month or so through fairly conservative parts of the Islamic world. He hadn’t so much as looked at a beer in that time, and now he was drinking astronomically priced Scotch (neat) in Baghdad.

“Wait what?” Janet asked, eyes twinkling.
“You’re Janet...Broderick?”

“Glad to know you’re not a totally sloppy drunk, Brucie.”

“What the hell are you doing in Baghdad?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

The elevator dinged and they stumbled into the hallway and, eventually, into her room. Bruce did not have a room on the premises. He’d planned on getting a drink and then heading towards his hostel, but then, Janet. He might not be a sloppy drunk, but this particular act of sexual congress was not especially graceful. They fumbled and tripped over their clothes and when they were finally horizontal, and he knelt between her legs, he finally remembered to ask about protection.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. So he didn’t.

When it was over, Bruce felt spent, but not particularly relaxed. Janet, on the other hand, lay beside him gasping. She pointed vaguely at his nightstand, and Bruce rolled over to grab a bottle of water for each of them. He could be ready to go again pretty quick, if she still interested. He turned to hand her the bottle and saw what was resting on the small table in the corner, the dusty cover camouflaged by the drawn curtains of the window.

He’d just had sex, meaningless and unimportant sex, in a room with a Torah scroll. A very, very old Torah scroll.

“What,” he said, voice flat, “is that.”

“Huh?” She lifted her head, snagged the water, and then dragged herself up against the headboard. “It’s a Torah.”

“I know that. Where did it come from.”

She made a flippant gesture, towards the city in general. Now that he was looking more closely, he could see more: a silver yad, a dented Kiddush cup, a tarnished crown, and the ancient looking mantle embroidered with what might be golden thread.

“Janet.”

“Oh, it’s all from the Farhud, we think. Jack got a tip about a cache. We’re not sure if if the kikes hid it, or if it’s some stash of Saddam’s. Either way, I was able to arrange for its removal.”

“Jack?” He recoiled, from the name as much as the slur.

“Drake. The man I married last year? Come on, Brucie, don’t pretend you didn’t know. It was in all the papers.”

“I’ve been traveling. What do you mean you arranged for its removal?”

He’d fucked a hateful married woman in a room with the lost treasures of the Baghdad Mizrahi Jewry, including the literal word of Gd. Bruce didn’t consider himself a very religious man, or superstitious, or faithful. But he found himself bracing for something terrible. A lightning strike? A column of fire? If he were immediately hit by a fully loaded moving truck, it would not surprise him.

“Oh, spare me the moralizing.” Janet tucked her damp hair behind her ear and drank deeply from
the water bottle. “If the Jews really wanted it, they would have taken it with them. They went out in dribs and drabs for years, rats off a sinking ship.”

“Janet. Please stop.”

“What?”

There passed then one of the most singularly uncomfortable moments of Bruce’s life. Because there, between him and Janet Drake, rapidly softening on its own, was the most tangible piece of evidence marking him as a son of Abraham.

Bruce was speechless. He was still drunk and now dumbfounded with his embarrassment, for himself and for her. And then there was the priceless contents of that table. Reasoning that he would think better with his pants on, Bruce dressed himself while Janet watched. Her body language was offended and even contemptuous. He picked up his dusty backpack and looked her directly in the eye.

“I expect to hear that all of this has been donated to a Jewish museum or historical society within the next month,” he said coldly.

“What the hell—”

“My Hebrew name is Efrayim, by the way.” He cleared his throat. “I mean it, Janet. A museum.”

“You’re not serious.”

“I am as serious as I have ever been in my life. A museum. Or I call Jack. And maybe the Gotham Gazette.”

“Get the fuck out of my room.”

“Believe me, I’m trying,”

Bruce got the fuck out of the room, the hotel, and then the country.

It was a Tuesday morning that should have been like any other Tuesday morning. Alfred normally didn’t even watch the news while he prepared breakfast, but he was experimenting with Challah french toast, and he didn’t want to leave the kitchen and risk being out of hearing range of the timer. The last time he had attempted bread pudding, he’d been distracted by a garden fence post that was suddenly listing to starboard. By the time the post was perpendicular again, the pudding was a solid black brick and the alarm company was ringing to make sure the house had not burned to the ground.

So he was working on the Times crossword, rather miffed by its level of difficulty, when the breaking news cut in. All he could think about was Bruce, Bruce travelling, Bruce boarding planes anywhere and everywhere. The planes. Master Thomas had taken meetings in those very buildings. Alfred had been there, to eat in the restaurant on special occasions. He remembered the view vividly. He only looked away from the television once, after that, to remove the French toast from the oven. He set it down to cool, turned the oven off, and promptly forgot about it. When the doorbell rang, Alfred almost ran.
“I didn’t want to be alone,” Leslie said. She looked pale and nervous, rather than frightened. “They closed everything. My neighborhood is locked down. And I didn’t. I didn’t have anywhere else.”

“I was just about to make a fresh pot.”

Neither he nor Leslie were terribly emotive people. Emotive people didn’t have to build chicken coops to express sentiment. But on this morning, they didn’t try to hide their distress from one another. They drank their tea and when the news came about the other planes Leslie actually crossed herself, in some sort of vestigial reflex. Alfred brewed yet another pot and they began to add whiskey to it.

When it was over, or when it at least seemed to be over for the day, Alfred put Leslie in his own bed. She was in no condition to drive anywhere and he was in no condition to drive her. He could have called a car service, but he knew they must be inundated with people trying to get in and out of Manhattan. If they even could get in and out of Manhattan. He put Leslie into his bed and then he went into one of the closets off the kitchen and retrieved a new bottle of Bar Keepers Friend. He wasn’t going to sleep, and if he didn’t keep his hands busy, he’d only drink himself into a stupor.

Across the world, that same Tuesday, Bruce was floating. Normally, this was nigh impossible, but the salinity of the Yam ha-Melah lifted even his dense body up towards the afternoon sun. Other tourists were splashing around, testing the limits of their outrageous buoyancy. But he was content to float, supported, maybe even cradled. His mother had wanted to take him to Israel, after his bar mitzvah. She had never been. She had wanted them to see it together.

He thought about Baghdad again and sloshed more water over himself, his face. The self-loathing was as unceasing as it was counter-productive. The point was, he reminded himself, the point was that fucking his way around the globe was over. It had been fun, until it wasn’t anymore. So now...he had to do the next thing. What the next thing was, though, was the issue. He meant what he had said in Recife. He wanted to be a good man. He wanted to be able to go home with his head high. He wanted Alfred to approve.

On the shore, there was a great deal of commotion. Someone yelled at their kids, in an American accent, to come in come in right away. Bruce didn’t want to know. It could only be bad. He thought, somewhere, he might hear a siren, and he tried to submerge his ears. It didn’t work.

He looked back towards the shore and the pillar of salt they called Lot’s Wife, and began to kick for shore.

Deciding to stop fucking around, metaphorically and otherwise, was surprisingly easy once he put his mind to it. His SAT scores were still valid. He had certainly acquired enough experience in the last four years to muster up a personal essay. Bruce loathed personal essays. It always felt forced, the emotion counterfeit. And anything that felt authentic cut far too close to the bone. Some things had to be kept safe. There were times, when he was drunk or just particularly tired, that he looked around himself, at all the people in the world, and wondered why their hearts and eyes were so shiny, and his heart was an oubliette.

Sometimes Bruce could hardly stand himself.

Bruce flew to Helsinki and then took a train to Tampere, where he checked into a proper hotel for
the first time in over a year. It was November, so there wasn’t really anything to do except hunker
down and work. He ran in the city when the sun was up and visited museums. And when the
weird-blue-twilight began to descend, he returned to his room and continued applying to schools.
Sometimes he thought he saw Mahala, in the corners of his eyes.

He liked Finland. He understood it. Finns liked strong coffee, strong liquor, and personal space.
But that wasn’t something you could put in an essay when you wanted someone to like you.
Instead, he wrote about Thomas Wayne. Not his father, but the Dr. Thomas Wayne that faced
outward from the Manor. Bruce’s father, the man who had set his arm so gently and also taken
away his night light in anger, that man was held back. Sherlock Holmes had his memory palace
and Bruce Wayne had his dungeon. His feelings dungeon.

“Paska,” he muttered, and went out for more coffee. No one in Finland would notice his black
mood, or if they did, they’d rather eat glass than mention it. He stepped into the little cafe. The
woman behind the counter frowned at him, said something derogatory he didn’t catch, and then
sold him pulla that was still warm from the oven. As he left, she half-shouted something about not
having a mouth full of tree bark.

Bruce wondered if he could afford to buy a flat outright. These were clearly his people.

In March, he was admitted to Cambridge, Stanford, Oxford, NYU, Columbia, and Johns Hopkins.
Oh, and Princeton, too. He looked over the letters. He’d been to all these places. It felt like moving
backwards, like moving back into his old life.

