Plus ça Change

by Cheers

Summary

They have built themselves a life they enjoy, but they are simply too good to fade into the background, and the powers that be want to take advantage of it. Domesticity Bruce-and-Selina-style, one year post-Chinese Boxes, as a globe-trotting couple dabbling in international espionage. The last of my three post-TDKR Bruce/Selina fics.

Notes

Mr Nolan has set a tempting example with trilogies. Rather than sticking to an odd pair of one short and one long TDKR fic, I stumbled into writing a sequel that mirrors Catching Up, the de facto prequel to the central plot that is Chinese Boxes. The title, which I picked up from a throwaway remark in Catching Up, comes from the French Plus ça change plus c’est la même chose, ie the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The further I go on from the film trilogy, the more OCs I end up with; and I tremble at the prospect of bringing two major girl OCs in here, but will try not to sink to stereotype. I try to bring back the trilogy guys, and my usual MO is to keep OCs to a minimum, but by now Bruce and Selina have a life, and at this point they are embarking on a new mission, so both seeing old acquaintances and meeting people is inevitable. With the exception of three or so prominent new mission-related characters, the other three have either shown up or been mentioned in Boxes, namely Theo Reimann, his nephew Max, and Armando Alves the would-be Hong Kong dinner date. In case you wonder, Gianfranco Varese is very much alive but stays in Prato for reasons that will be clear later.

And while I had a lot of fun planning their China trip last time, this time I am sticking to
sending them to places I have been to, assuming we have no illusions of what Gotham stands for.

Finally – and then I’ll stop chattering – who would have guessed, two weeks ago, that Michael J Morell, the RL CIA ex-Deputy Director I mentioned here, would now be its boss? Ironically, I did not bring up Petraeus himself out of respect; now he has “repaid me” by giving me a potential continuity error :P Oh well; I guess I should have called him Mr Smith...
the phone call

one year later

“Brandon Wainwright speaking.” She stirs lazily on the bed; this was really crappy timing for an overseas call on the landline that Bruce apparently needed to pick up in the study. It is admittedly civilised time at 3:30 pm, but takes no account of the fact that they both have taken the day off, as they put it, to catch up with housework, a very transparent excuse considering that they employ a maid. Thing is, they were still very much in the middle of housework at the time of the call. Oh well. He’ll get rid of the caller and be back in the bedroom soon.

“What?” The way Bruce says the word, it sounds like a whip crack. She instantly sits bolt upright on the bed. Something has just gone wrong.

“How do you know my name?”

Something has just gone very wrong.

She puts on a minimally decent amount of clothing for the benefit of anyone who might drive up to the villa in plain view of the floor-length west-facing study window and wanders over to the study.

“How. The fuck. Do you know. My name?” Bruce repeats in a very Batman-like cadence. Seeing her, he presses the speakerphone button and sets the receiver on the desk, stony-faced. She runs her fingers over the back of his neck as she passes him and is glad to see that he still shivers with pleasure; things may be bad but not bad enough to make him immune to her touch. She perches on a corner of the desk, next to him; he uses the opportunity to run his hand up and down her thigh.

“Let’s say the details are irrelevant right now, Mr Wayne,” the caller drawls in a Midwestern accent.

“Suit yourself,” Bruce shoots back. “Just tell me why the hell you’re calling.”

“We… well, to tell you the truth, we need a favour.”
“You picked an interesting way of asking.”

“I wanted to get your attention. Also, it ties in with what we have to offer in return.”

“Which is..?”

“If you really want to stay dead, we can make it official.”

“Thanks, but I like being alive.”

“No, you don’t understand. We can make sure that you’re officially recognised as Brandon Wainwright, Swiss citizen, fingerprints, eye scan and all that, and that nobody on our side asks you questions later about your… previous life.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you because..?”

“We’re prepared to give you guarantees from the highest level.”

“So far you fail to convince me.”

“What would convince you?”

“A written guarantee in advance, promising what you said in exchange for what it is you want me to do. From the highest level, like you say. Your boss as the bare minimum. Signed, sealed, and whatever else makes it a hundred percent official.”

“Give me two days.”

“Fine. We’ll talk then.” His finger is already on the button when the caller speaks again.

“And maybe your very talented wife would like to join in, on the same condition. The fact that she has erased all trace of her previous life doesn’t mean we don’t know who she was.”

She can see the colour draining from his face, and wonders what will come next. Based on previous experience, the two most likely options would be Bruce cutting off the call and disconnecting the phone, and Bruce showering the caller with a deluge of expletives.

Neither thing happens. Instead he grits through his teeth. “My wife. Stays. Out of this.”

It is risky, she knows, but she also knows that this kind of battle is easiest to win in public, even if there will be consequences. In any case, she is too angry herself, not at her proposed involvement, but at this disembodied voice that makes him look and talk like this.

“No, I don’t stay out of this,” she cuts in, leaning toward the microphone, her voice husky and menacing. “But listen, asshole, if you don’t leave us alone after this I swear I’ll find you and kill you personally, I don’t give a fuck about going to prison, he’ll break me out anyway.” Somewhere at the start of her comment, she sees his eyes fly wide for an instant before he sits back to listen to the rest. Strangely, he does not look angry; she would almost say he looks amused.

The caller does not respond at once. “I… appreciate your cooperation, madam,” he says at last, in a curiously calm tone. “As I said, Mr Wainwright, you’ll hear from us in two days about the guarantee, for both of you. And then we’ll talk about the details.”

“Fine with me,” Bruce says nonchalantly. “I’ll talk to you later.” The moment he cuts off the call, he does the last thing she would expect; he starts snickering.
“What?” she snaps. It is clearly to do with her interruption, or the caller’s reaction, but there is still a piece missing.

He has composed himself by now, but still has trouble keeping a straight face even as he rolls his eyes. “Do you know who that was?”

“No,” she confesses, beginning to feel embarrassed already.

“Does the name of Michael J Morell ring any bells?” Seeing her blank stare, he adds: “Acting Director of the CIA.”

“Oops.”

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing he can do. You’re a law abiding Canadian citizen, and he is an asshole, the way he’s handling this. But next time, bella, before you start telling people the truth in conference calls, check who’s on the other end.”

“Next time, tesoro, why don’t you install a videoconference kit so I can see who’s there?”

“I could.” She can tell by his tone and his serious face that he is about to have fun at her expense. “But it goes both ways. Considering the state of undress in which I answer a lot of these...” He pinches the silk of his pyjama bottoms, not even visible above the desk; since she mercilessly raided his sleepwear wardrobe he has learned to buy two sets of each new item in two sizes, but she still steals all the shirts.

She looks down at her present ensemble of lace bra and yoga pants. “Point taken.”

“Although I have to say,” he says in a pretend-thoughtful tone, “other than the whole blackmail thing *per se*, and the fact that I still have no idea what the fuck it is that he wants, I like the way this call has gone.”

She takes it as a cue to slide off the desk into his lap. “Let’s just forget about it for now and get back to the...housework.”

“Good idea,” he mutters, undoing her bra. “It can wait.”
“Che cazzo è questo?”

Selina is a couple of steps away from Theo’s office when she is treated to this gem of Italian eloquence delivered in her husband’s voice. It shouldn’t be anything to worry about; Bruce usually reserves English for serious swearing and uses Italian for more benign situations, but he sounds surprised enough to make her curious.

“Reimann, I order you as the company owner, for fuck’s sake, take this thing down. One wall was enough; both is really too much. Next thing I know, you’ll be sticking these to the windows.”

Now that she is inside the office, she can finally see the offending item. Looking at her from the wall on her left is a framed full-size, three-by-five-foot Dark Hero poster; more specifically, a Batman poster, showing the titular hero in his caped, cowled, Kevlar-suited glory, with a scrawled autograph in silver marker in the bottom right-hand corner. The two men are staring at it from six feet away, Bruce with only slightly exaggerated indignation and Theo with distinct pride, a collector admiring a new jewel in his possession.

“No way.” He sounds pretty adamant, too. “I had to fly to the London premiere and pay for the most expensive VIP seats so I could sweet-talk my way into the press reception to get Chris Hathaway to sign it for me. I’m not taking it down. In fact, after listening to you now, I think I’ll rig it with a burglar alarm.”

“Then I refuse to hold meetings in your office. From now on, if it isn’t held in the conference room, I’m not attending.” She wonders how long Bruce will be allowed to stick to his resolution, given how sneaky Theo’s tactics can be where teasing Bruce is concerned. After all, Bruce already swore it off a month earlier when the action figure came out in the promotion campaign that preceded the film’s opening; discovering a twelve-inch replica of himself sitting on Theo’s desk was, apparently, a big shock and led to a similar promise on his part... that he ended up having to break a week later. He had just about got used to the figure by now and probably thought he could breathe easy... until this.

“We can do a deal,” Theo suggests, in his most salesmanlike tone. “I can take down one of the comic book covers in exchange for this one.”

Unexpectedly, Bruce looks interested. He turns around to face the other wall to survey the six smaller frames there, but it seems that he has made his choice already.

“The one with the Joker and Rachel.” He points to the picture, and looks relieved when Theo takes it off the wall.

“Yes.” Theo might enjoy teasing Bruce but can’t really refuse her. “Which one?”

“The fight with Bane.” It isn’t the fight with Bane; rather, it is the decisive rematch immediately before she came back to shoot the brute to kingdom come, but it is enough of a painful reminder for her to want to never lay eyes on it again. When Theo takes it off the hook she feels like a nagging weight has been lifted off her mind. “Thank you.”
“The two of you OK with the remaining ones?” he asks, rearranging the four frames into a continuous row.

Selina nods.

“Apart from the fact that they’re here in the first place?” Bruce counters wryly. “I guess so.”

“Are these four in the right order?”

Bruce takes a couple of seconds to study the drawings. “Yep. Falcone, then Ra’s al Ghul, then Dent, then the blast. That’s it.”

“Céline tells me you’ve seen the film now,” Theo continues. Bruce wasn’t quite an eager movie-goer in this case, but his attendance wasn’t Theo’s doing. After catching the tail end of a short interview by a visibly exasperated Jim Gordon on the GCN international edition where the poor Commissioner complained about having become a media personality overnight, Bruce figured he probably needed to offer Gordon commiserations for his unintended fame – which, by necessity, involved the disclosure that he was alive. And sort of required seeing the film to see what exactly Gordon’s part in it was like.

“Yep.” Bruce makes a face, but as faces go, it isn’t a particularly pissed-off one. “We went last week when you were in Brussels at the conference.”

“What did you think? I mean, how close to the truth is it?”

“Do you want a blow-by-blow account?” Bruce settles down onto the sofa, making a point of picking the seat facing the window, and once Theo has locked the office door to keep any eavesdroppers away, the two of them take their places in the armchairs facing him –and the artwork. The original purpose of going to Theo’s office was to remind him to join them for dinner at the villa to talk about their upcoming trip, but it can wait a few minutes.

“Apart from the fact that I’m dead at the end of the film, which I’m grateful for,” Bruce continues, “and the fact that they made me a disgruntled ex-Marine, which frankly smacks of Rambo and I’m still kinda pissed off about, it wasn’t too far off the mark. I mean they picked up all the public knowledge parts. The anti-mafia campaign and capturing Falcone, Ra’s smuggling drugs into the water supply, his death on board the Gotham train, the Joker murders, the circumstances of Dent’s intended self-sacrifice and his final days now that the truth is known, though I wish they’d left that last part out, the Bane war, the nuclear threat and the way it was averted, that was all true. Except for the part that I punched out of the Bat minutes before the blast. I’m surprised they managed to fit it all in, but then they didn’t have any idea about the rest of my life so they only had the Batman persona to show. And of course they don’t have Selina in it, but it’s not such a bad thing in terms of avoiding exposure, and it’s great that they don’t have Blake in it or he’d be mad as hell. Gordon’s pissed off enough for both of them that he’s turned into a media celebrity. They totally fudged it on a lot of the technology we used, though. I mean, suggesting that my first suit was made of rubber really takes the cake. But I’m glad they had me steal the stuff from Wayne Enterprises instead of, well, the obvious.”

“So now that you’re going back there,” Theo begins, a bit apprehensively, to Selina’s ears. “I wonder if you’ll feel like-”

“No,” Bruce interrupts him, having guessed the question – and while Selina has heard him deny it a couple of dozen times to her already, it really doesn’t hurt to hear it again. “We’re going there because it’s part of the deal and because we’d both rather go to Gotham than to Langley or DC as such, but we’re only staying for two days. And it’ll give me a chance to see Gordon and Blake, not to mention Lucius, but that’s it, there’s no way I’m staying there, not when I’m officially dead and a
lot of people are still likely to remember my face. I’m worried about it as it is.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Theo argues. “The way you can act, you could probably pull off impersonating a teenage girl.”

Selina has to laugh at imagining this, but Bruce is still not convinced. “How did we get into this anyway?” he moans. “One day we lived our happy lives in peace, next day, we get this mission to deal with.”

“Get into this? I don’t think you ever really stopped,” Theo argues again. “You hadn’t bumped into the CIA until now, but it doesn’t change much. When was it that you went to Turkey on that mission the ROS had asked you to-“ He cuts himself off, seeing the shock on Selina’s face and the belated trademark death glare on Bruce’s, but he can tell that it is too late.

Unlike her present attitude to her husband, who knows that he is in deep shit now, Selina is grateful to Theo for this slip of the tongue. It remains to be seen if the Turkish mission is the only thing Bruce has kept from her, not to mention that she’ll make any sort of pardon conditional on full disclosure of its exact dates and details to make sure she’ll pick up the signs and catch him next time he tries anything of the sort, but for now she is pleased that he got caught hiding things from her. Things that Theo apparently knew about all along. Maybe she should be pissed off at both of them.

“At this rate, I’m tempted to pick up the dinner and eat it myself and leave the two of you to get your own,” she announces sternly, getting up. “But since I promised Sylvie you’d have dinner at our place,” she continues, pointedly addressing Theo as the lesser culprit, “I’ll keep my word to her, so we’ll see you at the villa in half an hour as agreed. Whether Wayne gets anything to eat is an open question as of now,” she finishes as she unlocks the door.

xxx

When exactly did Bruce learn her tricks? She can swear she has had an eye on her handbag pretty much all the time, with the Sesto keys safely in it; but by the time they are in the garage and have walked up to the car, before she has time to wonder why he is going over to the driver’s side, a quick check shows her that he has stolen them. Walking away now would be ridiculously childish, so she drops gloomily into the passenger seat, wondering if they are facing a miserable ride in silence or if he’ll be taking her on some sort of detour while he bothers to explain himself.

What she gets is neither of these. Before he even starts the car, Bruce turns to her with what can only be described as a puppy-eyed look and puts his hand on her arm – and as much as she might want to, she can’t find the resolve to flinch away.

“I’m sorry.”

“Liar.”

“I know I am. It’s the only thing I lied to you about in the past year.”

The irony is, this still makes him a greater liar than she is in this marriage; ever since they got together, Selina has been really scrupulous about telling him the truth – and assumed the same from him.

“I would have told you but you weren’t even here, you were in the middle of running a training course in Lyon and it wasn’t worth bothering you about a two-day trip.”

“A dangerous two-day trip, I presume.” And surely even if they didn’t talk in those two days, they would have exchanged messages – and that’s even ignoring the question of any advance notice he is
“Not really. Gallitelli’s deputy called me and asked me if I could lend them a custom drone, the bigger kind, I asked why, they said they had a couple of Italian engineers held hostage by Kurdish extremists and wanted to try an unmanned recon flight and then either an unmanned attack or an ROS operation to get them out. Knowing the kind of casualties and collateral damage this can cause, I offered to get these guys out instead if they guaranteed me free passage through security and customs with the kind of equipment I needed. In the end it was really easy, I flew in, did all the recon in an hour, got the guys out, came back. Could have almost done it in one day but I needed the cover of darkness.”

“When was that?” she insists, doing her best to sound unimpressed.

“Two months ago, just after we came back from Japan.”

She remembers now; the afternoon she came back from Lyon to find him asleep on the sofa downstairs, apparently too tired to go up to the bedroom. A sleepless night rescuing hostages will do that.

“Listen, I don’t see anything wrong with doing it, but if you don’t stop lying about it I’ll start spying on you.”

“It was just once.”

“Promise you’ll never do it again. Whatever you’re up to, you tell me before you do it.”

“I’ll promise if you promise you won’t always insist on coming along.”

Bargaining again; typical. But while she does not like the sentiment, she is grateful for the always qualifier. “It’s a deal.”

Ten minutes later, when they take a few seconds’ break from the frantic kissing and such, she takes a quick look at her watch.

“Shit.”

“What?” He does not seem at all concerned about the world outside the Sesto front seats.

“It’s a quarter past seven. We agreed to meet Theo at the villa at half past, and we still need to go to Fabiano’s to pick up the dinner.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell them to deliver,” Bruce mutters, already calling the number. A few seconds later, the matter settled, he pulls her back to him. “Which still leaves us five more minutes before we need to get going.”
Way back, when I hoped to finish this story around Christmas, this chapter positively resisted being written: it insisted on being cumbersome, slow, and confusing. I am afraid I have not managed to rewrite it from scratch, but I dare hope that its current shape is a tolerable improvement.

A lot of things have happened in the wonderful world of espionage since last autumn when I put the plot together. For one thing, I can't ignore the Snowden story; I do not intend to write a topical commentary or follow the facts verbatim, but parts of it kind of fit in with the plot I made up. The guy himself won't feature, but I can't help sticking in an oblique reference.

They set the table for dinner in an excited hurry, but by the time they sat down, the upbeat mood evaporated, and preoccupation crept in and settled over them like a chilly fog. Bruce has become reticent, Theo has become businesslike, and Selina sits and listens and wonders whether, on cold reflection, they should be going on this trip.

Theo says it for her. "The way things stand, you're better off staying here."

"We don't know much about the way things stand," Bruce mutters.

"You don't know shit about the way things stand," Theo corrects him."But the whole thing stinks. They must have a few hundred people capable of doing whatever it is they need done. Why you?"

"I suppose they want deniable assets for this one," Bruce ventures.

"All their black ops people are deniable assets by definition. I suspect that they don't just want deniable assets, they want disposable ones." Theo is staring at Bruce as he says it, but if his words are meant as a deterrent, they don't seem to be working.

Sensing that he is losing the argument, Theo looks to Selina for help. "Has he always had a death wish?" he asks rhetorically. Strictly speaking, he has known her husband for much longer than she has, though they had not had any face time until about a year and a half ago.

She nods emphatically, but the gesture likewise seems lost on Bruce.

Theo goes for a more direct approach. "I take it there’s a reason why you can’t just tell them to fuck off."

"A few," Bruce admits. He sounds uncomfortable.

The silence that follows lasts no more than ten seconds, but the sudden quiet in the room and two pairs of eyes fixed on his face make it impossible for Bruce to stick to the cryptic answer.
"They know how best to blackmail us both," he explains darkly. "And there's no doubt they'll use it."

"If you mean that they can charge you with faking your death, it is technically illegal, but you can always prove that you were pronounced clinically dead and then spent weeks in a coma," Theo offers. "And changing names is not illegal. I suppose they could try to corner you with attempted US tax evasion if they brought in the IRS."