There was one envelope he hadn’t opened. He held it in one hand and tapped it against his other
palm. It didn’t have the cache of Oxford or even Princeton. But no one would know him. He
wouldn’t be approached to join any bullshit secret societies, just because his father had. And if he
didn’t like Paris or the Sorbonne, he could always leave. He’d left before.

Bruce loved Paris, and he didn’t leave. Not until he was a doctor.
College is boring, let's fast-forward. Also, yes, in Europe your med school and your undergrad are rolled into one long program designed to break your spirit. Please forgive my anachronisms, I just like jokes.

2002

“She’s here,” Alfred said.

On the other end of the phone, Leslie gasped.

“Garden lasagna?” he asked blithely, as though he hadn’t already chosen the finest vegetables in his demense.

“Yes, please. I’ll see you after work.”

He took more time than usual laying the table. He even arranged a small bouquet of roses, which he had begun to grow last year. In a concession to his back, he had hired a local contractor to help him construct the beds, which were installed behind the house, not far from Alfred’s own bedroom windows. When the plants were more robust, they would be visible from the kitchen and breakfast room. Assuming any family ever returned to use the breakfast room. He brushed that thought aside and went to work on the roses.

Leslie didn’t trouble herself with the doorbell anymore, just parked her ancient coupe in the drive and walked around to what she had taken to calling Hensington Palace. Alfred was waiting with a glass of red for her and a pair of those ugly brown boots in her size. She felt a sudden rush of affection for him, as British and absurd as he was.

“Where is she?” Leslie asked, grinning in anticipation.

“Good evening to you to, Doctor. Yes, my day was fine, thank you for asking.”

“Alf!” Absurdly, she felt a little like a child on Christmas morning.

“Right this way.” His eyes were twinkling, adding to the presents-under-the-tree feeling. Carefully, he lifted a juvenile chicken from the coop’s fenced area.

She was beautiful, with a creamy white breast and black wings. Leslie had thought the other chickens were cute, but this chicken was far superior. Her eyes were bright, her feathers perfectly formed. This was the Golden Age Film Star of chickens. Under Leslie’s hands, she could feel its unsure muscles and uncertain temperament. Leslie made little shushing noises and felt its heart beat.

“As she matures,” Alfred was saying, “her plumage will change so that she’s more mixed black and white. Dappled, almost.”
“What kind is she?”

“Of chicken? She’s a Pita Pinta Asturiana.”

“You made that up.”

“I most certainly did not. The Pita Pinta Asturiana is from Spain, of course, but is related to Basque chickens. The breed was almost extinct at one time, but its natural hardiness, combined with the diligence of Spanish breeders, has ensured the line.”

“Just now, while we were standing here, you made up a name and a history for my beauty pageant prize winning chicken.”

“I assure you, Leslie, you are the only one who doesn’t take my chicken enterprise seriously.”

“You gave me a chicken that’s prettier than I am, Alf. How seriously can I take it?”

“I selected a chicken whose beauty would be commensurate with your own.”

Leslie blushed and her eyes felt suspiciously hot. She looked down at her perfect chicken and stroked her little head gently with one finger.

“Well.” Alfred cleared his throat. “What shall we name her?”

“It was going to be something silly,” she admitted. Her list of suggestions had included: Apgar, Kidney Basin, Narcan, and Enema. “But she’s too pretty.”

If he were a little less British, Alfred might be looking pleased with himself.

“Mae West,” Leslie said definitively, looking down at her coloring. “Pure as the driven slush.”

Alfred, bless him, smiled his approval. “Unless my memory fails me, I believe I have a copy of She Done Him Wrong on DVD.”

“When women go wrong,” Leslie quoted, “men go right after them.”

“The lasagna is prepared, as well. And I’ve had the most interesting postcard from Paris.”

2003

Bruce was sitting for exams in Paris when his home country invaded Iraq. The prevailing mood on the Continent was not favorable, by any means. Bruce was less horrified and more baffled. He understood deception and he knew how nations got into wars. They had covered yellow journalism and Teapot Dome and the so-called annexation of Hawai’i at Roxbury Fielding. But he had never before been presented with evidence of his fellow countrymen being so willing to be fooled. To be made fools of.

Of course he was smarter than other people. Well, the vast majority of people. He knew that was no real moral advantage. He knew that meant that he often grasped things first, with the least emotional confusion. But he couldn’t understand why so many people were so unwilling to grasp things at all. It ate at him.
He kept a lid on it. He went to class. He meditated and set aside time to learn savate and practice jiu jitsu. He read newspapers and digested them and tried to understand and rationalize. Of course, eventually he lost it.

There had been a dreadful exam at the Sorbonne that day. He had struggled. He was not the only one. His cohort went out for drinks. POTUS appeared on television and began talking like Jimmy Cagney on quaaludes. Bruce counted at least three poorly coded allusions to Evangelical Christianity. At which point, Bruce threw his pint glass onto the floor and bellowed, like some kind of overeducated bear.

“He’s not even from Texas!” Bruce yelled, in very good French. “He was born two hours North of me, on I-95! Look at me. Look at me” Bruce was wearing Brooks Brothers, almost head to foot, with the sleeves of his oxford shirt rolled up to reveal the Patek Philippe watch that had belonged to his father. I don’t understand! I don’t understand.”

His friends were coaxing him off a barstool now. How had he gotten to standing on the barstool?

“He went to Yale!” Bruce called over his shoulder, as they hustled him into the street. “Yale!”

There was a polite smattering of applause, but it was unclear whether they were cheering for him, or for his removal. Bruce chose to believe the former and allowed himself to be led home and put to bed with a glass of water.

Much of his university experience went the same way: periods of intense study, minor windows of free time occupied with travel or binge drinking, and being put to bed with a glass of water. He continued to practice martial arts, and on nights when he couldn’t sleep, he ran. School itself was a blessing. For the first time in his life, he was thinking hard enough to occupy his whole brain at one time.

He didn’t date, but he didn’t live like a monk either. Bruce had brief liaisons with an assortment of interesting characters including an illusionist (with legs like Anne Reinking), a USAF pilot on loan to NATO (with a smile like Paul Newman), and a red headed journalist (with the bone structure of Kim Basinger). Bruce always made sure, extra sure, that his partners were single and the sex was safe. And that everyone came at least twice. It wasn’t about pride; it was about being thorough.

“Holy shit,” the pilot had said, sprawled across Bruce’s mattress. “Are you sure you’re not French? That felt pretty fucking French.”

“Hnn.” Bruce ran his fingers down the other man’s back, and backside. He knew that other branches of service sometimes called it the Chair Force, but it didn’t look feel like Jordan did a lot of sitting. Jordan was the name on his worn bomber jacket, and the Academy ring looked genuine. They hadn’t done much talking at the brasserie, just raised mirrored eyebrows and headed for the door.

“Holy bejeezus fuckballs. Are you ready to go again?”

“It’s alright.” Bruce felt himself begin to blush. He knew, intellectually, there was nothing wrong with a short refractory period. That it was considered desirable. But it was still...outside the normal range. “We don’t have to--”

“Oh no, no way. I have to pay you back for doing French stuff to me.”

“You are aware that the prostate doesn’t have a nationality.”

“Apparently mine does.” Jordan sat up and scrubbed his hand across his face. “Okay, I’m going to
go eat another slice of that Cletus fetus and drink some water and then I’ll be good to go.”

“Clafoutis.”

“Yeah that’s what I said. Hey, also, are you rich? Because if this is a Fifty Shades situation, you should know that the US Government technically owns my ass already.”

“I am rich, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Good answer. Perfect answer. Can we afford more clap foots? And pizza? Do they make pizza in this town?”

Despite Jordan’s resolution to misunderstand every word in the French language, Bruce truly liked him. It was awkward when they parted, and depressing. And more than a little embarrassing, when Jordan had to more or less explain Don’t Ask Don’t Tell to him. Jordan wouldn’t even take his phone number.

“There was a...thing. In Lisbon last year.” Jordan flushed.

“You were caught.”

“Almost. Maybe. I don’t know.”

“I understand.”

“Uh, no offense, Bruce. But I doubt it.”

Bruce considered. “That’s fair.”

“Very big of you. Thank you for that.”

“I hope your prostate decides to travel internationally again someday.”

“You made a joke. Did you just make a joke? Three days fucking my brains out of my ears without so much as a smile and now he’s making jokes.”

“I smiled. I just did it from behind.”

“More jokes. Jesus Christ, you’re an asshole.”

“Don’t crash your plane.”

“I’ll try. Be good, Wayne.”

“Be safe.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

2006

Leslie wasn’t entirely sure how it had happened, but she and Alf were...what? Going steady? At
some point in her thirties, she had accepted that she was not wife material. She didn’t regret that for a moment, but she did wonder sometimes how other women did it. There were a few women she’d met during her residency who had married, and one or two who had children before they applied for fellowships. Leslie could see the appeal of not being alone. There were times when she was chopping vegetables or working out or getting into bed when she thought to herself: what if I wasn’t alone for all this?

But other people wanted so much. The heterosexual male, she had long believed, was one of the most useless creatures on the planet. Once every few years, she tried to give one of the species a chance. The result was mediocre sex and aggravation. Why did Leslie have to always pick the place for dinner? Why was Leslie expected to do his laundry with hers? Why was it Leslie’s fault that her tourney brackets were always better? They needed constant care and feeding. And that was before they realized she had no interest in motherhood, no desire to give up every moment of her free time to care for someone who might or might not love her back in thirty years.

No, it was better to be alone than to be a drudge. She knew she was different, that it didn’t feel like that for other women. If it were a fault, the fault lay with her. When Thomas and Martha died and left her with half of the guardianship of the world’s most emotionally fragile child....well. She had no qualms about letting Alfred handle the heavy lifting. Her visits became more and more sporadic. And finally, Bruce went to college and then he was in the wind. And it seemed like fate had put a period to her odd little family.

Then Alfred had thrown his back out and while she was pulling his pants down on the kitchen floor and he was bitching about it it hit her: she missed this. And at some point in the following week, when she’d been invited back for more homemade, homegrown food, she finally clued into the fact that he was lonely too. Leslie talked Alfred out of purchasing a dairy cow; Alfred talked her into canning his tomato haul or planting peach trees or whatever Little House on the Raritan nonsense he’d come up with. She’d bitch and moan about it, but then he’d send her home with tote bags full of produce go distribute at the clinic and, well.

She’d never been with someone who gave more than they took.

The man bought a laying hen for her, for Christ’s sake. She got daily texts about egg production. So, yes, they were an item now. After they watched reruns of Morse or Forsythe, they went to bed together. Even there he was kinder and gentler and more patient than any other man she’d ever been with. And not at all uptight, for the record. In bed or out of bed, he never asked her for anything she wasn’t willing to give him.

Even a commitment to watch his illicitly obtained episodes of British mysteries. A few months ago, when the premiere date for Lewis, the long awaited sequel series to Morse was announced, Alfred had declared he would have recordings air mailed to him across the pond.

“Isn’t that piracy?” she had asked, pretending to clutch her pearls.”And who across the pond is willing to go through all this trouble for a TV show?”

“I still have contacts in special forces,” he said, absolutely without irony.

“Shouldn’t they be off invading some tiny tropical island that has no hope of resisting the grasping arm of British Imperialism?”

“Everyone needs a hobby, Dr. Thompkins.”

It still surprised her, when she finished work for the day, that she didn’t resent the drive out to the Manor. She looked forward to it. Alfred would be there, with a glass of something alcoholic and
perfectly suited to both the weather and the accompanying meal. The food would be excellent. Then they would sit on the sofa and she could put her head on his shoulder or, if it had been a rough week at work, she would rest it on his lap and he would run his hand through her graying hair and tell her what the chickens had been up to.

“Thanks, Alf,” she said, as he spread an afghan over them.

“Of course.” He settled himself and arranged the throw pillows so that she could lay sideways on the sofa without getting a crick in her neck. He pressed a few buttons on one of the myriad remotes and Lewis began.

“Not of course. I mean...thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Leslie.”
Bruce found about Le Chat Noir entirely by accident. His externship was almost over and he barely had the bandwidth to remember that vegetables were a food group. He’d been awake for thirty-six hours and he was out of coffee, which was why he was in line at the ATM wondering what the French word for sleet was, because it was stinging his neck, striking just above his crumpled collar. At least it was help keeping him awake.

In front of him, a well-dressed man and woman were arguing in hushed tones about how much money to withdraw. He heard the word *offrande* and *le chat noir* and *collier de jade*. They withdrew an amount that made him blink. He didn’t know what kind of cat accessory could be so expensive, even if it was composed of jade. Now the couple, excited and confused by Parisian geography, were arguing about directions.

“Excusez-moi,” Bruce broke in. “Le magasin Cartier est au sud d’ici.”

“Merci, merci.” The man thanked him with a hearty handshake and kissed his wife on the mouth. They looked perfectly normal, a middle class, middle-aged couple from the suburbs. But there was a light in their eyes, a kind of fervor. Or maybe hunger. Then they hurried off, south towards Cartier.

“Le Chat Noir est revenu,” whispered the woman, tossing it over her shoulder.

Bruce bought coffee, went home, slept for twelve hours, made the coffee, and began hunting. He had approximately five hours until he had to be back in the hospital and he made good use of them. By the time he reported for his shift, he had what he needed: a ticket, a clean suit, and a small package wrapped with brown paper and string. The time fairly flew by and although two separate attendings complimented his performance, Bruce barely registered the praise. He handed off his patients, showered, and dressed with more care than he had in years.

Le Lapin Agile was a small building in Montmartre with green shutters and enough history to give the air a certain weight. Just inside the door, an unobtrusive young man was accepting tickets and, Bruce was fairly sure, screening the guests. The usher took the ticket of one woman who seemed just a little too eager, and scrutinized it before tucking it into a separate pocket of his jacket. Bruce approached and quickly passed muster. He reached into his own jacket pocket and produced the small package.

“Ceci est pour la dame.”
“Oui, oui.” The usher accepted the small gift and secreted it somewhere on his person. “Restez à votre place après la représentation. Je vous prendrai.”

“Merci.”

Inside the Le Lapin Agile, the atmosphere was quiet and charged. People ordered drinks in hushed tones. Couples held hands. Bruce ordered Scotch, neat, and sipped it slowly. He looked for the couple from the ATM, but they must have bought tickets for another night.

When the curtain finally rose, he thought for a moment there had been some kind of error. His brain expected spectacle and instead, there was a quotidian room and a young woman in sweats. The stage looked like every dance studio he’d ever seen, in person or on screen. Stage right was a mirrored wall with a barre, stage left was a plain white wall hung with action photos of the greats (Fonteyn, Tallchief, Copeland, and Markova), and upstage hung a large tapestry printed to look like a red brick wall. The woman in sweats slung a worn Bloch branded duffle bag to the floor, kicked off her Uggs, and slid easily into the splits, facing stage right into the mirror. Bruce looked closer.

Le Chat Noir was in fact black, or perhaps multi-racial, with clear brown skin and a glossy black ballet bun. After loosening up her shoulders, she examined herself in the mirror as she began to stretch her sides, then sliding into front splits in both directions, then effortlessly rolling herself to standing. Still looking at herself, not the audience, she unzipped her black hoodie and tossed it at her bag. Underneath was a plain black leotard, with modest cap sleeves. Then she slid her stocking feet into nude ballet slippers, and then into first position and began to perform a more standard progression of exercises. They must have some French names, but there was lots of bending from the waist and knees. There was a languidness to her movement beyond that of a typical ballerina or ballet class. It dawned on Bruce, rather slowly, that the reason she moved with a little more sensual grace, and the reason she kept her eyes on the mirror, was that the pleasure in this performance was for her. Not for them.

By the time she was warmed up, and had removed her pants to reveal shapely legs in prim pink tights, Bruce was achingly hard. Then for the first time she turned towards the audience and snapped her fingers, making him actually startle. She turned her back and a very faithful recording of Strauss began to play. Bruce felt his heartbeat begin to pick up speed. The Dance of the Seven Veils. Le Chat sauntered back to her duffle back, wiped her brow and face with a towel. Then reached up and with the pull of a single pin, released a waterfall of shining hair. She performed a series of chaîné turns in front of the mirror, spotting herself, and letting the hair lift up and away from her body. Then as the strings picked up dramatically, she paused and watched herself, lips parted, as she pulled one cap sleeve off, and then another, and then she wiggled out of the leotard entirely.

Bruce was in danger of sudden heart failure or spontaneous combustion or sudden heart failure caused by spontaneous combustion. He breasts were small, natural, with dark nipples that puckered in the cooler air of the theater. Or, again the possible myocardial infarction, perhaps her own arousal. The music went on and the dancing became even less structured and more overtly sexual. All the while, she appeared to ignore the audience, giving herself looks of pride and satisfaction. When she did look in their direction, it was a knowing invitation. I know. You should be so lucky. Le Chat bent at the waist to remove her slippers and a man at the table behind Bruce gasped and knocked over his water glass. When the tights came off, Bruce reached for his drink, realized his hands were trembling too hard, and clasped them tightly in his lap.