Bruce perks up at this line of reasoning; to Selina, it sounds as if he is relieved to be talking about this, the more technical issue, and not other dangers lurking beneath. "The argument would never fly. I can prove that I derived no benefits from being declared dead. I’m sure they’ve checked and seen that my death was a minor windfall to the IRS thanks to the estate tax on whatever I left to Alfred in my will that wasn’t in his name already. I could probably even ask for a refund. I’ve been a Swiss tax resident since I ended up here, and I pay every cent that’s due. They could try to give me crap over my beneficial ownership of Wayne shares, but the dividends are taxed anyway."

Usually Selina is very laid back about table manners, herself treating most solid dishes as finger food in informal company; however, she has a problem with Bruce waving around a fork to emphasise the points he is making when there is a dripping mozzarella pearl stuck on it – within inches of her silk dress. The instant his hand stays still, she grabs his wrist and holds it long enough to bite off the cheese, while Theo, out of the danger zone, gives his verdict on the argument.

"Which means that a good tax attorney can shut them up. So where's the real catch?"

You're puzzled because Bruce has been too good at downplaying the depth of his hang-ups, she thinks, sipping the Amarone. He even fooled her for a few months, until she watched him wiggle his way out of a two-day business trip to Gotham last November. She hadn’t called his bluff, but she knew his excuse back then to have been nothing more than a clever contrivance, whatever the real reason for his reluctance to go back. Having had a single person for a confidant for most of his life has not helped; and even Alfred has been telling her that Bruce always tried to keep his troubles to himself. He goes to great lengths to avoid admitting to feeling pain, physical or otherwise. She has made good progress on getting him to acknowledge pain of the physical kind, which luckily has not bothered him much since last August’s cartilage replacement operation, but the mental kind definitely needs work.

"The catch has little to do with my life or finances as Wayne," Bruce confesses, looking glum. "If we don’t play along now, they’ll find a way to make public what else I did when I lived in Gotham. They must have figured it out and know that I don’t want it advertised, or else I’d have stepped forward when the film came out, hogging the spotlight or brandishing a lawsuit demanding royalties."

Theo shakes his head. "Call me an idiot, but I’m still stumped as to why you refuse to admit that it was you. The greatest hero that city has known in decades; it’s not as if anyone could hold it against you. You don’t even live there anymore so you’re at much less risk of attracting publicity. If you’re worried about paparazzi stalking your home, raise the fence three more feet and get a couple of guard dogs."

Privately, Selina has wondered about the same thing, even if she has always accepted his denial as a given. Her own desire to safeguard her anonymity was a natural consequence of her Gotham lifestyle; but after the near-destruction of the city, no one, not even the CIA, would dare hold Bruce accountable for his unorthodox modus operandi, and any attempt to tarnish a legend with accusations of petty misdeeds would be seen as crass and irrelevant.

"They’ll throw me to the media who’ll do their damned best to make a puppet out of me. It’ll be a
mockery of any good I did back then. I’ll be spending days turning down requests to pose in the Batsuit, to sign up for product endorsements, and to do the rounds at the late night comedy circuit and in shitty reality shows.”

“A month’s inconvenience followed by lifelong peace of mind still sounds like a bargain,” Theo counters.

“If it comes to that, I’d rather do it on my own terms,” Bruce replies, morose but resolute.

There’s more to it, she thinks; he has been telling the truth, but she knows him well enough by now to read the signs - and he has not been telling the whole truth. Theo is not far behind with the same conclusion, albeit for a less intuitive and more specific motive.

"You said they have facts to blackmail you both with," he prompts Bruce, and Selina's eyes fly wide at the crestfallen look on her husband's face.

“If they manage to prove that Céline is in fact Selina Kyle, she has an unfinished prison sentence to serve and I can guarantee that they’ve got an extradition order ready and will threaten to enforce it if we don’t cooperate.”

Shit; this was damn shortsighted of her. She spent too long thinking about his reasons for avoiding Gotham - and overlooked the blatantly obvious. Worse still, it painfully reminds her of how and following what she’d got herself arrested and sentenced.

Luckily, Theo, unaware of her tormented sentiments, sticks to logical reasoning. “There’s no trace of her previous identity online. I checked the databases last year, remember.”

Selina takes it as her cue to weigh in: getting into practical risk assessment issues is a good distraction, not to mention a useful measure. “If someone got a recent picture of me and showed it to Gilly, the dickhead Congressman I kidnapped, he’d give them a positive ID in two seconds. I know he’s still alive. I saw him on TV a couple of months ago talking bullshit about new lobbying regulations.”

“Even if he IDs you, they need a match in the criminal records to show that you really had a conviction. If no records and no evidence remain, they’ll have a hard time proving it. It’ll be a case of he said, she said.”

“I’ve made sure there were no surviving electronic records online, but I never bothered to go after hard copies or physical evidence bearing my prints that they still might have. I figured that erasing the online stuff and getting a new ID was good enough. There may also be offline backups that I couldn’t get to if they were never plugged in and updated after the Bane occupation. I just assumed they were all destroyed when it happened, or lost in the confusion afterwards.” Hoped it was the case, more like it, and refused to acknowledge the limitations of her Holy Grail piece of software. Recklessly negligent at the very least. “We don’t know when exactly they tagged me. Chances are that they’ve been through the remaining archives already and found something to make sure they have a match. I know it was stupid of me.” She should have known better than relying exclusively on a software gimmick, however effective.

Theo tactfully says nothing, but she can tell that he is deliberately not shaking his head. After all, both she and Bruce had given him ironclad assurances, which he had confirmed as far as he could, but neither she nor Bruce had ever explained what exactly their “magic eraser” had amounted to and what its potential pitfalls were. “It’s probably too late now, but we could try to check how many of the offline records survived. By way of damage control,” he offers.
At least that is easy to do. Sort of. “We’re meeting Jim Gordon in Gotham tomorrow night. We’re gonna ask him to go through the surviving part of the old GCPD archives and destroy any copies of my records he may find. I know I should have done it earlier.”

Bruce decides to stake a claim for his share of the debacle. “I should have done it. You only met him a couple of times, and Jim and I go a long way back. But we didn’t talk until two weeks ago. He knew I was alive but had no idea where I was.”

Theo does shake his head this time. “You’re friends with the Gotham Police Commissioner and you didn’t ask him to double-check.”

Selina relents, seeing her husband’s misery. “Bottom line is, we can no longer walk away from this mess. All we can do now is deal with it.”

“Fair enough,” Theo concedes. “And you can’t start dealing with the mess until you meet with them and find out how much they know and what they want. They still haven’t mentioned what it’s about, have they?”

Bruce shakes his head. “Nothing. Morell says his aide will explain it face-to-face in Gotham. The only thing he did say was that they want us to help them retrieve a misplaced asset.”


“Steal back, more likely,” Selina suggests.

“Seeing the kind of press they’ve been getting lately,” Bruce muses, “there’s a long list of what they may want stolen back, all of it covered in sleaze. I won’t be surprised if it’s a sex tape featuring one of their top bosses that they don’t want discovered by their own staff.”

“Can’t rule it out,” Theo agrees. “Or worse, they'll want you to capture this Surcliffe guy or some other whistleblower.”

“We're not doing that,” she and Bruce remonstrate in unison.

“Fair enough, but it'll be trouble either way. Any clues about the location?”

Bruce scowls. “Nope. We have to wait until Wednesday.” The day after tomorrow. “I know they’ll swear us to secrecy, but I’ll leave you a note in draft if it turns out we need something and don’t have time to come back here. Then we can talk, no open references, in case the stuff we’ve put together isn’t enough or isn’t right.” Earlier that afternoon in the office, they spent the better part of an hour assembling emergency toolkits of sorts, of surveillance, counter-surveillance, and lock-picking gadgets they might end up needing. They resolved against bringing those along until they had decided whether to pick up the task, and figured that if they went for it, they would ask their CIA counterparts either to get them travel clearance to carry the gadgetry or help send it as a diplomatic mail package if necessary to make sure that they would be given a green light at security checks. The note in draft was a standard covert messaging technique allegedly used by terrorists and, apparently, by General Petraeus in his amorous dealings: with a shared password to a dedicated e-mail account, they could leave each other messages in the draft folder, thwarting attempts to monitor e-mail traffic.

“OK, we wait until your meeting,” Theo concludes. “Anything else I can help with in the meantime?”

“Could you ask Max to pick us up at Gotham International? I’d rather not pay the cab fare.” More importantly, Selina suspects, Bruce wants to find out any fresh Wayne Enterprises gossip from Theo's nephew, the recent Wayne recruit, before their dinner with Lucius, so that he can impress his
CEO with the intel.

“I’ll call him later tonight. Which flight are you taking?”

Bruce pulls a positively tragic face.

“Come on,” Theo chides him, “it can't be that bad. The earliest flight out of Zurich is at ten AM. You can survive getting up at six once in a while, can you?”

“It’s not that,” Bruce mutters.

Theo raises both eyebrows in response.

“It’s Donald fucking Trump,” Bruce explains peevishly. “Why the hell he picked the same flight beats me, but because of him, I can’t fly first class. I wouldn’t even risk business. Knowing Trump, he’ll stick his entourage into business rather than put everyone in first, and will keep poking in to give them orders.” In the follow-up call from their CIA handlers late last night, the senior aide in charge of the mission insisted that they take the Swissair flight from Zurich to Gotham International the next morning as a condition for vetting their new identity credentials at immigration. The man said that he wanted to make sure the CIA sent an agent on-site to help in case of problems, in addition to clearing their identities past the FBI in advance, but in all likelihood, the real reason was to check that Bruce and Selina were holding up their end of the bargain - knowing the CIA, they’d have someone watching them board in Zurich. And since mid-morning when ever-paranoid Bruce hacked into the Amadeus booking records for their flight and discovered Trump’s travel arrangements, anyone could be forgiven for thinking that fucking was the man’s official middle name.

Theo looks puzzled. “I know he’s an asshole, but flying economy for ten hours because of him sounds like overkill. You don’t have to talk to him. Put on a pair of Ray-Bans and if he still recognises you, tell him you have a bad hangover.”

“He’s a gossip whore. As soon as he lands he’ll shout about me on his fucking Twitter account.” Bruce takes a shot at a Trump impression; the face is off but the voice is spot-on: “Just saw useless playboy Bruce Wayne sneaking back into Gotham.”

“As I said, amore, you could wear a wig and talk like Batman,” Selina taunts. It may be unfair, but she is getting a kick out of imagining what he’d look like in a wig.

Bruce refuses to see the funny side of the situation, and takes her comment fully at face value. “I’m not wearing a fucking wig. What colour would I pick, blond? Everyone knows Trump wears a toupee to cover his bald pate, he’ll think I’m deliberately trying to get his attention. And you know that talking like Batman will create more problems than it solves.”

“You could try a curly wig and speak Italian,” she keeps teasing. “Or wear dreadlocks and a Rasta hat and talk about recording your next album.”

It finally dawns on him that she may not be entirely serious. “You’re kidding, right?”

“It’s either that or economy class, tesoro.”

“I’ve already changed my seat to economy. Do you really need to rub it in?” he scoffs. Selina, unimpressed by the prospect of spending nine hours in a cramped economy seat eating unpalatable food, has refused to follow suit, and now he is probably getting jealous, too.

“OK, I’ll leave you to it. If you ask me, you’re a chronic sucker for punishment.”
“I didn’t ask for Morell to call me.”

"Punishment aside," Theo cuts in, "I'm kind of surprised he didn't call you sooner. With the sort of backgrounds you two have, martial arts, fluent Chinese, experience with security systems, no one could blame them for trying."

"For one thing, they probably didn't know where to find us," Bruce argues. "The CleanSlate software may not be foolproof and I may have been something of a public figure, but for the facial recognition software to tag us, they still needed faces to recognise, and we haven't been photographed much."

"What about that Virginian guy?"

"What Virginian guy?" For a moment, Bruce's face is a concerned blank.

"The ex-Marine you met this past winter, the one in your photos from Zermatt. Max sent me one with the three of you in it, he told me the other guy had made the mistake of suggesting a race with the two of you to the bottom of the Schwarzsee run, and ended up being the last one down the mountain by a quarter mile."

The situation is no laughing matter, but Selina cannot help a snicker. "Oh, I remember. The day you guys went off at dawn and came back after sunset, and then went and got yourselves drunk on a gallon of glühwein and came back signing We Are The Champions."

Even Bruce cracks a half-smile at the memory. "I'd almost - not quite, but almost - say it was worth getting tagged."
He cannot sleep.

This is so not Bruce that Selina has an alarm bell the size of London’s Big Ben going off in her head the moment he says he’ll be right back and heads downstairs from the bedroom. He has an uncanny ability to fall asleep in no time at all, in the most untenable positions on any surface, in any amount of space, any kind of light and noise environment, whenever he has a quarter of an hour to spare. Herself occasionally struggling to doze off, she envies him this gift but knows that he has paid the price for it in years of accumulated sleep deficiency and disrupted circadian rhythms.

They have just finished packing, and earlier they had rinsed the dishes and stuck them in the dishwasher for Graziella to run tomorrow morning. There really isn’t anything for him to do downstairs; if he had wanted to check something online or in his files, he would have gone to the study on the same floor as the bedroom. Unless he wants to grab the bike and go on a ride down the hairpin road in the middle of the night. She would not have put it past him; Selina listens for the telltale engine rumble wondering if he’ll take the high road or head straight down to the tunnel on the winch lift, but all is quiet. She turns off the light and tells herself to get some sleep; they have less than five hours left as it is, and Bruce is a big boy who should know what he is doing; maybe he wants to make sure he’ll be sleepy enough for his uncomfortable flight. But the nagging voice in her head won’t leave it at that. Notwithstanding her family history, or perhaps because of it, she takes marriage seriously; for better, for worse and all that may be so much blah blah in the modern world but to her, it actually means something, even though they did not have a church wedding and till death do us part is not a straightforward notion when it comes to Bruce.

The open space downstairs is dark, unless she counts ambient light consisting mostly of the big, nearly full, moon setting behind the villa. It does not take long for her to see him on the balcony running the length of the room; narrower than the upstairs terrace, it looks out onto the same stunning lakeside vista, but watching him leaning against the railing, she could bet that he is not seeing it. He has heard her padding barefoot out onto the sun-warmed stone, but gives no acknowledgement; she walks up to him and wraps herself around his back, her hands pressed to his chest. A memory flashes in her mind; tackling and holding him like this just over a year ago, on her first visit to what is now her home. Little did she know - hope? dream? - of what it would lead to.

There is no playful fighting to be had this time; she just sags against his back and stands there. It is no use questioning him; his reflex in such cases is to clam up and become monosyllabic, no matter how justified or how well-meaning the inquiry. Still, dealing with whatever is gnawing at him in silence need not equal dealing with it alone.

"I'm sorry." he says it quietly, but she almost starts at the unexpected sound.

"Don't be."

"I'm keeping you awake."

"I have a first-class seat that folds out into a full bed."

"It'll mess with your sleep pattern in Gotham."
"With any luck, we're only there for two days."

"Yeah," he exhales. The word is so full of conviction, it confirms all her suspicions: the emphatic agreement can only refer to the with any luck part of her statement. Thing is, there is little comfort she may offer. They've just been over why they cannot back out of this trip, and it is no use telling him to let her go there alone.

"We get in, meet Max, go to the hotel, meet with Lucius, meet with Gordon and Blake, get some sleep, meet with the CIA, get out. You don't even have to go outside in between -"

Another sigh, of resignation this time. "I know. It won't change the way it -" he clearly stops short of saying the way it feels, still unable to make this kind of admission.

She says nothing. If he is still struggling to get out the words, prodding him won't help.

"It's all been rebuilt. It won't look the way it did back then," she offers eventually. This might not be his only, or his greatest, worry, but it is the easiest one to tackle.

"I know, I've seen the footage." Seeing Gotham in the news still unsettles him, she knows, but both of them have been impressed by the speed and scale or the rebuilding effort. It actually looks cleaner, shinier, taller. Not quite the city she grew up in, but it actually looks better now.

"Is it Rachel?" It's as good a guess as any, though who knows what other demons he may have been concealing. Selina thinks she knows most of the facts from his life by now, but with this iceberg of a man, she can never be sure.

His denial is not vehement but is, for all the quiet tone, conclusive. "No, of course not." He makes a quarter turn so that he is standing in profile, and takes hold of her shoulder to further emphasise the point. But this position leaves his face visible to her, something he looks uncomfortable with. She steps forward to the railing, still next to him, but looking at the deep dark blue of the sky, the lake gleaming faintly in the moonlight diffused in the humid, hazy air, and the black mountain ridge beyond.

This restores his comfort level enough to let him continue. "No, she was... part of my life back then, and the memory will always be, but it's nothing like this, like you. It's just that..." She is ready to give up hope of hearing the reason when he finally says it. "...seeing it again will remind me of how I've failed it, failed my parents, myself, how I - "

In retrospect she won't even see why this seemed so shocking to her. Knowing Bruce, this is precisely in line with his view of things; still, the accusation is so incongruous that she protests with immediate, exasperated force.

"What the hell are you talking about? This is - " Ridiculous. Unfair. Just plain stupid. "This makes no sense. What more could you have done?" The logic kicks in, and once again on familiar ground, she picks up confidence and pace in her argument. "The only way you could have done more for Gotham would have been if you actually got killed. Is that what you're wishing for?" She does not even wait for him to shake his head before continuing, "It would have been the ultimate sacrifice but it wouldn't have done any more good than you did already. What more? Stay there and keep fighting crime? You know that Gotham's police force now is three times its size before the war and they've really recruited the best of the best from among the officers who volunteered around the country. You know the crime rate now is less than 20% of what it was. You remember Lucius saying how Blake tells him he's spending most of his time teaching kids at the orphanage because there are fewer criminals to chase. Do you think it would be any different for you? You'd be sitting there getting bored. Not to mention that with all due respect, Blake is almost twenty years your junior and still has
his own bones. Are you telling me you're a failure because you don't have a full titanium skeleton? Have you failed to copy the Terminator as your role model?” She has been watching him sideways; the movie reference makes the corner of his mouth quirk up so she knows that he is a. listening and b. not getting angry. So far, so good. "Give me one person who hasn't failed someone or something and then we'll see how much of a failure you've been by comparison."

"Gordon."

"He failed his wife and kids, remember? She moved away because she said he was never there -"

"He's working on it now."

"Doesn't change the fact that it happened."

"Blake."

"Failed the GCPD when he resigned."

"That's kind of mutual, though. Alfred."

"Don't get me started. The poor man may be blameless but you should hear him going on about how badly and how many times he failed you."

"Not true."

"No different from what you think about yourself. Maybe you picked it up from him."

"My parents."

Now that's a tough one. Unable and unwilling to find fault, she changes tack.

"OK, I'll grant you that. But what makes you think you failed them?"

"The way I tarnished the family name. The way I - pranced around Gotham doing things they'd have blushed to hear about."

"You still saved the company and helped it grow. And if you didn't prance around, you would have blown your cover. You can either regret not doing enough as the Batman and accept that you had to be a playboy to do it all, or regret not having had a virtuous lifestyle and accept that you wouldn't have been a crimefighter. Take your pick. You can't regret both."