He had no idea what traditional ballet dancers wore underneath their tights, but he sincerely doubted it was an elaborate thong of black silk, separate pieces held together with very showy
Bruce never did remember exactly how the show ended. He remembered staring at the knots, trying to memorize them photographically. He needed those knots for something. Later. She took her bows in a magnificent teal silk kimono. It was a good thing that he had to wait in his seat for the usher to come get him, because he needed fifteen minutes at least before there was enough blood flow to his brain to make gross motor movement advisable. At least, when the usher came to fetch him, he had stopped sweating and was able to grip his drink well enough to finish it.

It came as no surprise that he was not the only person waiting for a private audience with Le Chat. A handful of others were there, whom the usher arranged quickly, addressing them by what must surely be the nature of their gifts.


Ah. Everyone else had gone with the classics, then. Well. That could work for him. Or against him. While he waited, Bruce mentally reviewed the day’s charting and the patients on his ward. Internal medicine was not his grand passion. But at least there plenty to memorize. In some ways he actually missed his early math and science courses. The part of his brain that was always whirring away, always chattering and concerned about carbon emissions and the recession and if Alfred’s osteoarthritis was progressing, that was silenced if he fed it problem sets to chew and digest. He wished he had time for more savate practice.

“Mr. Bat,” the usher said at last.

Inside her dressing room, Le Chat was not exactly what he had expected. The teal silk dressing gown had been cast aside in favor of sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt identifying her as someone named Sasha Fierce. Not what she had worn at the beginning of her performance. These were far more lived in. He could see two or three darker freckles on her tawny skin now.

“I hope you don’t mind. I went ahead and changed,” she said, sitting on a battered leather ottoman and pulling on a pair of large wool socks up and over the cuffs of the sweatpants to keep out any drafts. She’d already put on a toque as well, and it occurred to him that there was no way that all her hair could fit under it. A wig. Of course.

“Not at all,” he said, settling himself on a hideous but very comfortable loveseat. “Although this is the first time I’ve been called Mr. Bat.”

“Ah.” Le Chat tilted her head slightly and narrowed her eyes. “I’m guessing it’s Dr. Bat.”

“Guessing?”

“It could be Bat, Esquire, but I’m not getting a lawyer vibe from you. You’ve got lawyer money, but I can tell you don’t spend much time in suits. So I’m going with young doctor, maybe a resident? And this,” she closed her hand around the gift, “says that you’re old money.”

“Yes.” Bruce looked down at his hands. “On all counts.”

“This belongs in a museum.” Le Chat held it tight and close to her chest.

“I can take it back,” he said, reaching towards her.

“Not a chance in hell.”
“Are you sure?” he asked, voice serious. “It’s not too late to do the right thing. For art history and our global cultural heritage.”

“Absolutely not. He belongs to me now.”

“She,” he corrected without thinking.

“What?”

“Look closer.”

Le Chat opened her palm and peered at the tiny, delicate netsuke. It was made of boxwood, roughly spherical, about one and a half inches in diameter. A tiny, perfect bat crouched, wings half-folded. Its face was friendly, peering out without fear. And there, just beside the shoulder joint, under one wing...

“See it?”

“There’s a baby!” she said, in genuine delight. Something moved inside his chest, something extremely creaky with disuse. “Does that mean double the blessings?”

His eyebrows shot upward. The creaky thing in his chest protested at a sudden spasm.

“Because of the near homophone in the Chinese,” she said kindly, as though she were explaining it to an ignoramus. “Between the word for blessing and the word for bat.”

“But the netsuke is a Japanese art.” Bruce found himself feeling somewhat sly.

“Yes, but the imagery is loaned from their neighbor.” Le Chat was smiling now and it was genuine.

“I think I owe you three more bats.” The feeling in his chest was warm now, the movement easier.

“I, for one, will not be satisfied until you have provided me with all my wufu.”

“I’m Bruce Wayne.”

“I know.” Her smile was sharp. “I grew up in the Thomas and Martha Wayne Home for the Boys and Girls of Gotham.”

“Oh.” Bruce dropped his head. All the rusty movement behind his sternum stilled at once. He couldn’t tell whether all the blood had left his face or if it only felt that way. Of course she knew. Of course that was the reason he had been admitted. Of course she had changed into pajamas. Not because she was comfortable, but because she’d rather not expose herself to him. He could feel his pulse inside his ears, so he tried to focus on the floor. It was clean, but battered by centuries of wear. Maybe Josephine Baker had been here.

“Hey,” Le Chat was saying, when the noise of his heartbeat receded. “I’m so sorry--I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought you already knew who I was, and that’s why you came.”

“No,” he said, raising his eyes to find her kneeling beside him. “No, I don’t even know your name.”

“Oh, shit.” She sat back on her heels and put a hand to her forehead. “I was trying to be clever. To impress you. I didn’t mean to...I’m Selina Kyle.”
“Hi,” he said rather weakly.

“Hi. I’m opening the cognac now. I think we both deserve some.”

It was very good cognac. Bruce sipped it thoughtfully, not sure what the next move was.

“See,” Selina Kyle said, “I got the netsuke, and it was the cleverest gift, plus you wrapped it in a vintage Hermes scarf, so I peeked from backstage, while you were waiting. You look just like--well, I’m sure you know that. Anyway, that’s why I put you at the back of the line. So we could actually talk.”

“Is that...is that why you changed?”

“I changed because I was freezing and tired of pretending to not be freezing. It’s hard to banter about nineteenth century Japanese art like that. And I wanted to talk.”

“About Japanese art history.”

“I like Japanese art history.” She exhaled. “I didn’t mean to pounce on you like that, really.”

“You really want those bats don’t you.”

“Bruce,” she leaned forward, smelling like neroli, “you have no idea how bad I want them.”

“Oh, I have some idea,” he said, and sipped his cognac.

Selina, sensing that he was no longer in immediate danger of fleeing the room, relaxed back into her chair, sitting in a half lotus.

“How long have you been a dancer?”

“My whole life, give or take the year or so when I couldn’t walk.”

“How much formal training did you have?” he asked. “And was it all ballet?”

“Oh dear. An audition.”

“Sorry,” he said ruefully. “I’ve been in medical school for six years. Clinical interviews are the only form of conversation I remember. And I’m actually not very good at them.”

“I’m shocked.”

“I’ve been informed that my interpersonal skills are terrible, even for an American.”

“How about I ask the questions for a while. Where are you in school?”

“I’m finishing my externat, so really I’m still in medical school. If I match with the right program in the spring, I’ll still have at least a year of talking to people before I can retreat into the morgue.”

“Is that a metaphor about where good doctors go to die?”

“It’s where all doctors go to die, eventually.” He was smiling again. “But I want to go into pathology.”

“Pathology?”

“I like mysteries and dislike patients.
“You really are that bad with people?”

He held his hands out, palms up in a gesture of *look around you*.

“Good point. So, Bruce, how long do you have until you have to be back at the hospital?”

“Six and a half hours.”

“And when’s your next free night, no on calls?” She turned back to the well worn vanity and began scribbling something on a piece of paper.

“Twelve days.”

“Good,” she held it out. “Go home. Rest up. Eat your vegetables”

“Yes, ma’am.” Bruce rose.

“Have a good night, Bat.”

“Bonne nuit, Chat.”

In October, he found the courage to invite her to an election party. She’d never met any of his friends from school or work. And they had never met the mystery woman that took up all his free time.

“You’re hosting a party?”

“Yes, and if enough people come, no one will notice my social ineptitude.”

“You’re not socially inept. You’re extraordinarily well endowed with social graces.”

“You saw the scarf, didn’t you.” It wasn’t a question. Bruce looked down to see that, yes, the silk was indeed visible in the front pocket of his wool coat, which he’d cavalierly tossed in the general direction of a chair when they got home from dinner.

“You’re the most handsome, fascinating, gregarious fellow I ever knew.”

“Alright, alright.” He feigned a put-upon sigh and stood up. He tiptoed over the chilly floor to his coat removed the tiny bundle of Hermes and handed it over, watching her unroll it. Sometimes he thought he could watch her open presents forever. Every treat he brought her, Hungarian rosewater or macarons or a small wheel of Brie, was like the first she’d ever received. It was intoxicating, to give someone a piece of happiness that pure.

At the center of the scarf, she found the ring and stilled.

“It’s not one of those rings,” he assured her.

“Oh,” she said with relief, then looked up to see if she’d hurt his feelings. She hadn’t, so she examined her gift with undisguised curiosuity.

It was small, gold, and older than the scarf. The shank was plain but on the head of the ring rested
the feet of a small bat. The wings extended up and over the bat’s head, where he held a small sapphire. The webbings of the wings were enameled to match the stone.

“Oh, Bruce. It’s not Rene Lalique. Tell me it’s not.”

“It’s not Rene Lalique.”

“Oh Christ it’s a Rene Lalique.” She slipped it onto the index finger of her right hand and admired it. “That makes three bats.”

“It took me some time to find the right one.”

“Well now I have to go to your party.”

“Good. Bring something round.”

“Round?”

“It has to be O shaped. Did you request your absentee ballot yet?”

“Bruce. Bat. Do I look like the kind of person that requests an absentee ballot?”

“I don’t know. Let me see.” He would take any chance to examine her frankly. He didn’t want to seem like he was ogling. He didn’t want to feel like the audience, not when they were alone. But it was hard because she was so beautiful. Her

She had small braids, box braids just long enough to brush her collarbones, which he had been very curious about. She had rolled her eyes, when he had asked about her hair, said she didn’t have time or energy to educate him, and directed him towards YouTube. This had been early, after the first or second time she had spent the night in his small flat. There had been no way for her to know how seriously Bruce took research challenges.

Now, in bed, he reached out and brushed the backs of his knuckles against her braids. He loved her hair, too, but he understood now it was inappropriate to talk about too much. Fetishization was the word he had learned. He leaned in close and pretended to be examining the three (three!) freckles on her left collarbone. She smelled just a little bit like roses and he knew now that she bathed with a brick of Savon de Marseille filled with crushed petals. Bruce placed a firm kiss to the center of her sternum.

“Are you looking for my voter registration?”

“Hnn.”

“You know if democracy always worked like this—” She stopped talking and squeaked instead.

The thing about Bruce Wayne was that she had no idea what to do with him. Which was probably why she was here, in his kitchen, carefully emptying a red-white-and-blue jello concoction out of a circular mold that was probably intended for better things. Selina Kyle had never made jello in her life, but here she was, on take three of a patriotic election night dessert.

“We can find something at the patisserie,” he said after the second failure.
“Kiss my ass, Wayne.” She would not be defeated by gelatin. She would not be defeated by this party. She would most definitely not be defeated by his bunch of overeducated future doctors. This jello would prove that. Selina exhaled as the jello left the mold in a smooth motion and landed on the platter with a satisfying plop.

“Score one for the stripper,” she muttered darkly.

“How?” Bruce asked from behind her, where he was connecting his new, huge flatscreen to the equally new cable box.

“Victory is mine,” she replied. And then she took a moment to appreciate the view. He was on his hands and knees which, frankly, was one of her favorite places to put him. The scrubs did nothing for him when he was on his feet, but improved immeasurably when he had his ass in the air. She always did like him on hands and knees. Victory was hers.

It wasn’t often that she felt inadequate these days. When she’d started stripping, it had felt seedy. A lot of the time, it had been seedy. But then she’d gotten good and she’d gotten fans. She went from opening clubs in Hackensack to closing out the clubs in Brooklyn. Emboldened, she’d made the transition to real burlesque in Manhattan. It hadn’t been easy. She shared studio apartments and ate a lot of tuna salad.

“You could always make more,” one roommate had said. Rafael was the most talented pole dancer she’d ever met, and he was on his way up in the world.

“I’m not interested in sugar daddy stuff.” She didn’t have anything against it, or any other sort of more intimage sex work, but she like the control that she felt on stage. Off stage, she became less dominant, less powerful. She wanted different things when she wasn’t oiled and glittered to high heaven.

“It’s too bad,” Rafael said. “But you can still make them pay.”

“My tips are good.” Her tips were great, frankly, but it was hard to make them go very far in New York City. Not with the upkeep associated with dancing in the best clubs.

“No, no,” he shook his head and went to his closet to retrieve a pair of brand new Ferragamo boots. Selina guessed they were worth about two, maybe three thousand dollars.

“Holy shit.”

“I’ll probably keep these ones, but I got a David Yurman piece last month that I used to pay off my credit card.”

“And you’re not fucking these guys.”

“I’m not. Well, not always. And it’s guys and girls.”

“How?” Selina couldn’t stop thinking about how good a cable bracelet would look on her wrist. Maybe one with citrine.

“So, I kinda put it out there that after my solo show on Saturdays, I hang out in the dressing room for an hour or so.”

“You hold court.”

“I do. And if someone happens to bring me a present? I hold court longer.”
“Okay,” she bit her lip, thinking aloud. “So I need a solo show. How do I get a solo show.”

“You need to be the best at something. There is not a harder working twink in showbusiness than me.”

“I want to do different stuff,” she insisted. “I tried to mix in some ballet in April. They told me they wanted something more urban.”

Rafael snorted. “Yeah, and they always want me to be ‘spicier’ too. But that doesn’t mean you can’t slip something besides Rihanna into your set.”

“Right. It’s just… I’m not exactly Dita von Teese.”

“Honey.” He reached out to take her hand. “Dita von Teese isn’t Dita von Teese. You are what you say you are.”

“Are you quoting Lupe Fiasco?”

“Be the ho you want to see in the world.”

She threw a boot at his head. “There is something wrong with you.”

That night, after a dangerous amount of Fireball, they worked out what would become Selina’s first headline act. It involved: pink pointe shoes, a full body black lycra catsuit, Bloc Party, and a little black cat ears headband. Rafael begged to add a tail or whiskers, but she had to put her foot down.

“I am not going full furry.”

“Oh fuck,” he gasped. “I didn’t even think of that. You could for sure retire on tips from the furries.”

“You need Jesus.”

It was a long climb from Manhattan Furry Bait to Le Chat Noir, but Selina was in Bruce Wayne’s apartment, wearing a handcrafted art nouveau treasure and drinking wine that cost more than her monthly utilities. And it turns out she and the young Prince of Gotham (did princes have to hook up their own television sets?) were shockingly compatible. He brought her fresh baked palmiers with the same reverence that he had delivered her prized netsuke bats.

And in the end his friends weren’t so bad. She could practically feel Bruce eavesdropping on her conversations, though. Maybe explaining microaggressions to him had been a mistake. The smart money said he was keeping track of offenses committed. While the rest of his friends were polite and educated, they were also pretty fucking clueless. Still, she had prepared for the worst, but only one of them was truly an ass. The ass, a creeper she nicknamed Jean-Mustache, either had terrible English or excellent dogwhistles. Possibly both.

“You and him,” he pointed at Senator Obama on screen, “are half a black each, yes?” And later: “I did not know that urban people studied ballet.” And then after more celebratory wine: “It is because you could not afford American college? This is why you dance for men?”

At that point, Bruce had stopped refilling Jean-Mustache’s wine glass and steered him to the other side of the small sitting room. Conversation was easier after that. Plus, Jean-Mustache left soon after, citing an early shift at the hospital. The other French women and men left before the western states closed the polls. But she and Bruce remained. Jean-Mustache’s comments ate at her, though, bringing up something hot and shameful, while they waited for Nevada to be called.
“I wanted to go to college.” Selina hadn’t planned on saying that out loud. But it just bubbled up. Like stomach acid. She had the money now, after her European tour, to go. She could pay cash at a decent four year school in the states, no problem. “I still do.”

“Okay,” Bruce said. She could see that he was a little tipsy and trying very hard not to fumble this answer. “Then you should go.”

“I never finished high school.”

“Okay. You should still go.”

“I know.” She crossed her arms defensively and drank some more wine. Fucking Jean-Mustache. The world was full of men like him, who’d had all their choices from the very beginning. That man had never worn lucite heels or lined up at a food pantry. The Jean-Mustaches of the world could only fail up.

She cried when they declared him President-Elect Obama, and cried harder when his family joined him on stage. She didn’t even like children, and those two were so precious she was ready to lay down on train tracks for them already.

“Hey,” Bruce put an arm around her and squeezed. “It’s okay?”

“I know, I know.” What was she supposed to say. Rich white guys got to be in charge all the time. Sarkozy was on his third wife, for fuck’s sake. The little Obama girls were wearing black tights and glossy black shoes. She sniffled and wiped her eyes and he handed her a clean handkerchief from his shirt pocket.

The thing about Bruce Wayne was that, even wine drunk, he knew enough to know what he didn’t know. He was a nearly unbearable stick in the mud about somethings (absentee voting and safe sex among them). But whenever she confronted with his own ignorance, he never resented it. Well, he never resented her. He resented the ignorance passionately. One night at her place, when he’d started talking about feminism, she threw her copy of *Sister Outsider* on the bed and told him to get his head out of his ass. After she brushed her teeth and cooled down, she came back in to apologize, only to find that he’d begun to read it in earnest.

“I can get another copy,” he’d said, upon seeing her return to the bedroom.

“You’re reading it.”

“Well. It’s the first time you’ve thrown a book at me. It must be important.”

When confronted with a weepy ‘half a black’ burlesque dancer on election night, he was capable of offering comfort and keeping his mouth shut. It was a lot, to be comforted politely.

“I’m really happy,” Selina whispered.

“Me, too,” Bruce whispered back.

Bruce was happy, in a deep and deeply moderating way. He drank less and yelled at fewer televisions. He left the hospital more and practiced savate and jiu jitsu again. He bought a lot more
pastries and Hermes scarves. His happiness, that should have been the first sign of trouble.