It makes him think - at least, it does not elicit an immediate objection. Finally he delivers his verdict: "Maybe I'd have done less. Maybe it took extreme measures to fight the criminals I've put away. I talked about it with Alfred at the beginning, that I had to have a high-profile social life to cover up my other life, and he kind of encouraged it. Maybe you're right. It's just that... I don't know, going back to Gotham makes me feel - guilty about the life I have here. I love it here, being here with you, the company, everything, but it's only been possible because I walked away from my old life and from my parents' name. And going back there really drives it in."

"You can always go back as Wayne. I mean, whatever the name in your passport, if you show up, people will know you."

"And judge me by what they thought of me back then. Even worse, instead of being presumed dead in the insurrection, I'll be seen as a blue-sky friend who left the city when it was in ruins and came back when its troubles were over."
"You're forgetting all the jobs your company creates and the good your charities do. With your money."

"They're not gonna see it that way. They'll still see me the way they saw me before."

"So what worries you are the preconceived notions in the heads of a bunch of narrow-minded people."

"Bunch? It must be millions."

"Those who know you will beg to disagree with the public image."

"Those who know me, the real me with or without the alter ego, are maybe a dozen all in all, and most of them are here."

"Exactly. Which goes to show that your real self is what you are now. The rest is just a name."

His shoulders slump a couple of inches as he leans on the railing, but she reads it as acquiescence rather than resignation.

"And face it, you've probably done more for Gotham single-handedly than anyone else."

"The new mayor would take issue with this statement."

"Is that the job you're pining after?"

He shakes his head, and it could be a trick played on her ears, but she thinks she can hear him chuckle. "Hell no. They'd have to take me straight to Arkham at the end of my first day in office."

"Precisely. Now come on, I've got some wonderful bedtime reading for you. I promise, two pages of my safecracking course manual and you'll be out like a light. With any luck, we'll still get three or four hours sleep."

xxx

After a quarter of an hour in first class aboard the 747, she is cursing herself for having forgotten to bring her mp3 player to drown out Trump's smug tirades; flimsy airplane headphones, while better than the economy version, are still no use. Is there anything in this world, apart from himself, that he is not judgemental about? After half an hour, she has fully endorsed fucking as his middle name. Three quarters of an hour after she boarded, thirty minutes after take-off and the moment the seat belt sign goes off, she presses the call button for the flight attendant.

The young man, probably younger than herself, seems genuinely upset at the news that his first-class charge wants to swap her plush seat for one in economy. She can't blame him; in all likelihood, he had pinned his hopes on Selina as the designated first-class eye candy on this flight, a natural choice among the slim pickings of Mr. Trump and a handful of money managers avidly discussing spreads and hedging strategies - and now stands to lose the star of the cabin with nine hours to go before landing. Sorry, sweetie; you are a nice guy but a girl has her priorities. She may not be wearing her ring but it does not make her any less married. It's just that apart from the gawk-inducing factor - Theo is right in joking that "it's not jewellery, it is a stun weapon" - she'd rather avoid interesting questions at US Customs about bringing in seventy million dollars' worth of carbon on her ring finger. Besides, although she never parts with it in Europe, and the envious bankers' wives in Lugano and her awestruck students in Lyon are well familiar with the sight, transatlantic travel fraught with a possibility of imprisonment at the other end is not the occasion to flaunt her most valued possession - and monetary value is only part of the story here. So she smiles charmingly at the
attendant and explains about wishing to join her husband in the back of the plane, and when he goes so far as to suggest that the husband join her instead, has to elaborate with a convincing, doe-eyed rendition of the tale about his fear of flying - yeah, right - and how it keeps him confined to the back rows of the plane, allegedly the safest ones in the event of a crash, despite having the money to fly first. This finally seals the deal; the guy promises to send her two first-class lunch trays to wherever she is headed, and she starts picking her way through the increasingly narrower aisles and denser rows from first, past business and premium, to economy.

Bruce may be a not-so-closet masochist in life, but he has his limits; his hacking prowess has secured him an empty row on an otherwise fairly full flight. Defeating the object and in keeping with the theme of self-torture, instead of stretching out across the three seats, he is crouched near the window, fast asleep, a familiar, almost reassuring sight, despite the baseball hat and shades still obscuring his face. Still, when she saw him sailing by on the way to his seat at boarding, she barely recognised him.

He does not stir when she sits down next to him, and she wonders if she will be gorging herself on two first-class lunches alone; but the moment she leans closer to look at him and her breath touches his cheek, he stirs awake and pulls off the sunglasses. His reaction upon seeing her is an irresistible, if rather sleepy, smile; it takes a couple of seconds before it gives way to a look of incomprehension when he remembers their agreed-upon, and argued-over, seating arrangements.

"What, tired of being pampered?" he taunts her, but she can tell that he is pleased.

"You were right about Mr. D. Fucking Trump," she explains with a scowl. "Even though I don't not know him personally, sharing a cabin with him is way beyond my tolerance for dickheads."

"What about your knee? You'll have a stiff leg by the time we land."

"I'll survive. What about yours?"

He wriggles his left leg. "it's fine. But you broke yours more recently."

" Doesn't bother me. Besides," she continues, pushing the seat handle out of the way to snuggle up to him, "I've got myself a bigger and softer pillow here."

He shifts in the seat to face her, burrowing his face into the crook of her neck. She could swear she was sleepy a minute ago, but feeling his breath on her skin is enough to set her senses tingling. Had the flight been any less crowded, she would be proposing that they extend their already impressive mile-high member credentials to coach class; but this is a touch too public even for her liking. It is a relief when their lunch arrives, attracting envious looks from economy-fare neighbours. But when it is over and the trays are taken away, Bruce settles back into exactly the same positon and is instatly asleep.

Good luck trying to follow his example when all she can think about is undressing him.

She pulls out the flight magazine and flips through the pages as a distraction. The panoply of travel destinations by now looks a lot more familiar. Vietnam, Japan, Peru, Australia, Antigua; all bring up memories of the fun trips they've been on in the past year, once her leg was healed, the sex-crazed summer marathon on board the boat was over, and once she'd come back from visiting Alfred in England. They have not yet made it to Rio as they'd hoped, but it is still a wonder how many places they have managed to see between Bruce and Theo being busy taking care of the company and the new business they've picked up, herself dividing her time between Lyon and the Wainwright headquarters in Lugano and helping the fundraising effort at a couple of charities Bruce is partial to, and Bruce flying a rescue helicopter as a volunteer pilot to pick up crazy stranded skiers off icy
ledges and take injured ones to hospitals. It's been a busy year, but she wouldn't have it any other way. She turns her attention back to the magazine, and somewhere between an article on London's boutique hotels and a long and rather boring list of Milan's shopping venues, she finally drifts off.

xxx

Seat comforts apart, the disadvantage of sitting far back is that they have to wait in the long line to Immigration control. And though they were the ones who insisted on getting in under their Swiss passports, it still seems strange to go to the non-citizen line.

"How long are you planning to stay in the US?" the officer asks her, glancing at her as she puts her finger on the scanner.

"We have a meeting tomorrow. I expect us to leave the day after," she says coolly. Bruce, waiting for her beyond the booth, rolls his eyes; he passed the check immediately before her and has just answered the same question nearly verbatim. Don't their identical last names imply that they are travelling together?

The man closes her passport with the customs form sticking out and hands it back to her.

"Welcome to the United States, Mrs Wainwright."

Whatever she might have imagined her return to be like when she crossed the Canadian border a year and a half ago as a bereaved fugitive from justice, this is not it. She'd thought it would have been, or at least felt, a bit more... dramatic.

Then again, the bets are still off regarding the manner of their planned departure.

xxx
Strangely, what puts her at ease upon arrival in her native city is seeing a foreigner. Max Reimann is waiting for them in the small crowd just beyond Customs, and she purposely ignores Bruce’s sideways glance to kiss him enthusiastically on both cheeks. Apart from being genuinely glad to see him, she has a reason to make Bruce jealous: the more he frets about this, the less he’ll be on edge about being back in Gotham.

"Did you have a good flight?" She cannot immediately tell if Max is pokig fun at them or being serious. Max is good-looking in a faintly Teutonic way, taller and bulkier than his uncle but with the same twinkle in his eyes that convinces her that curiosity and a propensity for mischief are family traits.

"You've got to be kidding. We flew economy," Bruce answers him.

"What made you do that?"

"Trump was flying in first."

"Trump as in, orange face, blond toupee Trump?"

"The one and only."

"My condolences."

"We survived."

"Barely," Selina puts in. Bruce was happily asleep for most of the flight, but she only managed a couple of hours; by the time they started the landing cycle, she had made it all the way from total rookie to Path of the Jedi virtuoso in Angry Birds Star Wars, and only had to stop when her tablet battery died.

"At least I can promise you that there are no Trumps hiding in my car," Max reassures them.

By the time they've made it to the parking lot, it is pretty obvious that there is no way anyone, let alone any number of Trumps, could be hidden in that car: she is looking admiringly at a gorgeous, sleek black Chevy Corvette C6 coupe, big on presence but not on room. Talk about the sincerest form of flattery: this is obviously the closest thing Max could get to Bruce's Sesto Elemento on a budget, at least relatively speaking. She looks aside to hide her smile.

Max has an almost-exaggerated regard for Bruce despite - or is it because of? - last winter's skiing season that his pride probably has not yet fully recovered from, when he was summarily upstaged at his favourite sport by a man 12 years his senior... which kept him baffled until, a few days before he left for Gotham to do his PhD coupled with a job in research, Bruce and his uncle sat him down and told him the full story of the double - make that triple - identity, life and afterlife of the late Mr Wayne, including his extra-curricular pursuits, so that Max wouldn't make a revealing gaffe while working at Wayne Enterprises. Selina was there too, no way she'd have missed that, and enjoyed watching his jaw drop.
When Max came back to Switzerland on a short break over Easter, it was clear that what he had heard of Bruce at Wayne Enterprises had only cemented his respect. Apparently Bruce had grown into something of a legend, the man who slept through half of the Board meetings and was still scarily good in the other half, and then went away for years but ran the company just as well from behind the scenes, and became regarded as a kind of martyr when he left without a word of complaint after being ousted as Chairman on the eve of the Bane uprising - on false charges.

All this, apparently, is enough for Max to be willing to trust Bruce with what is clearly a prized possession. The issue, however, is that the Corvette is a two-seater.

"How are we going to fit in?" she asks.

"Don't worry, I'll take the subway back to the lab. I'm on my lunch break anyway, and Mr. Fox knows I'm here to pick you guys up."

Sweet of him; so much so that it makes her feel bad. And so much for Bruce hoping to hear the latest news off the Wayne Enterprises grapevine before they see Lucius.

"You sure you don't want to at least take a cab? Or we could put Mr Wayne in the trunk, considering that he's dead," she adds, glancing at her husband with carefully feigned nonchalance.

Bruce rolls his eyes while Max laughs. "Nah, I'll be fine. Seeing the westbound traffic on my way here, I think I'll beat you guys downtown."

"Thanks kid." Bruce gives him a pat on the shoulder and a wink. "For saving me from the trunk. And I'll tell Lucius that you have my authorisation to charge the parking tickets to expenses."

"What parking tickets?"

"The ones I'll run up in the next two days while we're here. When I had a car here, Alfred, my former butler, used to joke that I never stopped it downtown for more than five minutes without getting a ticket." That was, of course, Bruce's famous Aventador, which she'd carelessly left parked in the side street near her home, and no doubt collecting a nice fat fine, for Alfred to recover the following afternoon. Too bad it was apparently trashed in the uprising. "I might also rack up a speeding charge or two, but those will be on my driver's license so shouldn't be a problem for you," Bruce continues. Won't be a problem for Bruce either, she thinks with a sly smile, considering that it is his fake driver's license that he is talking about. "We'll park it downtown when we leave so you won't have to get back out here to pick it up. And make sure you let me know when you're in Switzerland next. I could use some competition on the slopes."

That, apparently, is quite a compliment, as Max is positively beaming when he leaves them to catch the subway back to work.

xxx

Bruce seems to be taking it pretty well so far; she has been watching him closely on the way to downtown Gotham, and he does not look nearly as tense as he did the night before. It is largely hepled by what they see of Gotham on their approach: far from the devastation of a year and a half ago, they are entering a bustling city humming with energy, a testament to recovery and resilience. Up close, compared to the TV footage, the city looks somewhat less glossy, more like a giant half-finished construction site, with the most common sight being a chicken wire fence with a contractor's name and scheduled completion date stuck on it and nonstop activity going on in the background. Some buildings and shops still boarded up but there are plenty of new ones opening alongside. The police are a visible presence, but they do not seem to have a lot to do, and the people do not seem to
mind them; the apparent consequences of the major, and enthusiastically received, nationwide recruitment effort into the GCPD post-war.

Ignoring the valet parking option, they pull into the underground garage at the Marriott Times Square the CIA has booked them into; Bruce, ever mindful of Trojan horses, had arranged for Max to bring them a bug sweeper kit in view of this generosity.

The parking attendant stares and shakes his head in disbelief at the impossible manoeuvre Bruce has pulled, sliding the Corvette into a tight parking spot apparently within a split second of switching down from fifth gear.

"That was crazy shit, man." His awe is great enough for him to momentarily forget the customer service drill. "Who are you, Batman?"

Shit.

Amazingly, Bruce seems amused. "What, do I look dead to you?" he chuckles, then assumes a regretful tone. "No... I wish. It's just that I race cars in my spare time. In my day job I'm an accountant."

The guy is still gaping at him, which is a good thing considering how Selina is snickering into her hand.

By the time Selina, the "public face" of the Wainwright couple for the duration of their Gotham visit owing to her husband's memorable face, has heard from the reception clerk that they are booked for the Presidential suite, she has to change her assessment of Bruce's bug-sweeping intentions from paranoid to supremely reasonable. There is no way they'd have splurged on a penthouse, private elevator and all, if there wasn't trickery involved.

"Well, maybe they wanted me to feel like home," Bruce remarks sarcastically when they are riding up, still wearing his disguise of Ray-Bans and Gotham Rogues hat. The porter has ostensibly let them enjoy their privacy, taking the service lift up, but they are pretty certain they are being watched, or at least listened to.

"Which reminds me..." she asks in a low voice, though it is a pretty safe subject as subjects go. "Why couldn't we just go to your penthouse?" Back in the day, the place had gained some notoriety for the scale and splendour of the parties he allegedly held there. And that one would be a bitch to bug.

He shakes his head. "Don't have it. Sold it three years ago, at about the same time when I bought the land in Carona and built the villa."

"Good call." Even if it leaves them dependent on hotel rooms.

"I wasn't so sure at the time. But I found myself spending more and more time at Wayne Manor, to the point when I'd only go there once in a few months, and every time I went back I was in a hurry to leave. It held too many memories."

"More than the manor?"

He shrugs. "I could never sell the manor, it was my family's home. Besides," he adds in an even quieter voice, though his secret is presumably out to the eavesdroppers, "it has the cave under it."

Ah, of course; the legendary but elusive Batcave. So that's where it is. She makes a mental note to
add it to her tour itinerary: before they left for Gotham, she had decided that she would sneak away from Bruce on some pretext to go back to the manor and take a better look at it, see if the place can yield her more clues about the man she has been living with. She knows what he is like - more or less, anyway; but she wants to see the place that contributed, at least to some extent, to making him what he is; a place he used to call home before the one they now share.

Once they are at the suite and have dismissed the porter, she walks around the suite, taking in the wraparound view of Gotham's resurgent core, while she waits for Bruce to finish the sweep. It is almost anticlimactic when it reveals a single paltry listening bug... hidden in the headboard of the enormous bed.

"Perverts," he spits.

She raises an eyebrow at him. "You surprised?"

He snorts. "No."

But when he picks it up and starts in the direction of the bath, presumably intending to flush it down the toilet, she gestures for him to stop.

"Wait..." she whispers sweetly in his ear, having covered the bug with her hand. "Let's give them something to listen to."

His first impulse, she can tell, is to protest; but as the shameless idea sinks in, she sees in his face that he likes it more and more with every second, until he steps back to the bed and carefully places the bug on the bedside table.

She gets her cue from that. Reaching into her handbag, Selina picks out the pair of deceptively delicate-looking carbon fibre handcuffs, the only less-than-innocent item she has smuggled in; between the likelihood of getting into trouble and the vague desire to punish Bruce for the delayed knowledge of his Istanbul stint, she figured they'd come in handy one way or another. Will they ever.

At first he is puzzled as to why she pulls his hands behind his back; but when he feels the cuffs clicking shut on his wrists, he tilts back his head to give her an infinitely dirty look... and starts laughing.

"Well, we were going to take a nap anyway... I'm all yours."

xxx

She knows by now that Bruce has a competitive streak a mile wide. Not that he usually has much competition; but of course, he has his match in Lucius. What surprises her is not the fact that Bruce takes it seriously; he is still a big kid at times when he lets his guard down, but Lucius... who would have thought Lucius would take the challenge so seriously?

"Is it that you don't want to talk about your latest hypersonic test results because you are too far behind us, or because we're too far ahead of you?" he taunts, and obviously enjoys seeing Bruce bristle.

"Lucius, if you think I'll tell you any more than is public knowledge about our testing, you're seriously mistaken. Not after you lured Max away from my company. But I assure you we match you step for step."

Lucius pretends to ignore the final statement. "Lured him? The kid wanted to come to Gotham, who can blame him? He can always go to Oxford when he's middle-aged and wants to slow down a
"And bribing a promising PhD researcher who specialises in the field with a nice long-term contract had nothing to do with his decision? I'm the owner, Lucius, I saw the terms you offered him."

"Beneficiary owner, Bruce, which means that Douglas Fredericks as Acting Chairman and myself as CEO are authorised to make tactical decisions, including hiring researchers, on your behalf for the benefit of the company."

"Fine," Bruce mutters, still sulky. "I'll still beat you to the field test date, with or without Max."

Lucius backs down to appease him, more out of affection than concern about pissing off his company owner. "I'm afraid I can't put it past you. We still have our issues, and it still sounds like a giant jackhammer, which rules out landings at civilian airports for now. In any case we're talking about different solutions: your precooled jet versus our pulse detonation. If we develop both to industrial testing stage at the same time, the world will only gain."

Speaking of global good never fails to work on Bruce, and Lucius obviously knows it.

"You have a point," Bruce concedes, and the discussion moves on to their upcoming mission. They have just finished dinner - Lucius's dinner and their late night snack, considering that they are still running on Lugano time, or else breakfast, considering that they woke up less than an hour ago from a long nap after thoroughly tiring each other out - that Lucius had discreetly ordered into his office at the top of Wayne Tower. Getting in had been something of a risk, even though Lucius had met them personally at the hidden access tunnel and taken them to the top without any employees setting eyes on him; but they wanted to be in a place that was guaranteed bug-proof, and in any case, Gotham's upscale restaurants were out because Bruce used to be a fixture at most of those.

The trouble is, they end up rehashing their dinner conversation from Lugano last night: until they go into the meeting and find out the casus belli, they won't even know what equipment or what sort of help they may need. So all Lucius can do for them now is promise to cover their backs in any way necessary, and, once they have set up the communications routine for the next few days, wish them good luck, give them hugs, and walk them out of the building on the way to their next appointment.