Bruce had an extremely romantic New Year’s Eve lined up. Bruce was, in fact, terribly anxious about how romantic it was. He had consulted with the most brutally honest people he knew: Parisian shopkeepers. First, he volunteered himself to work through Christmas in exchange for New Year’s. Next, he solicited advice from one of his cohort, a woman named Fabienne who has happily married to a man who adored her, even if he only saw her at night before she fell into bed. Her advice led him to a tiny boutique with lingerie of handmade lace and two women whose faces seemed frozen in disdain at the presence of this large American. Recognizing expertise when he saw it, Bruce threw himself on their mercy.

“Vous êtes tous les deux américains?” one of them asked. Her eyebrow was permanently arched in skepticism.

“Oui,” he said apologetically.

The two saleswoman made identical notes of Gallic disdain.

“Conseillez-moi, s’il-vous-plaît. J’ai ses mensurations.”

More skepticism.

“Elle est trop belle pour moi. La seule chose que je dois lui offrir, c’est de l’argent. Mesdames, s’il vous plaît.”

Parisians were irredeemable snobs but they understood the opportunity presented by a groveling man for whom money was no object. They wrapped his purchases in tissue paper so thin you could read newsprint through it. It went into a small box with a satin bow and then into a paper shopping bag. In addition, they gave him very specific instructions for how to proceed, what to purchase, cook, and how to lay the table.

Now he was in line to buy champagne. Selina had a show, but she said she’d try to be at his place a little before midnight, or shortly after. Her run at Le Lapin Agile was almost up. They hadn’t talked about it, but she was definitely waiting on a reaction. Bruce just had to be sure he gave her the right one. Other people didn’t seem to struggle so much with these sorts of things. Especially in France. They just expressed themselves with total disregard for the consequences. Kissing on the sidewalk, slapping bad men on the Metro, chastising a naughty child, it all happened in public. Like it was as natural as breathing. Bruce had never found it as natural as breathing.

“Bruce?”

He turned, and froze. It had been eight years. But there was Mahala. Her hair was different and her clothes were Western, a cashmere blend coat and knee high boots. A taupe silk scarf covered her hair and her lips were painted cherry red. But still, it was unmistakably here. There was a tingle between his shoulderblades and for a moment the air felt thin again.

“Bruce!” she said and rushed forward to embrace him. “I can’t believe it!”

“I. Can’t either.”

“Here,” she said, smiling widely. “Look, it’s your turn.”

It was his turn. He stepped up, gave his request to the shopkeeper in his serviceable French, and waited while he went in search of the correct vintage. She chattered on about her vacation, about how much cleaner the trains were here, how many crepes she’d bought from street vendors. He
bought the champagne and tucked it into a sturdy canvas bag.

“Are you running errands?” she asked brightly when they were on the street. Had she always been so...bubbly? He didn’t think so, but it had been years.

“Yes, I have. I have plans tonight.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows lifted a little. “Well--I’d love to catch up and I don’t have any plans. Would you mind terribly if I tagged along?”

He didn’t mind. He really did want to catch up with her. She looked tired and maybe a little bit harder than he remembered. So they walked around his arrondissement all morning, picking up this and that. The entire city was preparing itself, as if holding its breath before a party. She never quite explained what she was doing in Paris, just kept a casual chatter. Eventually, he was out of errands to run.

Bruce reached for all his tact and all the tools of politesse that Alfred had taught him, trying to arrange for lunch with Mahala. Because he did want hear more and she was interested in . But there was some raw chicken in his bag that was going to need refrigeration in short order. It was cold outside, but not food safety standards cold. He tried to explain

“Dinner?” She looked hopeful.

“For two.”

“Oh, you have a date!” She clapped her gloved hands together. “I don’t suppose you have time for a quick drink? Before your date?”

He allowed himself to be talked into a drink at the brasserie closest to his apartment. They sat down with steaming cups of chocolate.

“Really, it’s so good to see you, Bruce.”

“You, too, Mahala.”

“Ah.” She winced. “Mahala was a bit of a nom de guerre, for when I was traveling in the mountains”

Ah, indeed.

“You can call me Talia.”

And shortly after that, Bruce’s memory of the day and night ended abruptly.

Chapter End Notes

Bat netsukes are the cutest:
 https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/19548/lot/205/?
category=list&length=20&page=11&keep_login_open=1

Rene Lalique ring:
And a gorgeous vintage scarf too:
New Year's Day, 2009

Chapter Notes

No graphic non-con, but discussions of what comes after.

2009

Selina climbed Bruce’s stairs about three hours into the New Year. Her knee was killing her and her pace was halting. She didn’t have health insurance, of course, but it was pretty reasonable out of pocket here. If it was still this bad in the morning, she’d have to do something about it. She really just wanted to lay down on the sofa and ice it and sleep for a week.

The night had been a total clusterfuck at the club. There had been a brawl outside before curtain and then she’d landed wrong at the end of the dance of the seven veils and then the brawl outside spilled inside and a patron had been hurt so everyone had to be interviewed by the police, not because they’d seen anything, but because of the club’s liability insurance. Selina knew, she just knew, that Bruce had been planning something perfect. And some dumbass drunk men and her own ligaments had ruined it.

When she reached his floor, Selina stopped for a moment and tried to extend the questionable leg, giving it a moment of rest. She groaned. Maybe she should have texted him from the street and made him carry her up. That would have been a much sexier way to start the evening than arriving sweaty and asking if he had any of the good painkillers stashed away. But men raised by unflappable butlers were not so easily put off, as she well knew. Selina put her arm against the hall wall for support and hobbled onward.

The door was unlocked and there was no sound whatsoever coming from inside the apartment. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and rose. She reached into her duffle, retrieved her (probably illegal) collapsible baton, and dropped the rest of the bag to the floor. She listened closer. Still nothing. With a firm flick of her right elbow, the baton extended. Selina held it ready and pushed in the door.

Everything looked fine. Exactly as it had the last time she had seen it. It was freezing, but that could be because the small kitchen window was open.

“Bruce?” she called. No response. “Bat?” She made her way towards the window and shut it, spying a bag of groceries on the floor. It had toppled over and spilled its contents, but nothing was broken. She spotted champagne and ingredients for coq au vin, maybe. Weird, but not reason enough to panic, yet. She called his name again, but no answer.

In the bedroom everything was not fine. The bedcovers were a mess, which was not like him, but whatever. The real problem was that it reeked of sex. And Bruce. And someone else’s perfume. Hard to say how long she stood there, her jaw actually open. This was not happening. Was this happening? It appeared to be happening. The sex smell hit her again and her empty stomach tried to turn itself inside out.

The hell with her knee, she stumbled towards the flat’s small bathroom, with its perfect vintage clawfoot tub. She had taken dozens of baths there, long hot baths, while Bruce occasionally popped
in with a glass of water or a small vial of scented oil. This really was happening. She would never see that bathtub again. She’d never see Bruce again. She’d have to kill him if she did. The bathroom door was jammed, but Selina was pretty sure she was going to be sick, so she threw her shoulder into it. It opened partway, enough for her to spit a little bile into the sink. Then she looked down and the thing blocking the door was Bruce.

The first thing she thought was that she was absolutely going to leave him there. Just stark naked on his bathroom floor. Her second thought was that he didn’t look very alive. She bent at the waist, keeping one hand on the sink while she shook his shoulder. There was a sour smell—had he been sick, too?

“Bruce. Bruce!”

He didn’t respond. She lowered herself slowly to the floor and sort of half-crawled over him. Breathing unsteadily, she touched him all over, his forehead and neck and chest. He was breathing. That was good. What next. Selina looked up, grabbed both towels from their hooks on the wall. She tossed them over him and then stumbled out of the bathroom, looking for his phone. It was on the floor beside his bed, just left there like the groceries in the kitchen. She unlocked it and tried to think of who he would want her to call. Finally, she looked in his recent calls and...Fabienne. Was that a friend from work? Or the woman whose perfume lingered in the apartment? Fuck it. She hit the call button, grabbed the duvet, and scrambled back to the bathroom.

“Putain de merde, Bruce,” said a woman on the other end of the phone. “Savez-vous quelle heure il est?”

“Sorry,” Selina said. She reached for her French, but it wasn’t there. “Is this Fabienne?”

“Oui. Yes.” Fabienne groaned and Selina could hear sheets rustling. “This is Bruce’s phone, no?”

“Yeah, this is Selina Kyle, his—I just called—look are you a doctor? One of the doctors from his hospital?”

“Yes. What’s wrong?” Her English was heavily accented, but she made up for it in volume.

“I think Bruce got— Fuck, I don’t know if there’s a French word for roofie.”

“I know this roofie.” Fabienne sounded much more awake. “Is he awake?”

“No, I came home and found him in his bathroom floor. He’s breathing, but I can’t wake him up.”

“Okay,” Fabienne said. “I am not so far from him. Keep trying and wake him up. Keep him on his side. Is the door unlocked?”

“Um. Yes.”

“Good. Stay there. Louis. Louis! Lève-toi!” Fabienne hung up, leaving Selina alone again in the bathroom.

“Oh, Bat,” she said, tucking Bruce’s phone into her bra. It wasn’t easy with her questionable leg, but she threw the duvet over him and climbed up and over so that she could sit close to his head. His face was slack and creaseless and very still. She tried pinching his earlobe but it got her nothing. Selina brushed one hand through his hair and rested her forehead in the other. Her anger had mutated and now it sat in her chest and pushed hot tears into her eyes.

In her mind, the story arranged itself. Bruce, coming home, disoriented. Getting the groceries to
the kitchen, but abandoning them on the floor. Bruce, dropping his phone beside the bed, when he was always so careful with his Blackberry. And then, later, Bruce crawling naked to his own bathroom and laying there alone. “Oh, Bat,” she whispered. Finally, she heard the sound of the apartment door opening.

“We’re here,” said a woman who sounded like Fabienne. She looked in the door of the bathroom and exhaled heavily. Behind her was a wiry, scholarly looking man who desperately needed a shave. “Merde,” said Fabienne. Then, “Okay. Okay, Selina?”

“Yeah.” Her voice shook. She cleared her throat. “Yes.”

“I need that Louis and I can work in here a moment. Can you go and get the bedroom ready? Water and a…merde. Seau?”

“A bucket,” said Louis, sounding gravelly, and shockingly British. “And some clothes for the poor fellow.”

“I can do that.”

Louis reached out to help her to her feet. Selina was suddenly terrible relieved to escape the bathroom. She didn’t like taking care of other people. Most days she had to spend some of her energy pushing down the old fears that stalked her: not enough food, not enough money, nowhere to sleep. The relief lasted as far as the bedroom. Fuck. She threw the windows open, weather be damned, and stripped the sheets off the bed, then paused. Were they evidence? Her gut told her Bruce would never report this, but it wasn’t really her call. She balled them up and tucked them inside one of the pillowcases and put them in the closet.

His second-best set of sheets were a soft gray cotton. They smelled like detergent and nothing else. Selina had never in her life been so happy to make a bed. She didn’t want to put the duvet, currently in the bathroom, back on the bed. With a little digging, she found two of summer weight quilts and then she added the throw blanket from the back of his sofa. A bucket was a little harder to locate than that. Bruce didn’t do anything as quotidian as clean his own apartment. She doubted that he knew how. But surely his housekeeper had supplies somewhere. Eventually, Selina found a bucket under the kitchen sink, which she quickly washed with some dish soap and brought back to Bruce’s side of the bed. In the bathroom, the water was running and there was low conversation in French.

What else? She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. Focus, Kyle. Fucking focus. Clothes. Clothes for Bruce. He slept naked, but he had to have workout clothes that might do. In the back of the bottom drawer of his dresser she found the pajamas. Two pieces, pinstripe blue, white piping, constructed with as much care as his suits. There was a small pocket and over it, someone had hand-embroidered his initials: BNW. She brushed her fingers over the neat, precise stitches. It must be Alfred. Bruce didn’t talk about him often, but when he did, it was like a father, not a butler. She took her hand off the embroidery to touch Bruce’s phone, which was still secure in her bra. Bruce sent postcards, she knew that. But he didn’t call. Should she call?

“Selina!” Fabienne called.

Bruce was semi-conscious and cleaned up. He blinked owlishly, trying and failing to focus on her face. With Fabienne and Louis’s help, they got him into his pajamas.

“These are lovely,” Louis commented, buttoning the top. “I wonder who does them bespoke in the Colonies.”
“He’s so vain,” Fabienne said, catching Selina’s eye. “I have to be a plastic surgeon, so I can pay for his eye creams.”

“And give me my Botox, when we’re old and wrinkly,” Louis added. “Alright, then, Bruce. You have to give us a little help, if you don’t want to sleep in the tub. Up we go.”

“Salaud,” Fabienne said, as Bruce rose to his feet with his arms over their shoulders. “He’s like an ox.”

The two doctors supported Bruce as Selina walked backwards in front of them, helping Bruce keep his balance with a light hand on his chest. His expression vacillated between blank and determined as they slowly progressed to the bed.

“Easy, easy,” Louis said, as Bruce half-sat, half-crashed into the bed.

“Pillows,” Fabienne said. “Behind him. To keep him up a little. Louis, close the windows.”

Selina crammed some pillows behind Bruce, but he really was ox like in his density. The three of them got him sitting up in bed, pillows behind him, holding his bucket. He looked bone white, bright eyes glazed over. Louis tucked the quilts up around his waist.

“Okay,” Fabienne said, surveying the room. “Very good. Louis, stay here. Selina, I need you in the kitchen.”

Selina thought Fabienne would be wasted in plastic surgery. She was clearly meant to be chief of something. It made her feel better, as she limped into the kitchen, knowing that this woman was here and in charge.

“Dieu,” Fabienne said, her face falling. She swore in French, voluminously, with regional words and idioms that Selina hadn’t heard yet.

“What?” Selina’s confidence was rapidly cooling and solidifying into a rock in her stomach.

“Professional secret,” Fabienne said, putting her hand over her eyes.

“It was rape,” Selina whispered, looking at the ground and spying the groceries again.

“Professional secret,” Fabienne repeated.

“Okay.” Selina began to pick them up and put them away, dropping the chicken directly into the trash. “What do I need to know?”

“I gave him a shot for the nausea, but it may make his head hurt. There are more pills, for nausea, to give in eight hours. He’s going to feel like absolute dogshit for the next few days. Whatever it was, it’s nearly all metabolized. But he needs to keep drinking water and you can’t leave him alone in case he loses consciousness and vomits again. I’ll bring over more pills tomorrow, that he has to take.”

“Okay. Yeah, okay.” Selina shut the door and limped towards the cabinet for a glass of water.

“What’s wrong with you? Did you hurt yourself trying to lift that…” Fabienne waved her hands in front of her, clearly trying to call up the right English word. “Brick shithouse. That brick shithouse of a man.”

Selina snorted, then covered her mouth as a wild giggle tried to escape. Then she stifled a few
more, while she filled the glass from the tap. Get it together, Kyle, Jesus.

“Is that not right?”

“No, no, it’s perfect. It just sounds very different when you say it. The knee’s just sore. I landed wrong on it tonight.”

Fabienne frowned. “This is near the end of your run here in Paris?”

“Yes.” Selina focused on the waterglass. The end of her run. What a turn of phrase.

“I’m not asking your intentions,” Fabienne said wryly. “But most injuries occur at the end of an athletic season. Go lay down. Go, go, go.”

Selina went. She’d wanted to take a shower before bed, or a bath. But she couldn’t face the bathroom again for any length of time. Fabienne ordered Louis about like a seasoned veteran. For his part, Louis did exactly as asked, occasionally muttering things like “I hear and obey” under his breath. Once Selina was in the bed, with her knee elevated, she found herself zoning out a little. She and Bruce were both propped a little stiffly, so she just reached out and took his cool hand and squeezed. He squeezed back once, then appeared to slip into sleep again.

“Very good,” Fabienne declared. “Now. I have work in...four hours. I am going to go home and change. Louis will sleep here, in the living room.”

“Oh, Fabienne. That’s not—-”

“I have put him out on the sofa so many times, and this one is much more comfortable than he is used to. It will be like a vacation.” Fabienne bulldozed right along, then held out Selina’s baton.

“This belongs to you, Madame. In the morning, Louis will arrange for someone to change the locks, add more locks, whatever. When I am done with work, we will all go to a clinic and perhaps get some pictures of your knee. And we will proceed from there. Very good? Very good. Au revoir.”

And then she was gone.

“Jesus Christ,” Selina said. She was impressed and a little frightened.

“Hrn.”

“I’ll say.”

“Knee?” he murmured, opening one eye.

“That’s a tomorrow problem, not a tonight problem.”

“Hnn.”

Tomorrow had plenty of problems. Her knee was swollen, stiff, and hurt like hell to stand on. She made it from the bed to the bathroom to the couch with Louis’s help. He also made some toast and coffee before he had to leave for work himself. Selina smeared the bread with butter and wolfed it down. She was guzzling her coffee black when her phone buzzed with a text from her booker,
informing her Le Lapin Agile wouldn’t be open tonight, due to the ongoing stabbing. Selina sent a photo of her knee. Her booker responded with a dozen cry emojis.