Which, however, is still a good two hours away: Gordon may have reached retirement age, but it does not make him cut his working hours from his usual fourteen-hour routine, and Blake, their second drinking companion for tonight, has likewise asked for a late hour pleading a movie night with the orphanage kids that they'd begged him to go along on; not surprisingly, the movie in question is Dark Hero, the film that by now has broken all sorts of box office records... that they are seeing for the thirteenth time.

But instead of heading back to the hotel, once Bruce and Selina reach the Corvette parked a few blocks away from Wayne tower, they agree, seemingly on a whim, to leave it there for the time being and go for a walk around the renovated downtown, checking out the changes. They are still taking precautions: the sunglasses stay on despite the approaching dusk, they stick to Italian instead of English, and at one point Selina even acts on her own advice to Bruce and picks up a short blond wig at a sidewalk store and manages to keep it on for the better part of an hour until the heat makes her ditch it. Still, their best disguise is probably their conduct: what with holding hands and murmuring into each other's ears, they pretty much look like garden variety honeymooners and certainly nothing like a reclusive, brooding billionaire and a brazen cat burglar.

xxx

Jim Gordon looks a good deal less preoccupied compared to the last time Selina saw him, in the
aftermath of the destruction. But he also looks older, his hair all grey by now; the city may have come back bigger and better - and safer - than before, but a big chunk of the burden of reviving it fell on the Police Commissioner's shoulders. Selina and he embrace like old friends, which is natural considering the circumstances of their parting. It is also natural that she and Blake exchange more reserved greetings, a mere handshake and a smile from each. What is unexpected is Gordon's gruff, almost grumpy, greeting to Bruce.

"What the hell are you doing playing dead?" But then the smile creeps up on his face, and the transparent pretense falls away.

"Look who's talking," Bruce mock-chides him in turn.

"I was only dead for a few days, and only when strictly necessary to catch a criminal," Gordon counters.

"I left you a good successor." Bruce tips his head at Blake, and Blake's face lights up.

"You sure did." Gordon and Blake apparently had a disagreement or two early on, but it looks like they have a solid working partnership by now. "But I still think - John and I both think that you should come clean about what you've done. You deserve the credit, as Bruce Wayne - and as the hero you created. Instead they had to cobble together an invented legend to put onscreen, and have given me credit for half the things you did." Selina remembers Bruce mentioning Gordon not being a Dark Hero fan; clearly, it is still a sore subject.

"By now, it could jeopardise the Nightwing's identity if I talked too much about who did what." The Nightwing is, of course, the nickname the Gothamites have given Blake.

"My identity doesn't get a lot of air time these days," Blake comments with a chuckle. "Not a lot of criminals around." He looks torn between being pleased and disappointed at the development.

"Even with the Dent Act repealed, with the force now three times bigger than it was, we've rounded up most of them and have a 90% crime solving rate," Gordon confirms proudly. "My goal, before I retire, is to take it up to 95% if the DA's office keeps up their end of the bargain. The Gotham underworld has their collective balls in a vise. Really, Bruce, you'd be bored here." Odd how Gordon says almost exactly the same thing she said to him 24 hours ago. Not at all odd that Bruce takes some convincing on that count.

"There will always be some monster or madman," he insists.

"And I'll be right there to catch him," Blake jumps in. He lacks the bulk to merit a comparison to a warhorse but is surely chewing at the bit. Still the eager, earnest kid she remembers, but the anger that used to simmer under his skin seems to have subsided. "With the gadgets I've been getting from Lucius, it shouldn't be any problem at all."

"Which reminds me," Gordon continues where Blake left off, "I never said thank you for the Tumbler. I know it was your idea."

Bruce smiles at him. "Like I said, you'll never have to." Seeing Gordon's wistful look, she wonders what particular inside joke or bit of shared history this exchange refers to.

"I may not have to, but I want to," Gordon insists. "And also, thanks to both you and your Italian buddy for the miracle Kevlar." This is a reference Selina does understand: as soon as Bruce and Gordon were back in touch, Bruce offered the GCPD an incredibly good deal on the ultra-thin, super-strong colloidal Kevlar now produced by Tessuti Varese, the Italian outfit she and Bruce saved
from becoming a terrorist supplier a year ago. Gianfranco Varese, its current young owner, arguably Wainwright Security's most grateful and devoted client, was only too happy to guarantee them a supply of the precious fabric his company now produces at a nominal price. He would probably have offered it for free for an old friend of Bruce's, but the appearance of a commercially sound deal was necessary to avoid allegations of bribery. As it was, the contract became a great advertisement in itself, with other cities' police already queuing to buy it, this time at market prices.

"It was a pleasure," Bruce assures him.

They sip their whisky in companionable silence for a while, Gordon and Blake relaxing after a day at work, Bruce and Selina trying to take their minds off tomorrow's meeting. But the question that she fears hearing eventually spills from Gordon's lips, and she fights down a shiver.

"Do you miss it?" This is directed at Bruce. She knows that Gordon does not just mean Gotham, or Bruce's life as Wayne, or as Batman; he means any and all of it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watches Bruce's face. She wouldn't have put it past him to deliver a glib answer to avoid upsetting her with the truth. But he keeps his eyes on Gordon, without glancing at her; better this way. More likely that he'll give an honest answer.

"No." He sounds calm, certain, resolute even if a bit sad. She feels the weight slip from her shoulders. "I have good memories of it and bad memories, I remember fun things and terrible things, but it was literally in another life. I'll probably keep getting into adventures from time to time, I still do, can't help it really, but it's... different. And I'm very grateful to John for taking over."

Blake looks touched to the core of his heart; but he is a smart guy, and has figured out that the best expression of gratitude under the circumstances is to reassure Bruce in the wisdom of his decision. "Can't blame you," he says, quietly. "I wouldn't have it any other way for now, but if it wasn't for my daytime job teaching the kids, it would be a hell of a lonely life. I don't know how you managed it."

Selina has nothing against an occasional sentimental display, but this is getting too maudlin for her liking. "If either of you need company, feel free to visit us in Lugano," she offers. Blake just smiles, but Gordon looks interested.

"I will once I retire, in a year or two," he declares. "You know I was ready to resign before the uprising, I even wrote a speech telling the truth about Harvey Dent with my resignation as the last sentence. Official structures have a way of locking you in and keeping you prisoner, and I wasn't sure I could take any more of that." He shrugs. "In retrospect, though, I'm glad I didn't. This past year has been busy as hell, but probably more rewarding than the previous ten put together. Now I'm ready to retire for real, I just need to make sure that my deputy is ready to take over. She's a smart girl, and tough as steel, but there are things you have to learn on the job, and it's best to have someone older and hopefully wiser while you're learning them to stop you from making too many blunders. But I'm looking forward to seeing more of my kids."

"They both OK?" Selina asks.

Gordon's face lights up in a broad smile. "They're doing great. They are my best allies in working things out with Barbara, they keep calling me and insisting on the four of us spending time together. It's still tough, with the counselling and all," he scowls, "but it's worth it if we can get back together in the end."

"I hope you do," Bruce calls out to him.
"Yeah, you and me both," Gordon chuckles. "This young man," he tips his head at Blake, "is lucky to have all these troubles ahead of him, but I'll warn you right now, John, you have to spend time with a girl or else she'll up and leave."

"I have to find one first," Blake shoots back sulkily.

Ah, a sensitive subject. "Maybe you could use some help," Selina suggests. She can't play matchmaker for the life of her, but she can at least point Blake to a good mentor. Of sorts. "Not from us, but there's a young guy I know." She sees Bruce nod in recognition of her stratagem. "The nephew of Bruce's business partner, about three or four years your senior," she explains. "His problem is usually the opposite, having too many girls to choose from. No idea how he finds the time between being an aerospace researcher and an avid skier, but somehow he manages. He's been in Gotham since this February and is staying for the foreseeable future. I'll send you his phone number," she fishes out her phone, "and tell him to expect your call. If nothing else, you can always just go for a beer, he's a fun guy. And he holds a job at Wayne and knows who Bruce is - was - so maybe he can help you out when you need it."

"Thanks." This is the nicest smile Blake has given her yet.

By then it is 5 AM Lugano time and unlike Bruce, Selina lacks the ability to sleep anywhere at any time and is used to European hours. Leaving her husband in the company of crime-fighting heroes may not be the best idea, but it will spare her the embarrassment of falling asleep on the couch in Gordon's living room - and if Bruce's Turkish adventure is any indication, chaperoning him wouldn't help anyway.

"Sorry guys, I'm turning into a zombie here," she tells them, getting up and stretching. "I'll walk to Times Square, it's no more than half an hour from here," she adds, seeing Bruce fishing for the Corvette keys in his pocket. "I want to get some fresh air." She goes through the goodbyes routine with Gordon and Blake before a final stern look at her husband. "Don't stay too late. Jim has to be in the office by 8 am tomorrow, and remember, our meeting is at noon."
The entire long tail end of this chapter is back-story exposition for where I see Selina coming from and what persons and events may have shaped her into the girl we saw at the beginning of TDKR. I hinted at it in places, but figured that it might deserve a more extended mention. What got me wondering, and ultimately led to this reverse engineering effort, was a PM discussion with klcthebookworm waaay back when we registered a common dislike for seeing Selina portrayed as a hooker. Thanks for making me ponder her origins!

...and yes, I know that the "present-day" Wayne Manor is a replica (or rather, I remembered it too late...) I suppose I could retrofit the text here, but I decided to make it a memory lapse on Selina's part, to be corrected in a later chapter.

Selina wakes up the following morning at a very leisurely 11:30 am... European time. Which happens to be 5:30 Gotham time. Bruce, of course, is fast asleep; she fidgets in bed for a quarter of an hour, hoping to doze off again, but no such luck. OK; when one door closes, another opens; she has lived long enough by that adage to recall it now. She picks up a change of clothes, sneaks off to the bathroom, and a quarter of an hour later, leaving her sleeping husband in the suite, she takes the elevator down to the lobby, asks for a parking valet, and hands him the keys.

It is a different man, one who is yet unaware of Bruce or his driving prowess.

"Here you are, ma'am." He holds the door open for her.

"Thank you, Andy," she smiles engagingly at him, reading his name off the tag. "If Mr Wainwright from the Presidential suite comes down looking for his car and thinking we forgot to pick up the keys yesterday, tell him his wife took it."

xxx

She heads through the tunnel northeast of the city and out towards the ocean, but takes a left turn a couple of miles before reaching the shore and speeds through shady country lanes towards an imposing neo-Gothic building, its spires, gables, and fancy towers lit by the rising sun, poking through the trees. This is, she realises, the third time she finds herself at Wayne Manor, and this time neither Bruce nor Alfred is there to greet her.

Once she is at the gate, just after six AM, she finds Blake's number in her phone directory and presses the call button. When he answers, his voice is still sleepy, but even as she mutters a perfunctory apology for the early social call and assures him that both of them are OK, she thinks it fortunate that she woke up and showed up when she did. In a couple of hours, the place will be teeming with boisterous, running, tumbling kids, and now is her chance to spend an hours or so at the place undisturbed and unobserved. When her unwitting accomplice meets her, yawning, at the entrance door, she gives him a reprieve until seven, assuring him that she'll be able to find her way around the Manor on her own.
Seen in the bright morning light, the palatial building looks less gloomy than she remembers it. Part of the reason has to do with most of the monumental furniture having been replaced with cheerful modern pieces in light wood, the airy gauze curtains in the public rooms letting the sunlight in, the crayon drawings plastered on the whitewashed walls and the occasional toys left in corners: Wayne's will prohibited tampering with the building itself but sensibly allowed a change of contents. But back then, after Thomas and Martha's murder, devoid of people and lacking the warmth of a true home, it must have been a rather lonely and intimidating place to live in and especially to grow up in as an orphaned kid. No wonder Bruce ran off to China after Chill was shot.

Her stroll takes in both the Regency Room where Bruce was born, now a space for indoor games, and the East drawing room where they met, now a library; but try as she might, she cannot conjure up any scenes or spirits of the past. For that matter, she cannot even imagine the man she knows now living here, let alone imagine how he had allegedly spent eight years holed up in this Gothic enormity with only Alfred to watch over him. The sensation persists when she meets a more awake Blake at seven, as agreed, at a discreet passage where he activates the hidden spring that leads them to a crude elevator shaft and down into the cave; while she is awed by the cavernous space and impressed by the technical gimmicks it is bristling with, which her guide clearly takes pride in, she cannot really imagine Bruce as she knows him haunting this vast gloomy underworld as a modern-day hermit.

xxx

She had not planned on visiting the graves, but ends up there anyway. Luckily, this time the grey stone saying Bruce Wayne only makes her smirk. But she sits down on a shady bench and stays there a long time looking at his parents' tombstones, wondering what they would have thought and said if they knew who their son had married and how his fate had shaped up, wondering what they had been like outside the public eye, if they were really the legendary loving couple they were said to have been.

Her parents' family was not exactly a perfect advertisement for married life.

As a kid, she grew up watching her mother, a beautiful, shallow and selfish woman, tempt and taunt and bully her father into becoming a criminal. Emily Kyle’s life was devoted to keeping up as close and convincing an illusion of glamour as she could create. Far from being content with her stunningly good looks, she lived in a perpetual state of envy and yearning for the material luxuries to match them. A sales clerk at an upmarket department store, she spent her days like a modern-day Tantalus, surrounded by temptation that was out of her reach; and she vented her frustration on her husband, endlessly snapping about their squalid lifestyle that, strictly speaking, was anything but that. It was grossly unfair; between her wages and Frank’s job as a locksmith, they had quite enough to live on, but it was never good enough for her – and he was too much in love with her to put her in her place.

Eventually she nagged and brainwashed him into a reckless scheme to rob the day safe at her department store, a scheme that, unfortunately, worked... until she started spending the money on designer clothes and the police followed the trail to them. She lost her job and Frank got a suspended sentence that cost him his business, but instead of learning her lesson, she became bitter and more frustrated until her poor stupid, infatuated husband came up with the idea of robbing a jewellery wholesaler in a doomed attempt to satisfy her appetite.

Once again, he got away with it to get caught later; but while he was hit with a ten-year prison term in view of his previous conviction, she managed to escape unscathed, letting Frank take all the blame in his chivalrous idiocy. Then, less than a month after he went to prison, Emily ran off with a travelling salesman who had called in at the fur traders where she was by then working as a
The first thing ten-year-old Selina knew of it was when she came back from school to an empty apartment, and discovered that her mother’s clothes were missing. Later that day, Emily’s older cousin, a dour woman in charge of a young and hungry gaggle of kids and an alcoholic husband, came to pick Selina up at Emily’s request; she had not even bothered to speak to her daughter directly. Apparently Selina was to stay with them until things settled down; but she never heard from, or of, her mother again, except for her aunt’s mention of another phone call a year later when Emily announced that she had obtained a divorce from her husband and was getting remarried.

Two days after Selina heard this, she packed up in secret and left her aunt’s home in the middle of the night to live in the streets, in abandoned warehouses and basements that she could break into.

Frank had refused to see her in prison, convinced that Selina was in on his ex-wife’s scheming. Left to her own devices, she stole what she could, picked what locks she managed to pry open with hairpins and plastic strips, and perfected the art of shoplifting for food, until she ended up joining a gang of teenage pickpockets operating on the fringe of the Narrows. She was lucky that her aunt’s eldest son, her second cousin, had taught her to fight and showed her a few mean tricks to keep opponents at bay; it helped her hold her own and keep unwanted hands off her body, and she became good enough at stealing soon enough for fellow gang members to treat her with the respect that securing their collective meals was bound to earn.

She had dropped out of school when she ran away from her aunt; whatever she learned after that came from stolen library books and reading online and talking to fellow gang members – and, eventually, to marks. By the time she was sixteen, she had had enough of picking pockets and running small scams. She wanted to move on to greater things, which in practice meant higher-value theft: jewellery heists, cracking safes, stealing what everyone believed could not be stolen. She would succeed where her father had failed... in more ways than one. She would make enough money to live comfortably, and when her father got out of prison she might even retire from crime and convince him to start a business together.

If her parents’ history had taught her anything, it was that beauty was a weapon and love was a weakness; loving someone made you trusting and vulnerable, a fool ripe for fleecing. Still, she was sufficiently disgusted with her mother’s modus operandi to stop short of using feminine wiles as her main money-earning tactic. She was above all a cat burglar, an expert thief; she used her charms as a tool to help her get what she wanted, but she detested the idea of sleeping her way to money and trinkets and, if she could help it, would not bring matters to a point where her marks fell in love with her. Feelings were messy and dangerous; her best bet was cultivating a coolly sophisticated, aloof persona that men would yearn for and lust after but could never quite have.

It worked miracles pretty much from the outset; but she soon learned that there was no such thing as the great heist that would set her up for life. Between greedy fences, the need to lie low after successful hits, and the relative rarity of good opportunities in the first place, what she made was enough to live relatively well but never enough to think about retiring.

To add insult to injury, her father got out of prison a born-again Christian, converted by a visiting divorcee with a passion for preaching. He had been OK with Selina visiting him for the last couple of years of his term, but as soon as he found out what she did for a living, he gave her a stern sermon and drove off with his new bride to set up home on a farm somewhere in South Dakota.

If her mother’s departure had given her what the school child psychologist had called *abandonment issues*, this multiplied them tenfold; but her only way of dealing with it was to harden her armour, shutting off any trace of emotion and presenting a cool and shallow pretty face to the world.
It worked. It even proved sustainable. Over time she learned to view her solitary life as an advantage, free from the burdens of commitment, seemingly free of emotional baggage, entirely under her own control. It made it easier for her to never trust anyone and always watch her back.

From time to time she picked up good accomplices, but whether male or female, she had managed to stay on professional terms with them. Jen was perhaps the closest that any of her partners-in-crime had come to a friend, but even then they had little in common despite their similar backgrounds. Jen was still in her teens, more of a surrogate little sister than an equal.

She would occasionally end up in bed with her marks – but then she would only bed the ones she felt some degree of attraction to – and with a few civilian strangers. Still, no matter how pleasant the liaisons were, be it for one night or for a dozen, she was never tempted by the prospect of long-term relationships. Being alone kept her safe; she eventually convinced herself that it did not hurt at all.

It was both sublimely ironic, and oddly fitting, that the first and only man she wanted to share her life with had been a loner playboy not unlike herself, and not unlike herself, one who had had to shut off his human side for other considerations.

The realisation, of course, could not have come at a more unfortunate moment. When she looked at herself in the mirror the day after his near-fatal encounter with Bane that she had lured him into, moments before she left for Gotham airport, and saw her mother’s cold eyes looking back at her, for the first time in her life she was both scared and disgusted at what she had become.
The beginning of a beautiful friendship is about as far from the gist of this meeting as things can get... unsurprisingly. Granted, neither side has told the other to fuck off - so far being the operative words five minutes into the meeting - but with the verbal sniping having escalated to the equivalent of a proper firefight by that point, she cannot rule it out yet.

xxx

In a blatantly purposeful gesture, the CIA had given them an appointment in an unmarked office on Park Row overlooking City Hall and what used to be called City Hall Park, and now bears the name of Batman Square. Reinforcing the crude hint, the brooding caped statue stared them down from the round lawn in the centre of the park as they approached. The early idea of keeping it in the City Hall atrium had quickly crumbled under a twin influx of Gothamites who kept bringing flowers and of tourists who kept taking snaps, to a point when city authorities saw that the modest annual expense of cleaning patina and pigeon shit off the burnished bronze was a minor nuisance compared to the visitors constantly milling inside.

For Bruce, the nuisance factor is the reverse. He would be OK with a likeness of his alter ego gracing the inside of a building he may never enter, but being greeted by the artefact as the focal point of a public park made him miss a step - and, if Selina's Ray-Bans did not deceive her, seeing the heap of flowers at its feet made him blush. Still, it would take a lot more than a statue to unsettle him enough for others to notice. Bruce might be mentally cringing, but looked glacially calm and acted completely relaxed as they entered the office complex, got directions at the anonymous front desk, and rode the elevator to the nondescript light-grey, glass-walled meeting room.

What made him scowl instead was their hosts' delayed arrival: well-schooled in power play, he knew it to be a display of tactical superiority, and was seething within two minutes. Selina passed the time scanning the room for cameras and other security equipment, but without much success: whatever there was, was likely embedded in the walls, the ceiling, the table, or the wall-mounted screen, so as to be undetectable upon casual inspection - and she lacked the tools and the time to make a closer one.

xxx

The glass wall has a matte finishing from about waist level up to six feet; thus all they see of their approaching hosts are two pairs of grey-upholstered legs and the top of a dark head with neat corn rows, an unlikely hairstyle for a quasi-military institution. But the salt-and-pepper-haired, stout character who enters the room first, ahead of the corn-rowed youngster, is every bit the picture of the old guard.

"Good afternoon." It sounds more like an order than a salutation. The younger guy limits his greeting to a discreet smile. "I am Deputy Director Charles Wrigley, of the Special Activities Division."

"Like the gum?" Selina prompts. It is the least she can do to repay him for holding the meeting next
door to Batman Square.

"Exactly," is Wrigley's flat reply. "No relation."

*Obviously*, she thinks; or else you wouldn't have had to make a living at a spy agency.

"This is Thomas Kettering," Wrigley goes on with a fractional nod in the other guy's direction, "from Science and Technology." His voice is stuck in pissed-off mode. "They interface with the people who lost our data."

"So the famous *misplaced asset* is a chunk of data processed by Palantir?"

She has no idea what in hell Palantir is, or how Bruce has made the connection from hearing two vague-ish sentences, but is perversely pleased to see Wrigley take it as an offence.

"We'll get to that, *Mr Wayne.*" He stresses the name in petty retaliation. "Anyway, thank you for coming," he adds with a hint of a sneer, the first departure from the perma-grumble. As if they had much choice.

"The pleasure is all yours," Bruce shoots back. She smirks; he narrowly beat her to saying the retort out loud. Kettering's mouth quirks up just enough for Selina to notice; Wrigley's face remains set as Bruce continues. "Provided that you refer to us *coming* here. If you mean back at the hotel, then I guess it was mostly *ours.*"

Selina and Kettering let out simultaneous snorts. Wrigley's face goes red; surely more from anger than embarrassment, but this is a direct hit either way – and he totally invited it.

Bruce is not one to give away a tactical lead. "I was hoping that the world's greatest intelligence agency wouldn't be so... obvious as to bug the suite you booked for us."

Wrigley has had no time to recover; his response is pitifully lame. "It was put there as a test. We needed to see if you're good enough."

"Well, *were* we?" All earnest curiosity; Bruce is so enjoying this. Kettering takes advantage of his position next to Wrigley, leaning back in the chair so as to be out of his line of sight, to relish a silent chuckle. Wrigley has managed to stay stony-faced, but Selina thinks she can see the flush deepening under the leathery skin.

She has to give the man some credit for tenacity; he does his best to resume what, for him, has quickly become a losing battle.

"Whether you *are* or not, you're all we have to work with at the moment."

It is a less inviting target for a return salvo, but Selina won't let it slip. "What, your several thousand highly skilled agents aren't up to it?"

"We have our reasons to need... outside involvement in this case, *Miss Kyle.*"

She keeps her voice level, but cannot keep the distaste out of her tone. "That'll be *Mrs Wainwright,* please. The reason, I take it, is that you need someone disposable."

"We need *civilians,* but we need civilians who have the necessary skills and are good at... dissembling. You, Miss... Mrs Wainwright, have spent at least ten years in Gotham successfully posing as an innocent using various identities while building a remarkable career in theft. And Mr Wayne here..." Wrigley may have given in on *her* name, but not on Bruce's. Presumably, seeing
from the opening exchange that he may not succeed in intimidating Bruce into cooperation, the bastard now plans to annoy him into it. "...has both maintained a very... challenging double identity and has also successfully staged his own death, though I really cannot see why he did it."

"I did it to get a life," Bruce retorts. "I realise it's an alien concept to you... sir."

It is the sir, seemingly respectful but dripping with sarcasm, that probably angers Wrigley most, judging by the timing of his scowl; but once again he cannot muster a suitable comeback, allowing Bruce to press his advantage.

"It looks like you've got the wrong people, anyway. We didn't know we were signing up for an acting job. If you need actors, you should call that Chris Hathaway guy who played me in the movie."

"I probably should, seeing what you are like." Wrigley's attempt at a stinging retort comes off embarrassingly weak. "Unfortunately, he probably wouldn't know the first thing about hacking, picking locks, and other illegal activities you two are good at."

"There are any number of hackers you could have blackmailed and an equally big number of convicted criminals you could have bribed," Selina suggests. She is tempted to say that the so-called illegal activities are widely practiced by Mr Wrigley's agency and its sister institutions with impunity, but drops it, taking Wrigley's glare as a warning.

"As I mentioned," he grinds out, "we need civilians who have both the required technical skills and the... impersonation ability. Am I making myself clear?"

"Perfectly, sir." With his soothing tone, Bruce has once again managed to make a nominally deferential remark sound disparaging. Still, either because the sarcasm is lost on Wrigley or because he is getting tired of the unevenly matched verbal fight with the two of them, he just pushes on.

"Good. We can finally discuss the task at hand." He opens a plastic folder; next to him, Kettering takes it as a cue to power up his tablet. "Several days ago," Wrigley continues, "someone, likely an insider, stole a copy of a top secret database we've been working on for the past couple of years..."

Bruce interrupts him mid-sentence.

"Is this about Robert Sutcliffe?"

Wrigley may not have been alarmed by the seemingly innocent question, but Selina wonders what variation on go fuck yourself he is about to hear next if the guess turns out to be correct.

"Well..." he starts.

Bruce takes it better than she expected. Rather than responding with elaborate profanity, he simply gets up to leave. "We aren't going to help you catch him."

Selina has just got up herself when Wrigley breaks down.

"Wait!.." he snaps. Bruce may have been bluffing, but either way, the game of chicken has an instant and obvious loser; obvious even to Wrigley himself. "This is not – about – fucking – Sutcliffe." He is practically spitting out the words.

"That's a relief. I don't think he's that into me," Bruce says lightly as he settles back into the chair.

Poor Wrigley, who once again is in a sorry minority, the only one in the room neither grinning like
Bruce nor snorting with laughter like Selina and Kettering. The only discernible reaction on his part is his face going a vivid shade of crimson, but his rage is impotent; by now it is clear to everyone present that he is not the one calling the shots in this meeting.

"It is very likely that Sutcliffe stole it given the timing of his escape to Hong Kong, but our priority concern right now is getting our database back. It's our database, not the NSA's," he repeats. "Naturally, if you find Sutcliffe it's your duty to - "

The afterthought was a mistake, as Bruce quickly demonstrates by interrupting him again, no apologies, not even a sir this time. "No way we'll be lifting a finger to find him. And there's not much of a chance Sutcliffe stole it, he's never worked for you."

"You know that Palantir manages both CIA and NSA data," Wrigley mutters ominously.

Kettering, seeing that things are heating up again, decides to offer a neutral explanation. "They do most data processing at client sites but we let them establish a hook-up between the temporary office we lent them at Langley and their HQ in Palo Alto to help speed up the project soon after they started this spring, or else they said the data tagging alone would take months. It was all encrypted, of course, and they've assured us it was hack-proof and insisted that they keep firewalls around each agency's material. But as an NSA contractor who also regularly dealt with Palantir, Sutcliffe may have used a combination of his security clearance and straight hacking to get access."

Bruce does not answer, but his face has don't bullshit me written all over it. Still, he decides to lets it slip. "What sort of database?"

"As I was saying before you interrupted me," Wrigley cuts in again, "for the past couple of years we've been collating an integrated database of international arms dealers. Meaning black market, not the official government sellers. Types of weapons, quantities, prices, known sources, names and details of contacts, known transit routes, known buyers. We've always kept track of such data, but until the Matrix Project it was just a mass of separate files by region or by seller, and now we've finally been able to build a, well, matrix of worldwide flows, so we can see which dealer supplies to multiple buyers and which buyers use multiple dealers, which in turn gives us much better estimates both of the dealers' procurement channels so we can catch them, and of the strength of the criminal and terrorist groups that buy from them so we can calibrate our responses. This way we've already been able to track down a number of dirty bombs, stop ground-to-ground missiles from being smuggled into the US in a mini-submarine, confiscate a number of illegal firearms shipments... Palantir also pointed to the links they've been picking up between the arms trade and drugs trade flows, so the latest stage of the Matrix Project should be integrating this database with the global database on the drugs trade that they've likewise been collating and cross-referencing for us. It was essential to use them to process these data, considering their skills, but in retrospect it exposed us to excessive risk."

"If you mean it would have been safe without their involvement... sir... you're probably overestimating your IT security."

This gets the energetic opposition of Kettering rather than Wrigley; Selina is surprised before she remembers Wrigley's introduction of the man as a techie.

"With all due respect, Mr Wainwright..." At least he does not rub in the Wayne part. "Our databases, and our systems in general, have never been successfully hacked. Unlike those at the Ministry of Defence..." He pauses, seeing Bruce's sceptical expression.

"Are you sure, Mr Kettering?" Bruce sounds unexpectedly nice, but Selina can tell that he is casting a baited hook.
Kettering chews on his lower lip for a second. "There was one isolated incident ten years ago where we did not catch the culprit, but since then..."

"Precisely," Bruce cuts in, still quietly but smugly this time. "To be exact, it was not one but four incidents in as many months starting eleven years ago. I suppose you were still at college then, so I can't blame you for a bit of confusion about the details."

"It was never known outside – " Kettering starts before his expression changes from disbelief to suspicion to something resembling awe.

By the time Wrigley has caught the drift and jumped in with a freshly-pissed-off "How do you know?" directed at Bruce, Kettering has overcome his amazement enough to say it out loud.

"You were the Shadow."

"The what?" Wrigley barks.

Kettering gives up on trying to hide his embarrassment at his superior's chronic cluelessness. "The Shadow, sir, the hacker who breached our systems between late 2002 and early 2003. The one who was never - "

Wrigley may have been bruised, but when he has a provocation spelled out for him in three-foot letters, he still comes back fighting, no matter how steeply uphill the battle - or how pointless his punch.

"Give me one reason," he growls, so angrily that he loses his voice and has to start again. "Give me one reason, Mr Wayne, why I shouldn't have you arrested right now."

Selina, excluded from the menace, feels free to retaliate on Bruce's behalf. "I'll give you two, sir," she says sweetly, taking a lesson from Bruce's book of mock politeness. "First, now that we have been admitted into the country as Swiss citizens under our new names, there are no legal grounds you can detain us on. I know you can still try to get me arrested on old charges, but there is nothing you can pin on him to justify an arrest warrant. And I promise you, the press in Europe will know about this the moment it happens." Which is a slight exaggeration, but not an unfounded threat: Theo has assured them, as a safeguard, that if they do not check in with him that evening, he will be on the phone to The Guardian. "And the breaking story they'll run will be that you detained Bruce Wayne of Wayne Enterprises in Guantanamo for the past year. Good luck dealing with the fallout. And second," she finishes, though she can see that her argument has already knocked the wind out of Wrigley's scare tactics, "you'll still need disposable assets to do your job for you. I wonder who you'll find at short notice and with a fresh scandal breaking... sir."

"It's called deniable assets... Mrs Wainwright. And what you're saying is pure blackmail."

Verbal sparring is not Wrigley's forte despite his perseverance at it, and she cannot help taking advantage. "It's called symmetric warfare, sir. And I know it should be deniable assets, but I think your concern for our well-being is limited enough to warrant my confusing the term."

Wrigley is satisfyingly silent; Bruce gives her a few seconds to savour her win before asking the next question, pointedly looking at Kettering.

"Even with the database accessible to Palantir off-site, the system access logs they've always bragged about should be enough to catch the thief, or at least put together a list of suspects. Other than Sutcliffe, who is obviously the Number One suspect for everything," he adds flippantly.

Wrigley, who she half expected to rush in again like a suicidal Energizer bunny, is still busy
gathering his wits, and Kettering apparently does not have strong feelings on the subject of NSA whistleblowers, so his answer is pure business.

"That's the problem. From the log alone, there are several hundred people who had access to it. Starting from Palantir programmers and senior staff, plus our directors and managers here, staff in the operational directorates, and undercover agents. Potentially, in theory, every one of them is a suspect. Whoever did it was smart enough or had enough of a high-level clearance to be able to tweak the log to hide the fact that they replicated it, but knowing it doesn't narrow the field much."

Now this explains why they needed civilians, as Wrigley put it. "Which means that until you find the thief, you can't even trust your own people." She looks at Kettering but says it more for Wrigley's benefit, to keep his bullying in check. Wrigley keeps scowling but says nothing.

"I can see why it is urgent to find the thief," she goes on, still addressing Kettering. "But why is it so urgent to recover the database as well? Presumably the copy at Palantir..." - whatever that is - "is still intact?"

Kettering looks mortified – and when he answers, he sounds devastated.

"We still have a copy, yes. But the database itself is a huge danger to our staff and to undercover agents. You see, to minimise the risk of security breaches and guarantee platform-independent data protection, we suggested replacing administrator-set access privileges and passwords with fingerprint scans, and hard-coded the digitised scans for all authorised users into the database code. We need to add and delete users occasionally but it's updated weekly anyway so there wasn't much extra effort in terms of maintenance. It's less of an issue for headquarters staff, but puts all our field operatives - and that's a few hundred people - at a huge risk. Like I say, whoever stole it must have been really good at programming, so they'll know about the hard-coding and will use it. We've taken it offline and are rewriting the code, but it'll take..."

Selina tunes him out for a second to catch up with the meaning. Her techno-geekery, while extensive in relation to hardware, is somewhat lacking where software is concerned; but Bruce, who caught the implication the instant Kettering said "hard-coded", has been slowly shaking his head, hand over his eyes, in shocked disbelief - and by the time she has understood it too, she feels like mirroring his gesture.

So the arrogant fools have sponsored the creation of a global who's-who of the illegal weapons trade that would be a Holy Grail to any terrorist group, and in trying to make it unbreakable they have made it much more valuable by adding a collection of their agents' fingerprints as a bonus. Thus an even greater need to use outsiders for the job: any agents who had access to it, whose fingerprint scans were hardwired into the programming, would be compromised. And who knows what other means could be found to cross-check the scans against other data sources that might store them alongside photographs or names to triangulate the agents' identities. All it would take would be a good hacker or two, and as Kettering pointed out, whoever stole it must be a good hacker by definition.

Chapter End Notes

*Casus Belli* is the Latin for “the case for war” which is also used to mean “the cause of war”.

The beginning of a beautiful friendship is the last line in the classic movie *Casablanca.*
Palantir the CIA-funded data mining company is real, and I’ve tried to stay close to known facts in my allusions to them, including what they do and who their clients are. What I know about them comes from an excellent Forbes brief (at http://www.forbes.com/sites/andygreenberg/2013/08/14/agent-of-intelligence-how-a-deviant-philosopher-built-palantir-a-cia-funded-data-mining-juggernaut/); apologies for not offering more details at this point, but I hope to clear up a few things, and add a couple of curious facts, in the next chapter by way of exposition or, failing that, as a footnote (same goes for CIA departments such as the [both real] SAD, who I owe an apology to for saddling it with a dick of a boss, and Science and Tech).

The “Matrix Project” database, together with its flawed coding, is, of course, imaginary… as far as I know.
She watches Bruce with a sort of morbid fascination; the way the disdain drains from his face, giving way to an expression both resigned and resolved; the way his shoulders first sag, then straighten. The news about hundreds, if not thousands of lives in the balance, even though they are trained spies who signed up for it in the first place, is the point of no return. She almost expects him to apologise to Wrigley; luckily, it does not come to that, or there would be no end to the man's conceit. If he and his superiors had had any idea of Bruce's character, they could have saved themselves the trouble of trying to blackmail or bully him. All it took was a mention of people in danger.

Wrigley is either too surprised at the sudden change in their demeanour, or too relieved at the sudden lack of opposition, to gloat or otherwise make himself a nuisance, so it falls to Bruce to pick up the discussion.

"You said several days ago. How many, exactly?"

"We don't know," Kettering mutters, his voice still ringing with embarrassment. "There was an apparent surge in access between two weeks ago and about five days ago. All by authorised users, but in retrospect the thief must have either tampered with the log or staged a sort of DDOS attack by invading other agents' machines and staging access in order to hide his tracks. And there are several thousand authorised users. Even if we isolate the users who were part of the surge and take out first-instance access events that were probably added to create noise to mask the theft, we still arrive at a high triple-digit number."

"Have you checked all the programmers who've been involved in writing the code?"

"We have. They were the first people who were checked in-depth, and they all look clean."

"Have you checked their personal histories, assessment files, family history and the like? Someone could be driven to extremes, say, if they have a grave illness in the family and are desperately trying to raise money…"

"We've investigated as far as we could, in addition to interviewing them all with a polygraph. No tangible leads there." This is Wrigley's first remark after the Matrix code denouement; he still sounds pissed off, but the arrogance is no longer there.

"And it's no use monitoring electronic traffic for the affected agents as the thief can easily use clean channels to communicate with buyers."

"Exactly." Kettering again, still sounding crushed. "Anyone could buy a netbook for cash and use..."
Tor and secure e-mail services to peddle the database, and buy a clean phone with a new SIM card and arrange the details through instant messenger. Then there's the app that automatically deletes messenger chats and uses superior encryption."

"Redact. I know, I use it myself." If either of their counterparts is unhappy with Bruce's admission, they are not showing it. "I know that you, or the FBI at any rate, have made some progress on cracking Tor. Any luck there?"

Kettering shakes his head. "Not much so far. The FBI are getting close to nabbing Ulbricht, but unlike The Silk Road and drugs, there's no organised marketplace for weapons. It's all decentralised, and they still prefer cash to Bitcoin."

"No leads at all?" Selina puts in.

Kettering frowns. "A couple, really remote, but they're the best we have to work with. At least they're in the same region."

"Which one?"

"Asia Pacific."

"Don't bring up Sutcliffe again, he isn't even there anymore," she scoffs.

"We can't completely rule him out, you know." Kettering has shifted from mortified to defensive.