Bruce was...not doing great. He showered by himself, for a long time. He changed into jeans and sat on the sofa. He did not eat or speak, beyond the usual grunts. He drank only enough water to get the next batch of anti-puke drugs down. Selina turned on a soccer match, but he wasn’t really watching it. It felt like cohabiting with a particularly handsome zombie. It was beyond a relief with Fabienne turned up with her tiny Renault to take them to the clinic.

“Your knee,” Bruce said, when he saw that Selina was hobbling down the stairs.

“I just twisted it,” Selina said. He frowned at the knee in stern disapproval, the first sign of life in his face all day. It passed and he was expressionless again by the time they reached the car.

They were in separate exam rooms at the clinic. After a very unpleasant exam, they took Selina for an MRI. Then finally someone gave her the good drugs. She melted a little onto the exam bed and felt a wave of frustration. They didn’t give you an MRI and the good drugs when your knee wasn’t totally fucked. And what the fuck was she supposed to do with Bruce?

“’ello,” Fabienne announced, walking in without knocking. “You have a partial tear in your ACL. We will put a big ugly brace on it for now, but you might need surgery or you might not need surgery. I don’t know. We’ll let the surgeons and the orthopedists fight for it. Hopefully one of them will die.”

Selina exhaled, doubly grateful for the drugs.

“But I am a little worried right now, because Bruce needs help. He’s not tracking. He’s not present.”

Selina covered her face.

“Yes, it is not good.”

“I’m no Florence Nightingale,” Selina said. She’d never been ashamed of it before, but now, when it was Bruce, her inadequacy felt choking.

“Florence Nightingale was a shit nurse.”

“Okay, maybe I am Florence Nightingale.”

“Look, Bruce doesn’t speak much about his family. But maybe this is a good time to visit home? See his parents? I can arrange things with the school.” That last sounded like a threat and a promise.

“His parents are dead,” Selina said quietly, and uncovered her eyes. “But there is someone back home.”

“Good. Call this someone.” Fabienne held out Bruce’s Blackberry. “Oops, he dropped this in the other room. Give it back to him, would you?”

“Fabienne.”

“Selina.”

“I can’t...he’s so private. He’s the most private person I’ve ever met.”
“I don’t really care.” Fabienne cross the room and wrestled a rusty window open, letting in the cold air. Then she reached into the pocket of her white coat and retrieved a cigarette to light. “Look, the thing is, Bruce needs a Mary Seacole.”

“Who the fuck is Mary Seacole?”

“Florence Nightingale, if Florence Nightingale was any good.”

“Fabienne. I’m a little stoned. Can you cut to the chase?”

“Bruce needs help. You need help. He can be mad at you later, if he wants, but I swear to the Virgin Mary, I don’t think he’d even notice right now.”

“Okay.” Selina stared at the phone. “You’re going to stay and listen, aren’t you?”

“I just lit this cigarette.”

“Right.” Selina, made brave by her opiates, glared at Fabienne, who only lifted a contemptuous eyebrow.

“Wayne Residence.” The voice was British, cool, and plummy.

“Hi. Is this Alfred?”

“Speaking.”

“My name is Selina Kyle.” She paused, but there was no recognition. “Um, I’m a friend of Bruce’s.”

“Is Master Bruce alright?” The genteel tone was gone at once, replaced with urgency.

“Not really.” Now, now of all times she felt her voice thicken and crack. Fuck. With effort, she cleared her throat. “Look, he’s had a bad week. I think he probably needs his family.”

“I see.” Alfred was all business again. “And where is Master Bruce now?”

“He’s with a doctor.”

“Is he fit to travel?”

“I wouldn’t want to put him on a plane by himself.”

“That’s not a concern. And is your own passport current?”

“I… Yes?”

“Please be so good as to pack some things for Master Bruce, as well as yourself. A jet will be ready at Le Bourget as soon as you arrive.”

“It will?” She pulled the Blackberry away from the side of her head, stupified by more than the drugs. Le Bourget? Alfred was saying something, so she put it back to her ear.

“…trust it will not prove too inconvenient. I will prepare a room for you as well.”

“Oh. That’s alright. I’ll sleep with Bruce.”

“Ah.” There was a very chilly pause.
Selina covered her face again. “Sorry.”

No need for apologies. Please ring me again when you’ve boarded the plane.”

Will do,” she said. Alfred hung up.

That went well,” said Fabienne.

Give me a drag of that,” Selina said flatly.

Absolutely not. It’s terrible for you. Trust me, I’m a doctor.”

Any doubts Selina had about bailing on Paris were put to rest by Bruce’s passivity. He didn’t have anything to say while she threw his things into a suitcase. He didn’t offer to help when she stumbled on the stairs. He didn’t even look interested when, seated on her bed in her small studio, she emptied the not inconsiderable contents of her sturdy safe into a vintage train case. She clutched it in her lap as Fabienne’s car hurtled towards Le Bourget. Only when they began to pass the hangars did Bruce rouse himself.

“Wait--where are we going?”

“I have prescribed a vacation,” Fabienne said from the front seat. “You are going along with. Selina needs someone to carry her bags and open doors for her.” She pulled up curbside and put her car in park. “Go, go.”

Bruce looked out at the airfield, then back to Selina.

“Come on,” she said. “Alfred is waiting.”

“I want to tell you,” Bruce said, over the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. “I want to tell you what I remember.”

“Okay.” Selina was trying to keep her expression neutral, he could tell. She was very good, he had known that from the beginning, but it had been a hard couple of days for her, too.

“A woman I know came up to me while I was shopping for dinner. Mahala. I met her in the mountains in Tibet. This was part of my...what did you call it?”

“Your Eat, Pray, Fuck phase.”

“She was beautiful, she is beautiful. And tough and. Well, the sex.” Bruce swallowed.

“You don’t have to--.” Selina exhaled. “I’m sorry, I’m bad at this. But. Just because you were good together before, that you liked it then. That doesn’t mean she had any right to expect you--”

“Right.” Bruce swallowed something sour. “I know that,” he lied.
“Okay.”

“She wanted to come with me on my errands. I let her do that. She wanted to buy me a drink. I let her do that, too. And then she said her name wasn’t Mahala. It’s Talia. And then I remember being on the floor.”

“Bruce. After you took that drink, you didn’t let her do anything. She did that to you, without your permission.”

“I know that,” he lied again.

“Yes, Magadalena. I am perfectly happy to pay your emergency rates. But I need your guarantee that you can have a team here within the next two hours. Magadalena, yes. Yes. Time and a half.” Alfred looked to the ceiling in supplication. “Magadalena please. Yes. Yes. Thank you. You are a queen among women. Worth more than rubies. Yes, I intend to ruminate you like it. Yes. Yes. Magdalena, the grocer is on the other line. I will see you in an hour, yes. Goodbye.

“Hello,” Alfred said wearily. He’d been on the phone for hours now, since well before polite society agreed business should begin. “Mr. DeVries. I cannot imagine what else you can possibly need to know. Yes, I meant it when I said the suet should be grass fed. Yes, I meant it when I said plum and raspberry preserves. I am making a proper Jam Roly-Poly, and so help me, I will proceed directly to the nearest WalMart if you cannot provide. Very good. I have to go now. Someone is at the door. Plum and raspberry. Posthaste.”

He stopped to the side door, where Leslie was still fumbling with her keys.

“Good morning.” Alfred opened the door. “My apologies. I forgot to unlock it when I went to collect the eggs.”

“Alfred,” she said. “We have a problem.”

“I know. Magdalena won’t be here for another hour at the earliest. Can you hold the bottom of the ladder? I want to make sure the front windows at least are clean.”

“Alfred!” she grabbed his forearm, stopping his forward progress. “I said: We have a problem.” She swallowed and steered him towards the kitchen table. “I think we should sit down.”

“Leslie, I am beginning to be alarmed.”

“Oh are you?” she said, dropping into her chair. “Indeed?”

“Leslie.”

“I received an extremely interesting phone call from the New Jersey Bar Association. They’ve been trying to reach you all morning.”

“What? Why on earth?”

“I’m still listed as a trustee on Bruce’s trust. They haven’t been able to reach him for days. So they tried you. And now me.” She swallowed. “And there’s an issue with the trust. Harvey Dent has been declared non compos mentis. His law license has been revoked. There may be criminal
charges filed. They haven’t determined his degree of culpability.”

Alfred’s jaw dropped. Harvey Dent had been helping them administer the trust for years now.

“I can only tell you what they told me. He had a break with reality. Some time ago. He sought help, but chose to forgo the medication and followup therapies he needed. Harvey has not been acting responsibly as a lawyer for some time. He has been...neglectful in some cases. And malicious in others.”

“Neglectful. Malicious.” Alfred remembered the diligent young man he had known. He simply could not grasp it.

“There have been claims made. Claims that Harvey did not deal with in a professional manner. There has been collateral damage.”

“What? What claims?”

“Paternity claims, Alfred. Children.”