"I think you can," Bruce argues. "From Sutcliffe's actions so far, it doesn't look like money is a motive. His MO has been to make public all he took – stole, if you wish – and all the information published up to now relates to surveillance methods. This database is a different animal. In fact it would damage Sutcliffe's case because it would make you people look good and could indirectly boost the NSA rationale for blanket surveillance. The most likely way someone could try to use it is to sell it to the highest bidder, and if so, they have to a. sell it before it can get out-of-date, assuming the thief isn't brazen enough, or rather foolish enough, to keep downloading the updates, b. try to contact the maximum feasible number of buyers to maximise the price, which means some delay, and c. keep copies to a minimum both to keep up the price and to lower the risk of onward theft. They could, in principle, sell multiple copies, but apart from the price dropping, doing so increases the risk of such copies being eventually traced to them. And if their buyers find out that they're selling multiple copies to their competition, the first one to buy it will send hitmen to make sure it doesn't happen. So we're most likely looking at a sort of auction, one copy, multiple bids, arrangements made online or by phone but the final sale in person, with the thief keeping a backup copy until they get paid. Maybe destroying the backup will be a condition of payment, to be done simultaneously. The thief will want to do it anyway once they get the money to avoid being caught. The good thing, if there's any, is that for the time being, they'll have as much interest in keeping the database under wraps as you do. Don't know if I'm going out on a limb here, but this is what I'd expect from my own experience."

For the first time, Wrigley sounds impressed, or as close to impressed as the constantly-pissed-off tone will allow him.

"That's largely what we've been thinking. And yes," he grunts, "it does make Sutcliffe an unlikely suspect. But the strongest lead we have is implicated in the Sutcliffe affair. It could be a coincidence. At this point, as I say, our priority is the database."

"What sort of lead?" Selina is getting impatient with their dancing around the matter.
"We've had indications of a simultaneous increase in comm traffic for a number of organised crime syndicate heads and known terrorist leaders in the region. The British GCHQ has a tap on an underwater fiber optic cable in the Arab Gulf and shares their data with us. It isn't always possible to crack the message contents but from the ones that were decoded, it seems that they are all talking about an important asset they're keen to buy. Could be a nuclear warhead, of course, but as far as we can see, none were known to have gone missing recently, here or in Russia. It's either a weapon or our database."

"Makes sense," Bruce admits. "But you have no pointers to the seller?"

"That's where our other lead comes in," Wrigley points out. "We've been told that a GCHQ employee had been making inquiries and apparently was tracking a potential seller suspect before being put on administrative leave pending an internal investigation. Allegedly, something to do with the Sutcliffe debacle." He may have given up on the notion of getting them to kill two birds with one stone and earning him an Intelligence Star in the process, but Wrigley still wants to rub in the fact that there may be a speck of substance to the tenuous link. "The GCHQ and MI6 were initially very reluctant to let us talk to a compromised asset but they finally gave us the go-ahead to make contact under the pretence of being an interested buyer looking for a way to bid. It's far-fetched, but it's the best we have."

"Fair enough. I've dealt with worse," Bruce mutters.

Wrigley is getting dangerously close to sounding human; his next remark is delivered in a tone somewhere between cautious and concerned.

"We have a problem here. No doubt you're aware of it yourself, but you have a recognisable face. Even outside the US, there's no guarantee that someone who followed the business pages or the society chronicles a few years ago won't tag you. Terrorist leaders aren't known to read the gossip columns, but we can't take chances."

"Don't tell me you didn't know it when your boss called me. What do you want me to do, wear a mask?"

"We want you to stay in the background. Some sort of disguise might help but in reality, you can't be involved in any face-to-face contacts."

"You said yourself, or rather he said," Bruce argues, pointing to Kettering, "terrorists and criminals still prefer cash. And the seller would be an idiot to try and send the code through any online channels, no matter how secure. It's definitely going to be a physical exchange, and there may be prior meetings in person to vet the buyers, make sure they're bona fide criminals. I may not be able to track them closely enough online to get within reach of the database."

Wrigley hesitates for a second. "That's why we thought…" He pauses again, as if worried about the reaction to his next words. "...that it would be best if you monitored the traffic and used whatever surveillance you can to follow the preliminary bidding, assuming it takes place, while your wife-" Wrigley shoots her a glance that, on the Wrigley scale of emotion, borders on imploring - "works as the frontman dealing with the sellers in person if it becomes necessary."

Bruce's reaction is surely anticlimactic to Wrigley who must have expected an explosion, though not to Selina, who knows that Bruce knows how she acts in such situations. Specifically, he knows that it is useless to argue about her involvement in any risky business in her presence, so he does the only thing left to him to block the suggestion, by regaling her with a stare that, on the Bruce scale of emotion, registers as terrified. No use, darling; she knows that he won't back out of it now that he has
learned about the potential human cost. Besides, she loves a challenge and has dealt with plenty of criminals and a few terrorists before; after Bane, a renegade CIA database seller should be a piece of cake.

"Ok, I'll do it," she assures Wrigley, to his obvious relief. "If you people stick to your boss's offer and leave us both in peace after this."

Wrigley looks like he is about to say something along the lines of if you make it back alive, then thinks better of it. "We have a deal then."

"I need to see the database." Bruce's apparent non sequitur sounds peevish to her ears. Having lost a few similar arguments to her one-on-one, he knows that he stood no chance here in the presence of interested parties – but he won't sound pleased with it if he can help it.

Wrigley offers him a ready pretext for venting with his ill-considered next remark. "We can't risk bringing the software here. Kettering can give you the main parameters and talk you through the contents – "

Even Kettering does not look convinced; as for Bruce, he brings back the sarcasm full blast. "You'll have to take the risk of bringing it here and letting me poke around it if you want me to find and, presumably, destroy the correct database. Otherwise it's your problem if I fail to delete it, or if I find you a database of Asian mail order brides instead of the one you've lost."

That would probably do him some good, Selina thinks, but keeps it to herself.

"Very well," Wrigley grinds out.

"And I need to talk to Kelp."

Why the hell does Bruce want to talk to a marine plant? For a split second, she is too weirded out to realise that he is talking about a guy with a strange last name.

"He's in Langley now, talking to the Science and Technology chiefs." If Wrigley meant this as an objection, Bruce does not see it that way.

"So you either fly him here together with the database or fly us over there. Your call."

Wrigley does not answer; instead, he pulls out a mobile and literally makes a call – and from listening to him barking into the microphone, it sounds like both the database and the Kelp character will be joining them in just over an hour.

xxx

Fortunately, their hosts' courtesy extends to ordering a couple of sandwiches and sodas for them, as it is the middle of lunchtime; so much for hoping the meeting would be over by now and they'd be off for a leisurely lunch á deux. The food is average and the drinks too sweet, but they are too hungry to care; between Selina's morning side trip and her coming back just in time to wake up Bruce for the meeting, they've both ended up skipping breakfast. No less importantly, said courtesy extends to leaving them alone in the meeting room for the better part of half an hour. Now with the wrappers and cans thrown away, they sit waiting for the men to come back. There isn't much they can discuss in a room that must be chock full of surveillance devices, but there are a couple of points of more or less general interest she wants to know.

"What's Palantir?"
"A CIA contractor. Both CIA and NSA, like they said, plus the FBI and the Marines and a few others. The GPD, too, in recent years, Jim Gordon loves them. They've basically been working on some of the forensic analysis and data management tools that Lucius and I developed for my use and applying them on a commercial scale for government customers. Their particular strength is data mining, taking masses of data and tagging and organising it into logically structured and searchable databases to make the data useful. The CIA invested two-plus million for a stake back in 2004 or '05 when they were just a small start-up and they've been a government pet ever since. Kelp keeps saying they stand for individual freedom and so on, he even set up an ethics hotline called the Batphone – " he can't help chuckling – "for employees to voice their concerns about possible privacy violations related to their software. But they're treading a fine line."

"And Kelp is…?"

"The CEO and co-owner. A real character, as you'll see. Very smart. Doesn't have a technical degree but has a great eye for ideas and business opportunities. He dabbled in various start-up investments with his inheritance money, then hit on the data mining idea and set up Palantir about ten years ago, and it's been growing like it's on steroids. The bulk of the start-up money came from a guy named Peter Thiel, he and Kelp used to study law together at Stanford, he's about five years older than me. They kept trying to talk me into buying a stake and were really keen on using an idea of mine – of ours-" Presumably, he means Wayne Enterprises. "-that we abandoned." Bruce rolls his eyes upwards to show her that details of the idea are best left to an unmonitored location. "It wasn't technically or commercially feasible, anyway."

"One last thing. I hope our hosts don't mind." She smirks "Why is Director Wrigley's folder filled with documents with a letterhead that says SAD?" Back when she saw it, the presumable acronym struck her as oddly fitting considering his demeanour, though to be fully accurate, it should have said "GRUMPY".

"Special Activities Division," Bruce explains. "Otherwise informally known as black ops. Undercover political interventions, highly sensitive intel gathering, cyber warfare, paramilitary ops, all deniable. Some contract killings, too. They must have been called in by Science and Technology when they discovered the breach, and I'm guessing most of their agents used this Matrix Project for their work so in a way, I can understand why they're so pissed off about it, and probably about having to use us. They'd normally deploy their own people for this kind of task, and now they can't. Hence us as a necessary evil."

Wrigley chooses the precise necessary evil moment to make a reappearance; at least the trouser legs give them a couple of seconds' advance warning. This time he is accompanied by a different junior colleague, with Kettering presumably setting up a computer to view the precious database. This guy is a bit older, maybe late thirties; he greets both of them with a quick muttered "hello", puts down a thick folder in the middle of the table, and waits for Wrigley's go-ahead.

"This is Martin Delaney, he works for me and he's put together the brief for your assignment." Either Wrigley has more faith in one of his own minions as opposed to techie Kettering or he lets himself relax once their cooperation is no longer in doubt; either way, after the introduction he sits back and starts reading a long memo, leaving the floor to businesslike Delaney.

"OK, guys. You know what happened, right?" Not really a question, but they nod anyway.

"So the best lead we have in terms of possible contacts is this GCHQ analyst who used to work in Dubai monitoring data on their underwater cable tap and then was transferred to Hong Kong when the North Korea crisis escalated earlier this year. Obviously, just in time for… other things to happen. This analyst apparently picked up info related to the Matrix theft and was allegedly pursuing a
possible contact before being taken off the case. We don't have the full details from the GCHQ, or MI6 who stepped in later, but apparently there's now an internal inquest into this person's involvement in the murder of a civilian. It isn't conclusive enough to have put them under arrest, but enough for an indefinite admin leave pending the outcome. For whatever reason, this Jamie character is now in Sydney staying off the grid, but once we persuaded the Brits to help us, we've exchanged a couple of coded messages impersonating someone looking to buy the Matrix, and got a vaguely positive reply."

This Jamie character. At least the modern version of the name presumably means someone young. "James Bond gone rogue, eh?"

"Not quite." Delaney gives her a slightly apologetic look, making her wonder why. "This one's a woman." He pulls out a printed sheet with a photo and slides it over to them. The woman, or rather the girl, looks barely older than Selina – between late twenties and early thirties – and, somewhat reassuringly, Selina is ashamed to admit, is not particularly gorgeous. More like a tomboy really, short dark blond bob, light eyes – she cannot tell if they are grey or blue – and a sort of dour expression. "Jamie Harper, has worked for the GCHQ, the UK electronic surveillance agency, kind of their NSA equivalent, for the past eight years, right after leaving Oxford. Apparently she wanted to go to the MI6 but back then, unlike now, they were mostly hiring men. Made it to senior analyst and was generally well-regarded until this whole thing blew up."

"Just shows that you never know, I suppose," Selina comments wryly. "Who is it she's said to have killed?"

"It's not known if she did it herself. Most likely not; assuming it was her idea she must have used someone else to do it. Anyway, it was a girl in Singapore, an office cleaner of Thai origin working there on a temporary contract. That's as much as we got out of the MI6. They refused to give us any further details citing the inquest."

So even if this Jamie is not a cold-blooded assassin herself, she must be enough of a cold-blooded bitch to have ordered the death of a civilian. Nice.

"How am I supposed to get hold of her?"

"They've tagged a Lavabit account she's been using. It's under a fake name, of course, but there were one or two instances when she logged on from a known IP address and they triangulated it to her location at that time. It took a long time to crack the messages, but apparently she was in touch with someone promising to find them an interested target audience for the release they're planning and trying to negotiate a fee. Which may mean that she's offered to find them buyers for the database – with the kind of info on terrorists she much have had access to it wouldn't be too hard."

Assuming, of course, that she really was talking about the database, and that it was really her. "Can I see the messages you've exchanged so far?"

"Sure." Delaney flips through the folder and pulls out another printout. "It isn't much, though," he goes on as Selina scans through the lines, Bruce peering over next to her. "All we can see from the headers is that she's using a Sydney IP."

"It could be faked, of course," Bruce suggests.

"It could be in principle," Delaney agrees, "but she's also been tagged going through the airport. She was using another passport, in the name of Laura Fitch, and had dyed her hair black, but the facial recognition was a positive match."
"So I have to go to Sydney to meet her," Selina goes on. It isn't a question, really: the last of the handful of short messages between the CIA sock puppet and Jamie was Jamie's terse suggestion that if they want to talk, they can look her up at *The Drunken Wallaby*, presumably a bar, during happy hour on weekdays.

"That would be the plan."

"Which means that realistically, we won't meet until Monday night," she points out. The soonest she – or they if Bruce comes along – can leave is later that night, which, between the flight times and skipping over the international dateline, will bring her into Sydney on Friday. She could, of course, go straight into the meeting, but as a good thief she knows what any good spy would also know, that it is crucial to scout out the location and not rush into a place or a situation without knowing the lay of the land and having guaranteed exits.

Delaney clearly thinks along the same lines. "Assuming you want to do some recon before the meeting and not do it right away on Friday, yes. It's a delay but it looks like there is still time. According to MI6, her messages with the alleged contact dated three days ago talked about a ten-day to two-week timeframe. The bastards won't let us see them, you now. Said Sawers, the MI6 head, needs to personally sign off on the release. I don't believe it for a second, I just think they're playing their cards close to the chest on this, for whatever reason. Then again, we haven't given them the full story of the Matrix and what happened, either…" Delaney catches Wrigley's warning glance and shuts up.

Selina is sympathetic enough to help save him from further scrutiny. "I'd like to do recon, yes," she says in answer to his initial assumption. "So yes, I guess I'll fly in on Friday –"

She cannot finish the sentence. "We'll fly in, she means," Bruce interrupts, smoothly but firmly. "There has to be someone doing background surveillance."

"Sure," she agrees; it makes sense operationally, and frankly, she'd rather be on a long-haul flight next to him than on her own, even if they have to stay apart in Sydney itself.

"And we'll fly in on Sunday rather than Friday," he goes on. "There's a stopover I'd like to make." The explanation is addressed to her; still, both Delaney and Wrigley look up at this, but it is delivered in such a resolute voice that neither man dares question him further. For now, Selina can only guess where the stopover point will be; she assumes they'll drop by back in Lugano.

"So I know what this Jamie, or whatever she calls herself, looks like. How will she know it's me?" The messages she's seen were all tagged *guest1681*.

"I'll get to that in a sec." Out comes another sheaf of printouts. "We've tried to find identities for both of you, even if you –" he tips his head at Bruce – "will stay away from face-to-face contacts. These are the closest matches we've had, in terms of age and appearance and the right level of seniority – it would be difficult to impersonate high-value targets as they're generally better known, but you –" this is directed at Selina – "have to be important enough to be credible as a buyer or a buyer representative. And no less importantly, they both have to be alive and in detention, preferably recently arrested but without media attention to avoid detection by a simple media search. There's some risk involved if the contacts know or find out that you're supposed to be in prison, but there's always the possibility of escape or of a plea deal. So here you are," Delaney continues, pushing two stacks of sheets to the two of them; hers looks thicker than Bruce's. "Rocco De Stefano and Mrs Sivaparan."

"Your name sounds like a porn star," Selina teases.
"Actually, he's a 'Ndrangheta hitman," Delaney corrects her with just a hint of a smirk mirroring Bruce's.

"As in, Italian Mafia?"

"Calabrese, to be precise. The De Stefano are an important 'Ndrangheta family, active in all the usual businesses – solid waste, drugs, prostitution, contract killings when necessary. Rocco is currently serving a fifteen-year prison term for one of those. Not the brightest one in the family, apparently," Delaney concludes with an apologetic glance at Bruce.

"Easy, then. All you have to do is speak Italian and act stupid," she quips; Delaney looks momentarily confused as to why a seemingly neutral, almost disparaging remark makes Bruce laugh; but then he can be forgiven for not knowing their shared history.

"More or less," Delaney agrees. Now you, Mrs Wainwright – " Apparently, he got the memo from either Wrigley or Kettering as to how she wishes to be addressed – "will have more homework to do. For one thing, you'll need to practice your English accent…"

"So I'm a Brit?" she asks uncertainly, looking at the exotic beauty staring at her from the top of her brief.

"Not quite, but you've supposedly been to Cambridge. This Sivaparan woman… whatever her first name is pronounced like, Shivagowri, is the daughter of this Shanthamohan guy who is – was – an important figure in the Tamil Eelam Liberation Tigers on Sri Lanka, and is married to one of the current leaders who is now in prison, though popular belief has him still hiding in Norway. He is one of the real extremists who insists that they have to keep fighting even now that the Tigers are practically finished as a viable force. His wife is more practical, apparently, or at any rate she must figure that continued terror campaigns need continued funding, so while Mr Sivaparan is serving his term she's taken over her husband's black market business as an arms dealer and has been selling to other, bigger terrorist groups in India and Pakistan. She started by using her husband's hidden stocks and the Tamil Eelam weapons caches that the separatists presumably couldn't use now that they've been summarily defeated, to avoid them going obsolete, and then picked up more contacts in the region and has been as much of an important intermediary as her husband was. Her family is very wealthy; her parents were divorced and are now dead, but both had lots of money. Her mother was English – that's why she went to Cambridge among other things – and left her a massive inheritance that she's allegedly used to finance her arms deals. Her full real name is either Shivagowri Shanthamohan or Shivagowri Sivaparan, depending on whether she uses her maiden name or her married name; she is also known under the alias of Veerammal, which means Brave Girl, and a surname of Nediyavan, which is her husband's alias meaning Tall Man. Finally, she's also known among the remaining Tamil Tiger command as the White Tigress, referring to her half-British ethnicity."

"Interesting story," she comments wryly. A few years ago, she would have probably looked at this woman as a role model. Then again, probably not. Stealing diamonds and selling weapons aren't exactly on the same level of heinous crime.

"You'll have to study her background in more detail and get familiar with the weapons trades she's done to make sure you can stand up to scrutiny", Delaney adds. He takes a USB stick out of his pocket with a post-it note and an eight-digit password scribbled on it. "This is your background brief, including an extract from the Matrix that deals with her, and there are also spreadsheets with weapons specs. It's a lot of data to remember, but she's the best match we could find. There aren't a lot of important women terrorists who are both alive and not too widely known like the White Widow who's at the top of our most wanted list. This woman looks similar to you – " his eyes flick
back and forth between Selina and the Sivaparan photo – "is only four years older than you, and is conveniently under house arrest right now. And being a Tamil, or half-Tamil half-English, she has the freedom of action that an Arab terrorist wife would never have, so doing deals in her own right is perfectly in character. When you meet Harper, whose name, incidentally, you aren't supposed to know, you are supposed to refer to a seller's market, that's the most visible catchphrase we've dropped in the messages a couple of times. We haven't left any clues as to the correspondent's identity, but you can be sure she's smart enough to pick up on clues to guess who you are, or rather who you're supposed to be, and is likely to still have the resources to look up to check her guess."

Selina isn't crazy about the idea of working her way through all the info and memorising it as if cramming for an exam- come to think of it, she's never sat for exams in her life, and now she is supposed to be a Cambridge alumna; but she can see the logic. "Makes sense. Now what if this Jamie girl or the sellers try to check my fingerprints against whatever they may find in security databases?"

Delaney pulls out what looks like the remaining stack in his folder, only this time, instead of printouts, it looks like a thick transparent rectangle the size of a letter or A4 sheet.

"It's a real risk," he admits. "So we've made several sets of silicone adhesives with your temporary identity fingerprints using what we had on these two. There are twenty sets each here, and they each last up to a day. They'll fool most heat-sensitive scanners and are 100% guaranteed to fool any attempt to take your prints left on glasses, furniture and the like."

"Do you have videos of our aliases' questioning sessions?" she asks. Seeing Delaney nod, she goes on. "Can we see them?"

Wrigley takes over, wearing the usual stern expression. "You can watch them here, but we can't let you make any copies of these recordings. It's too much of a security risk if they're found on your persons."

For once, the man makes perfect sense. "Of course."

"And we've figured you might need cash if there's a deposit required in the bidding. Obviously, you're supposed to bring it back to the extent possible, or at least inform us of its supposed whereabouts if you use it as payment." Wrigley looks forbiddingly grim saying this; obviously, what he knows of Selina's background does not inspire him with trust. What he probably isn't factoring in is that, between her Interpol training consultant job and her part-time work at Wainwright Security, she makes a comfortable enough six-digit sum not to bother stealing from the CIA – and that's apart from Bruce's money. "You're going to get a million dollars in unmarked 20-dollar bills, random serial numbers, as they usually demand. We've got a record of all numbers, of course." Again, this sounds as a caution to her, though frankly, it is not very realistic to assume they'll be able to track these bills if they end up in circulation.

"Can we pick it up in Sydney as opposed to here?" Bruce jumps in. "We're going to stop over at a place that has a notorious crime rate." Not Lugano, then.

Wrigley finally seizes an opportunity to stick it to Bruce… or try to. "What, your legendary crimefighting skills are getting rusty?" he says acidly, provoking an uncomprehending look from Delaney; obviously, not all of CIA is aware of Bruce's extra-curricular activities.

"Let's just say, we're trying to be careful with your money and to keep a low profile," Bruce counters. "It could be inconvenient if I make the local news en route to a secret rendezvous."

Wrigley cannot muster a suitable rejoinder, and has to concede again. "Fine. We'll give you the
location of a dead drop in Sydney. For us to do so, you, in turn, must give us the phone numbers you'll be using." It is a foregone assumption on both sides that they won't use their regular phones.

"We'll let you know."

"Obviously, you'll need several sets of SIM cards to communicate with the contacts, with each other, and with us, though I can't stress enough that you are not to communicate with us except in emergency circumstances." Bruce gives Wrigley a tired look that says *don't teach me stuff I already know.* "You can contact Kettering if you need any urgent background checks. He's set up a clean number with a foreign SIM that he'll give you." They both nod their assent.

"Are there any local assets we can contact if we need backup?" Bruce asks.

Wrigley shakes his head even before Bruce has finished the question. "We can't risk it both for secrecy's sake and because of the Matrix fingerprint issue." He hesitates. "As the last resort – I repeat, the *absolute* last resort – you can call Peter Newell, he is officially the head of a consultancy called PanAsian Strategy that has offices in Hong Kong, Singapore and Jakarta. We'll give you the numbers, they are listed in the directories.

"Is he above suspicion?" Selina asks.

"No one is," Wrigley counters, before a quick look at his phone. "But he is our most senior field asset there. Now I've been informed that Kelp has just arrived in the building so you can talk to him and look at the Matrix." There is no hiding his displeasure at this concession to Bruce's demands; and the *whatever good it may do you* is no less apparent for being left unsaid. But Bruce sounds unfazed as ever.

"Thank you, sir."

xxx

"So what do you really think of it?" she prompts Bruce when they are finally out of the building in the late afternoon, tipping her head at the bronze statue.

"Not bad. I wish they'd coated it in Teflon so the bird shit wouldn't stick, but it's OK. You?" he prompts her back.

"Pretty good, really. Though I must say I like the real thing better," she says with a sly smile, to his obvious enjoyment.

The remainder of their stay in the Park Row office was relatively uneventful. As expected, Alex Kelp made his appearance together with Kettering – and Selina could see why Bruce had called him a *real character* earlier. The shaggy-haired, red-polo-shirted, hyperactive guy looked a lot more like a geeky scholar or even a hipster than a spymaster, and spouted a lot of libertarian rhetoric in between subtly but repeatedly reproaching Bruce for having passed up on both a stake in Palantir and on his business venture proposal way back. In another setting, Selina thinks, Kelp might be interesting and even fun to talk to, though she doubts if he is ever able to get off his guard enough these days – the hulking ex-Marine bodyguard accompanying him even inside a CIA building is a tangible reminder of that. He and Bruce went on to dig around the Matrix and its dangerous code; she stayed long enough to get the basics but left when things got decidedly out of her depth software-wise to watch Shivagowri Sivaparan's interrogation video. The woman has regal poise, she has to say; and listening to her cut-glass English accent, Selina had to add another couple of items to her pre-meeting to do list, namely, get her hands on a copy of *My Fair Lady* to watch in-flight, listen to BBC podcasts, and call Alfred to get pointers on the right pronunciation. By contrast, Rocco De
Stefano's questioning session was more along the lines of morbid entertainment: the man is easy on the eyes, but his responses, delivered in a thick Calabrese accent, left no doubt that he was not the sharpest knife in the family drawer, albeit good with a gun. At one point, after stubbornly denying killing someone, he finished by saying *and anyway you'll never find his body*, effectively shooting himself in the foot, figuratively speaking. So her reciprocal advice to Bruce to *speak Italian and act stupid* was pretty much spot-on.

Now that they are a safe distance away from the building, she can finally ask Bruce the things she really wants to know.

"What's the deal with your hacking past? Being known as the Shadow and all that?"

He laughs. "I didn't plan on it becoming a big deal. It was never known to the general public, anyway. It started out as me being curious, I just wanted to see if I could do it. Obviously, I could; it took a while to figure out a way to route the signal via China convincingly enough to make them think at first that I was a Chinese hacker. Then when the whole League of Shadows business blew up, I got back in a couple of times to see what sort of intel they had on those people, which wasn't much. And finally, on my second data-gathering hack, I saw some of the stuff that was going on at the time at places like Guantanamo and Iraq that was frankly disgusting, even if the targets were terrorists, and went back in once more to post a warning to their command that if it continued, the media would get the full details. The press did get some of the details on their own eventually, but that was a couple of years later, when most of the abuse had stopped. So the good thing was, they were really scared of me back then."

"Which also means you could do it again," she suggests.

"Well, this time they would know it's me, so it would be more of a headache," he counters. "But I've thought about it too, as a last ditch reciprocal blackmail tactic in case they don't keep their word on leaving us alone, or if I see them doing something outrageous. After all, they still won't get any tangible proof it's me."

"Exactly. And one more thing: what was that project that Kelp kept mentioning, the one you said you'd abandoned and he'd wanted to develop with you?"

"Oh, *that.*" He scowls. "That was something Wayne R&D toyed with nine or ten years ago. Lucius first showed it to me when we went to Hong Kong to catch Lau, and it looked like a great idea. With the right kind of software, any advanced cell phone could become the equivalent of a submarine sonar, if you wish, transmitting its 3D position and the resonating structures around it, such as steel reinforcement beams in concrete buildings. We used it then to triangulate the layout of Lau's headquarters, which allowed me to do a precision strike and get him right out of his office. I then took it one step further by writing code that was basically a backdoor hack of others' phones, which would enable me to do the same thing using those. It was in the middle of the Joker rampage so I desperately needed all the intel info I could get my hands on. The same hack allowed me to eavesdrop on user conversations if I wanted to. I knew I basically had a nuclear bomb on my hands... figuratively speaking... so I kept it completely secret, even from Lucius himself for a while. When I told him he blew up and accused me of violating people's privacy -- basically, doing the same things the NSA is being accused of now. I was defensive at first but I could see he was right. In the end I handed the control over to him and told him the self-destruct prompt, so he destroyed it as soon as the Joker was in custody. Now Kelp and I have been in occasional contact for the past ten years, initially through Langone and Druckenmiller, both billionaire angel investors, and when we talked about it very briefly in the early stages, right after the Hong Kong episode, I mentioned it as a technological possibility. He got really excited and kept reminding me of it even after we'd destroyed it, so I had a hard time convincing him it didn't exist and the whole thing was just an idea that didn't
"Well, if it no longer exists, he can moan all he wants. How come he wasn't surprised to see you alive?"

"I think he knew, even before the CIA told him. Luckily the guy knows better than to talk – he's in the business of keeping secrets, after all – but I'm pretty sure he knew. And he's too smart not to have put two and two together when I… died." He wriggles an eyebrow at the last word.

"So his Batphone hotline is a tribute of sorts," she suggests. "You should be flattered."

"I'm not saying I'm not," he replies coyly. "But for all he says about protecting privacy, I wish he'd taken a firmer stance with his own contractors. He won't even say on the record that he doesn't think Sutcliffe stole this Matrix, though it's obvious he doesn't believe it for a second."

"Well, to be perfectly exact, the guy did work for the CIA. He was, technically speaking, a CIA employee permanently seconded to the NSA, despite what you said." She did not want to say it in the meeting, for obvious reasons, but thinks she should warn Bruce in case he brings it up again.

"My bad, then. But I still don't believe he had anything to do with it."

"Neither do I," she agrees. "Unlike this Jamie girl, who kind of looks guilty one way or the other."

Bruce does not sound convinced. "I don't know what to make of her yet, based on what they've told us. I guess I'll wait until you've met her before I can pass judgment."

She bristles at the implicit reproach, and feels an unexpected and irrational spike of jealousy. "She got someone killed."

"I got people killed," he argues.

"You're on about Rachel again," she says with a sigh.

"Actually, I meant Harvey."

"Harvey got himself killed," she insists. She remembers the public reading of poor Jim Gordon's untendered resignation letter where Harvey Dent's fall from grace and literal fall to his death was recounted in all its frightening glory. "He may have been a victim more than a criminal, but he sure did it to himself."

"Maybe." He'll never be convinced, she thinks. At least it makes implicit solidarity rather than any romantic stirrings the likely motive for his defence of Jamie.

"One last thing. What's our stopover point? Bogotá, Mexico City, or Cape Town?" Based on what he said earlier about the notoriously high crime rate and the likely routes from Gotham to Sydney, she has been thinking it must be one of these. Unless he means Caracas or Lima.

"Rio," he says instead.

That is a pleasant surprise; high crime rate or not, it is one of the world's most beautiful cities, and one she has not yet been to – their crazy schedules had put a stop to their hopes of visiting it at Carnival.

"Sounds good, but why?"

He smirks. "Because you haven't been there yet. Also, remember your good friend Armando..."
Alves?"

The *tall-dark-and-handsome-but-not-quite-Bruce* Brazilian guy she stood up over a dinner in Hong Kong when *the real thing* was revealed to be alive. "Sure."

"His company, my Brazilian subsidiary, makes excellent mini-cameras, among other things. I figure we'll need a bunch of those in the next few days. And you can say hi to him."

And finally apologise in person for the dinner; all she had done earlier was a hurried phone call and a less hurried, but rather unrevealing email blaming the change of plan on her sudden move to Europe. "About time."

She pulls out her phone for a quick check of the flights and weather and makes a face. "Shit."

"What?"

"Just looking at the weather. Rio's OK, 72 degrees, that's 22 in European terms, but looks like our best bet for an onward flight is via Buenos Aires, and there it's 18 high, 10 low. That's 50. And we'll be there in the middle of the night for eight hours. And I'll want to take a walk around the city, I've never been, you know, and I like the tango. So we'll need to get fleece jackets here, because there's no way I'm gonna waste time in Rio on shopping."

"We can get them at Gotham International," he suggests. "It's almost six, and we have to get there about 8-8:15 to make the 9:40 pm flight." She is impressed how he remembers the flight time by heart. And a bit suspicious again; surely the only way he'd fly there regularly as Bruce Wayne would be for some wild partying. "And we still need to talk to Theo, which means sneaking into Lucius's office again; at least we can leave the Corvette right there and then grab a cab to the airport. And before then we need to pack and hopefully grab a quick bite, because those CIA turkey sandwiches tasted like cardboard. So I suggest we hit the outdoor gear shops at the airport. Does it make sense?"

Sounds like a plan, all things considered.

She flashes him a mock-contrite smile. "Yes, *sir.*"

TBC

The Endless Endnotes

*oh shit, where do I start?*

I mentioned SAD in the previous chapter. The Special Activities Division does exactly what Bruce says; to be more precise, it has two constituent units, the Political Action Group (doing what is coyly described as covert political action) and Special Operations Group or SOG, which takes care of the rest of the black ops business. Where would I be without Wikipedia?

The Intelligence Star, as anyone who has seen *Argo* may remember, is the top award given to CIA operatives – for the most part posthumously – and cannot even be publicly claimed by living recipients.

As I also mentioned in the previous chapter, *Palantir* is real, and all the facts I mention here come from the Forbes brief referenced there. I was able to sneak in the Batphone, but could not do so for
another choice tidbit: “

In 2010 Palantir’s customers at the New York Police Department referred the company to JPMorgan, which would become its first commercial customer. A team of engineers rented a Tribeca loft, sleeping in bunk beds and working around the clock to help untangle the bank’s fraud problems. Soon they were given the task of unwinding its toxic mortgage portfolio. Today Palantir’s New York operation has expanded to a full, Batman-themed office known as Gotham, and its lucrative financial-services practice includes everything from predicting foreclosures to battling Chinese hackers.”

Now Alex Karp (who I changed to Kelp, who, me paranoid?) may not look like Bruce Wayne at all, but I believe, dear readers, we may be looking at a real life Wayne Enterprises R&D prototype here…

You may be familiar with DDOS aka distributed denial of service, at least as a sufferer if not as a computer geek. DDOS attacks consist of massive surges of access queries to the target website that crash it by exceeding its server capacity. Hackers did similar things to PayPal at the height of the Assange scandal when it allegedly froze transfers related to WikiLeaks.

Tor, or The Onion Router, is a Firefox plug-in that lets users access what is called “the dark web”, or the part of the Internet hidden from search engines. Users’ identities are kept anonymous by routing their queries through a random series of computers between the point of origin and the target site. Most recently the NSA and GCHQ have been trying to crack Tor, or at least find ways of figuring out user identities, using “man-in-the-middle” tactics, i.e. impersonating target sites using clones that log user data, with programmes such as FoxAcid (the Guardian has a pretty interesting, if technical, recent exposé on the subject). A particularly notorious example of Tor use came with The Silk Road, the online drugs marketplace, which the FBI shut down last week or so, arresting its owner, Ross Ulbricht, in the process (remember that in my story timeline, the events take place this past July, so as of that date, the FBI had not arrested him *yet*. In the same vein, Lavabit, the secure e-mail service that voluntarily shut down in early September rather than comply with NSA demands, is still active here, though I am not sure to what extent it was “crackable” by the CIA). Bitcoin is the purely-electronic currency that has been used mostly, though not exclusively, for Silk Road purchases.

The Redact instant messenger with message encryption and deletion functionality is real and, most appropriately, its British developer company is actually based in Geneva (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/james-bondstyle-redact-secure-messenger-app-that-can-wipe-sent-messages-from-receivers-phone-could-help-british-spies-8597650.html). In a similar vein, my head canon has Bruce & Co using a paid and heavily encrypted e-mail service called NeoMailbox, also based in Switzerland, instead of dear old Google. I do not mention it but it’s still “true” ;) (you can double-check it and explore other, free options here: http://www.popsci.com/technology/article/2013-08/what-are-your-options-secure-email)

The GCHQ (“the UK NSA”) tap on the underwater fiber optic cable is real, though I picked Dubai as a purely arbitrary location: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/exclusive-uks-secret-mideast-internet-surveillance-base-is-revealed-in-edward-snowden-leaks-8781082.html

’Ndrangheta is, indeed, the Calabrese mafia, and the De Stefano family is one of its prominent parts. I have no idea if a Rocco De Stefano really exists. For any fellow dinosaurs out there, the porn star quip is a send-off to Rocco Siffredi, a real Italian 1990s porn star.

Shivagowri Sivaparan née Shanthamohan is real, as is her husband and his Nediyavan nickname, along with his Tamil Eelam background, arms trading and hardliner separatist stance (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perinpanayagam_Sivaparan). He is allegedly free on bail in Norway, but
you never know ;) His wife’s English mother, as well as her Veerammal and White Tigress nicknames, and her foray into the arms-trade business is my invention, but it’s not that implausible. The White Widow aka Samantha Lewthwaite is a real life terrorist, currently on the CIA most wanted list over the Kenya killings. (damn, I am sure ticking enough boxes for the NSA to read this…) 

While my remark about the high crime rate in relation to Rio may read a bit unfair, it is true. My own experience, luckily, was limited to a pair of Havaianas nicked on the beach (I did end up fighting and scaring off a would-be robber in Brazil who had put a carving knife to my throat, but that was outside Rio – and yes, I was crazy), but I’ve heard stories of friends-of-friends being robbed and beaten right on Copacabana. Beautiful country, though.

And finally, I’ve had to have Selina correcting an apparent lapse of Bruce’s re: “Snowden’s” employer after realising my own inaccuracy, and tweaked the number of Matrix users upwards after reading that in the US alone, the number of people with a top secret clearance is ca. 480 thousand. So I made several hundred into several thousand on the assumption that a weapons trade database could come in handy to quite a few.
"Are you sure there's positively no way I can do it? I can leave a deposit. You can talk to my banker, he can get you a guarantee for the full cost amount…"

Bruce is really doing his best to be charming and persuasive. It has worked part of the way; the receptionist, who pulled in the managing director just as he was about to sneak off for an early lunch in town, is still staring starry-eyed at the handsome stranger who does his best, in a mix of English and Italian, to persuade Senhor Nogueira that he is perfectly capable of flying a helicopter even though his pilot's license is for a Cessna Skyhawk, that he has flown plenty of similar craft in rough conditions, and can leave heaps of money as a guarantee in case he puts so much s a scratch on it. For a minute or so, even Nogueira looked swayed; but then his shoulders slumped and he waved a hand in resignation.

"I apologise, Mr Wainwright. I'd really like to let you do it but we have very strict rules here at Guarulhos. Sometimes they'll come up with a spot check before take-off to see that we have all the necessary kit on board. If they see a passenger about to take off piloting one of our craft, they can confiscate and impound it and make us pay a fine of 200,000 Reais. I know you're offering to pay it, but it's too much to pay for a half-hour airport transfer, don't you agree?" He looks at Bruce with an expression meant to placate. "I assure you, our pilot is at your full disposal and can take any route you may want to indicate to him… so long as safety rules allow." She suspects that the real reason for the reluctance is not the danger of airport authority spot checks but the fear that she and Bruce may be hijackers – after all, modern scam artists can engineer a call where an accomplice answers what seems a legitimate phone number pretending to be a bank manager, credit card verification can be similarly faked, and you never know what intentions may hide behind respectable looks; she herself has used conservative dress and demure manners for criminal ends lots of times, and can sympathise.

Bruce decides not to push it. "I understand, Senhor Nogueira. I apologise for trespassing on your lunchtime and thank you for the offer. If your pilot could fly us along the oceanfront past Sugarloaf, then west over to Corcovado, then swing further south to Leblon and then go back east along Ipanema and land at our hotel, we'll have seen most of it."

"Of course, Mr Wainwright. Juliana, please tell Diego what the senhor wants."

"Right away, Senhor Nogueira." The receptionist picks up her desk phone to relay the message, and half a minute later, having done with the thanks and smiles and handshakes, they are escorted to the landing pad.

"It was worth a try," Bruce says to her, apologetically.

"No worries, caro, I'll still see it." It would be more fun if he flew it, but you cannot have it all.

He lets her take the co-pilot's seat in the front and settles in the back with their carry-on suitcases, and they soar toward the clear sky. As soon as they are a couple of hundred feet off the ground, Rio once again unfurls its majestic panorama that she glimpsed from the plane on their approach: the endless fringe of beaches glowing white against the turquoise ocean, the city sprawling next to them,
scrambling up onto the steep hills, against the sharply rising green backdrop of the Tijuca forest covering the Serra da Carioca, the sleek statue of Cristo Redentor floating above the rest of the ridge in lofty solitude. There is a whiff of resemblance to Hong Kong, but where Hong Kong is all about the triumph of man over landscape, full of ultra-modern sleek glass and glitzy technology, with the hills almost indistinguishable underneath the skyscraper jungle and the beaches squeezed away by relentless construction and relegated to Lantau Island across the bay, Rio rejoices in its glorious setting and still wears its untamed side with pride. She could live here; they say it is notoriously unsafe, but what is that to her when she can single-handedly beat half a dozen men if things get tough? In another life, perhaps… For now, she must be content to survey it from the skies and look forward to two days of exploring with a dinner in between.

They set down on the helipad on the roof of the Sofitel on the Arpoador, a sort of urban isthmus between the world's two most famous beaches, Ipanema and Copacabana, its upper floors commanding a grand view of both and of the little Praia do Diablo in between. They have booked the enormous Imperial suite that wraps around the semicircular southern front – Bruce picked it and she certainly did not mind – and for the first couple of hours, rather than heading straight into town, they lounge around, drinking the welcome cocktails and snacking on a light room service lunch, walking between the suite's eight balconies to see which one has the very best view angle, and, as per Bruce's euphemistic invitation, testing the mattress. Still, by the time it is half past two, they figure they'd better get out and see the main sights before it gets dark.

They put on their least conspicuous clothes, Selina having left not only the pearls, but even her wristwatch at the safe, and do the slightly reckless but decidedly fun thing by renting a convertible – at least they make sure it is an old, slightly shabby-looking Jeep Wrangler that is an unlikely target. If they had more time it would have been nice to walk on the grand oceanfront promenades stretching all the way from the western end of Leblon beach to Morro do Leme near the foot of Sugarloaf, but driving along the beachfront in the fresh ocean breeze is probably just as much fun. They go on from the eastern end of Copacabana to the elegant spiral curve of the Gloria marina up north, then double back to the sheltered nook of Botafogo beach and take the cable car from the foot of Morro da Urca to the round top of Sugarloaf in the late afternoon, in time to see the sparkling white sand turning rose gold in the setting sun, before heading to the top of the soaring Corcovado mountain and there to the foot of Cristo Redentor for a breathtaking city view in the dusk.

"Like it?"

What sort of question is that? Of course she likes it. "It's gorgeous. Probably the most beautiful city setting I've seen, and that includes Sydney and Hong Kong. Shame about the tourists or else we could have…" she pauses and gives him a dirty sideways look.

He laughs. "You just can't stay at a mountaintop location and not get the urge to have sex."

"I didn't know you had a problem with it."

He keeps chuckling. "I didn't say I had one. That's why I was thinking that after dinner we could go to another mountaintop with a view that's every bit as good. Provided we'll bother to admire it. That one is really busy during the day but totally deserted at night."

She is intrigued, to say the least. "It's a deal."

xxx

They take a cab to their 8 pm dinner appointment with Armando. Selina herself picked the Gero Ipanema, apparently the chic-est local venue to see and be seen with great food to boot, and their middle-aged Wrangler is not the sort of vehicle to take to a place like that if they want a good table.
With the same in mind, she puts on one of the two smart dresses she packed on this trip – she figures Armando has seen enough of her in black so she goes for her favourite cornflower she got in Lugano two days after she left Hong Kong. She takes the pearls out of the room safe and slips them into her handbag; she may be good in a fight and accompanied by an equally good, if not better fighter, but there is no point in tempting fate by putting on the eye-catching necklace until they are at the restaurant.

The restaurant is open but practically deserted; it is still early by local standards. They take seats at the bar to wait for Armando. He sent them a text five minutes ago to say he would be ten minutes late, and asking if it was OK for him to bring a friend.

"I said it was fine," Bruce says, shrugging his shoulders. Selina is guessing that he is probably pleased; if the friend, as she suspects, is female, then he can probably dismiss Armando as a threat where Selina is concerned. "I told him I was bringing a colleague, so I guess he figured it was a table for four anyway."

She shakes her head in mock disbelief. Girlfriend or not, he still wants to see what happens when she is revealed to be his wife. Then again, it is bound to be entertaining.

"Brandon!" Their dinner date greets them with a cheerful wave from the entrance. The wave falters just a bit when he sees Selina – from surprise more than shock, and pleasant surprise at that, judging by the broad smile. "Celine, what a pleasure to see you again." Not surprisingly, he goes for the twin kisses on the cheek for a greeting before a handshake with Bruce, and immediately turns his attention back to her. "Brandon told me he was bringing a colleague, I had no idea it was you!" He turns to Bruce again with a reproachful look. "If only you'd told me who it was you were bringing I wouldn't have been so stupid as to let my current girlfriend tag along." He asks the bartender for a caipirinha and turns back to them, glass in hand, as Selina does her best to suppress the laughter before he notices.

She pulls a serious face and tells him the bad news. "Armando, I'm married now."

He is completely undeterred. "So long as you are on your own here, it's not a problem," he assures her with a conspiratorial wink and a quick sip of his drink.

She is about to say that she is very much not on her own when Bruce cuts in with his trademark deadpan delivery. In a perfectly pitched voice – he could be greeting an eminent guest at a diplomatic reception – he makes the formal introduction, of half-introduction as the case may be.

"Celine, I believe you know Armando Alves de Mello, senior business development manager at Quimetal, our subsidiary." Armando makes an impatient face but lets Bruce continue. "Armando, this is Celine Wainwright, my wife. Who also happens to be my colleague," he adds; by then Selina is busy tapping on Armando's back as the poor man has choked on his caipirinha. "You okay?" Bruce finishes innocently. "Ye-es," Armando manages, and Selina is glad that she is out of his direct line of sight and free to give in to the quiet giggles.

"You said your girlfriend is joining us?" she asks when he has regained his breath and taken a gulp of the strong cocktail, pretending that she never heard the stupid and current girlfriend part.

Armando looks both sheepish and resigned, but has to make a brave face and rescue the situation as best he can. "Yes, she told me she's never been at Gero and would love to try it." Much more likely, she heard that her well-to-do and reasonably good-look ing boyfriend is off to a mysterious dinner and wanted to keep an eye on him. "She doesn't speak much English but I suppose we'll manage."

Selina gives him her sweetest smile. "I'm sure we will."
Armando has not yet fully recovered, however. "You- you told me you were-" He stops, realising that perhaps could be is betraying a dirty little secret of Selina's by reminding her of her Hong Kong "widowhood".

She is not in the least worried, though. Perhaps it is time Bruce heard the story.

"I told you I was a widow, I know," she finishes for him, ignoring Bruce's surprised expression. "You see, I thought he was dead and didn't feel like moving on too fast, though we weren't married at the time. We hadn't even been dating. Well, we had one or two dates," she corrects herself, though it is admittedly a very loose interpretation of their Gotham encounters. "But when I found out he was alive and living in Lugano, the day you and I were supposed to have dinner, I had to go see him. And it sort of went on from there."

There is no question that Bruce is flattered. Enough so, apparently, as to magnanimously forgive Armando for the earlier faux pas and be reminded of something he said to her a year ago in Hong Kong when the two of them stopped by there. "So really, I have you to thank for getting us together again. You see, I'd got into a bad car crash and Celine had no idea I'd survived, and then when I knew I'd make it I sent Celine these pearls she's wearing with a card and my number inside the case, and she only discovered the card when she decided to wear the necklace for the dinner you two never had." It is not the exact truth, but a close enough approximation without giving away too much.

"And I wanted to apologise again for standing you up," Selina adds.

"No problem," Armando replies, with both a smile and a sigh. "I'm glad to have played a part in such a romantic story." He takes another look at her neckline, whether to admire the pearls or to sneak a peek at her cleavage while he has a pretext. "Those are exceptionally good pearls," he muses. "Must be seriously expensive, too."

"About a million Reais," she informs him matter-of-factly. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars; and that's a conservative estimate.

"And you wore them on your way here?!!" Armando gasps.

"I had them in my bag," she assures him.

"Did you at least get an armoured car from the hotel?" he insists.

"No, we took a cab, we figured it was less conspicuous. It's just a mile and a half from the Sofitel to here, anyway."

"Well, you aren't taking a cab on your way back. I've got an armoured Mercedes and I'll give you a lift."

"Thanks. Is it really as bad as this?"

"Not always, but you never know. They often keep an eye on people leaving fancy places."

"Then I'm glad I didn't bring my wedding ring," she replies, also to explain why there is no outward indication of her civil state.

"Is it more expensive than the pearls?" he queries incredulously.

She rolls her head from side to side. "Oh yeah."
"About…" Bruce runs a quick mental calculation, "…two hundred and eighty times as much."

Armando does not choke this time; he just stares. "You're damn right it's a good thing you're not wearing it," he exhales finally. "With that sort of thing you wouldn't just need an armoured car, you'd need an armoured carrier. Better still, a brigade of them."

It is probably true. And Lugano may not be as breathtakingly stunning as Rio, but one of the advantages of living there is that over there, she can wear the outrageous item in plain sight and not risk much more than envious stares from the bankers' wives.

"So what can I do for you guys?" Armando asks them when the shock has subsided. "You said," he goes on, addressing Bruce, "that you needed a few samples. What sort?"

"The minicams," Bruce explains. "The smallest ones we can get, autonomously powered. The sort of thing you can wear and hide in a pen or a watch – or a piece of jewellery, incidentally. Also a few night vision ones, again the smallest you have, and a couple of shielded ones. And a few miniature microphones. We have a client in Italy who's been getting Mafia threats." The white lie is a quicker and safer explanation to make in a public space compared to the truth of having been commissioned by the CIA.

"Sure. You know the shielded ones we make aren't exactly wearable, but they're reliable."

"That's the important thing. The micro stuff will do for most uses, and if we need these, they can be installed as stationary devices."

"I've heard they make good small shielded cams in the US," Armando suggests. "You could try contacting Honeywell or Wayne or Raytheon to see if you can buy some from them."

Bruce waves the suggestion away. "No, it's OK; we don't have much time. Besides, Wayne doesn't make the stuff themselves. In fact they asked us a while back if they could buy from us – that would be from Quimetal through us. They being Lucius, of course, who has been the designated intercompany liaison for the past year, working for the same owner in his living and posthumous guises.

The mention brings up a business rumour recollection in Armando's mind. "Is it true that Wayne tried to buy a stake in your company last year?"

Bruce smiles. "They tried. They found me less willing to sell than they'd hoped."

Armando shakes his head. "Their owners must have thought you were batshit crazy."

"I am crazy, I know," Bruce assures him readily.

Selina turns away to hide the grin.

xxx

All things considered, the dinner was a less entertaining affair than the drinks that had preceded it. Their lively discussion was soon interrupted by the arrival of young, tall, slim, dyed-blonde and expensively-dressed current girlfriend Leticia, whose easy greeting to the maître d' left Selina in little doubt that her story of not having been to Gero had been a bald-faced lie. The part about her not speaking much English was true, however, so that Armando had to translate for her when she joined the conversation – which was not very frequently, as for the most part she was there just to make sure Armando's eyes did not stray too often in Selina's direction. She was distinctly displeased when Selina paid for dinner, with the explanation, unfortunately translated at face value, that she was
paying him back for a big favour he had done her in Hong Kong. The poor guy will either have to start taking her along on his business trips from now on, Selina thought, or start looking for a new girlfriend. She suspects she knows which option he'll go for.

Half an hour after Armando and sulky Leticia dropped them off at the Sofitel with a promise to deliver the gadgets tomorrow afternoon, they are driving out again – once again in the Wrangler wearing simple clothes, with Bruce at the wheel and her in the passenger seat, heading for the mountaintop Bruce had intriguingly promised to take her to. It is only ten miles west, but it takes them almost half an hour to get there – for once she asks Bruce to go slowly so that she can take a good look at the beaches they are driving past, and when they take the right turn onto the roughly paved, unlit track leading away from the beach and north into the mountains past the suburb of Sao Conrado for the final four-mile ascent, he slows down further to avoid giving them both a bad case of tremors with the hard suspension.

The spot, when they get to it, is well worth the trip and would probably be worth a trip twice as long. It is not, strictly speaking, at the top of the mountain, but at 1,700 feet, it is high enough. Above them, she can make out the peculiar turret-shaped top of Pedra da Gavea a thousand feet up and about a thousand feet to the southeast against the night sky, the bare rock shimmering softly in the light of the crescent moon. Far below, at the bottom of a sheer drop, lies Sao Conrado strung along the Praia do Pepino; further to the east is the glowing golden strip of Ipanema and the scattering of city lights next to it, and in between are the steep, jagged double hilltops of Dos Irmaos, silhouetted black against the bright city. It looks magical, and there is not a soul in sight.

Yet contrary to their usual modus operandi, rather than take advantage of the lofty spot and get frisky, they just sit down a couple of feet away from the edge of the wooden hang-glider launch platform and take in the view. Part of it may be due to the fact that the platform slopes down as it nears the edge to facilitate take-off – not exactly helpful for an amorous couple perched near the edge of a seventeen-hundred-foot drop without the benefit of hang-gliders, or any other means of sustaining flight, for that matter.

Bruce is the one to take issue with it. "Fuck, this is ridiculous. It would be so much fun flying down from here, we could fly over to the Pico Dois Irmaos and see Ipanema up close, and now I'm sitting here like an idiot and can only show it to you from the platform. Why the fucking hell didn't I think of asking Lucius for a memory cloth cape when we were in his office yesterday? I already knew we were headed to Rio for fuck's sake."

"Maybe because bringing the Bat-cape in your baggage and flaunting it flying around Rio might get in the way of keeping a low profile?" she reminds him wryly. It would be fun, sure – she has never tried it but can certainly believe it – but sometimes Bruce forgets the whole being dead thing and what it means. It is bad enough that he has been strutting his stuff in more Swiss and Italian extreme sports events than she'd care to remember. It is a tempting proposition, though. "Maybe we can come back tomorrow morning and rent a glider from the pilots?"

He perks up at the suggestion… somewhat. "It's not as good as flying with the cape would be, these things are fully rigid and less manoeuvrable. But on the plus side, if they give us the double one they use for passenger flights, it'll have a harness for you to strap yourself into instead of holding onto me."

Holding onto him is not really an unpleasant notion per se; on the other hand, doing it for the better part of a quarter of an hour while hanging a thousand feet in the air might be pushing it. "See, it makes more sense anyway."

"I guess it does." A pause, long enough for her to star wondering what is going on in his head. "You
know, it's funny you should have mentioned the cape." What's so funny when you were the one
lamenting its absence, sweetheart? "I was just thinking, when we were leaving Gotham, that now I
can finally rest easy in the knowledge that Batman is really no longer needed there." Ah, that's what
it is… now this, the fact that he thinks so whether it is 100% true or not, is good news. "They've got
Blake as the Nightwing, they've got Gordon who really cleaned the city up, even without the Dent
Act to rely on. I kept thinking if I went back there I'd feel like a traitor for leaving a city that needs
me. Instead it's a relief to see that it no longer does. But I still miss it sometimes."

She can understand the sentiment even though she does not quite share it; for her Gotham, for all its
energy and drive and the odd cosiness of living among high-rises, was never a choice, more of a
survival obstacle course than a home. He was its golden boy, of course, at least for a while…
maybe that's what he is missing. "What, need your fix of partying?"

He laughs. "Of course not. It's more about the people, Lucius and Gordon, and the company, I feel
bad about no longer having any part in what my father built. And the city itself, I never really had a
chance to enjoy it, I don't mean the partying, just walking around, looking at it. These past two days
were the first time I could do it since when my parents were alive. I'd like to go see the orphanage at
Wayne Manor, see what it's like…"

"I went there." She did not tell him until now; when she came back that morning there wasn't much
time, then after their meeting it did not seem like the right moment to bring it up. She figured she
would tell him eventually, just was not sure when.

He does not answer at once. "So that's where you went yesterday."

"Yep. I thought you were asleep."

"I woke up at about nine and you were gone. I didn't know where, and didn't want to corner you
with it. So you went to see Blake?" There is a hint of suspicion in his voice, a far cry from full-blown
jealousy but with just a touch of sulkiness.

She chuckles. "No, I went to see the Regency Room."

He takes a second to answer, again; as far as she can tell, he is impressed by her recollection of the
circumstances of his birth. "You know it isn't the original house, though," he comments cautiously.

"I do, but I recall reading that it's an exact replica." She does not particularly care to
recall when and under what circumstances she read it; the fact is, she studied the blueprints for the
original Wayne Manor deposited at the city archives when she was getting ready to steal his
fingerprints. "So it was the closest I could get to the real thing, anyway."

"You're right, it is an exact replica. Apart from the foundations, we reinforced the part above the
cave and installed a new lift system there after the fire." He falls silent again, and she momentarily
berates herself for the awkward choice of subject. This is turning into a waste of a glorious
mountaintop opportunity.

"How was it?" he asks at last.

"Big. Impressive. I could tell though that it must have been a cold place to live in."

"It was… after my parents died." Died, not were killed. Has he finally moved on from the pain?

"I think it needs a lot of people to make it feel more like a home. I think it was a great idea to turn it
over to the kids. They run and shout all over the place, but for them it's fun, so much space and all
this fancy Gothic stuff. Blake tells me the younger kids call it Hogwarts."
This finally gets him laughing. "I'm glad they enjoy being there. So you went all the way there just to see the Regency Room?" Not suspicious, just surprised.

"That, and the East Drawing Room where we met. Where you caught me," she corrects herself.

"Where I failed to catch you," he corrects her, making her chuckle.

"I don't think you were really trying."

"I'm flattered. I don't think I was in any shape to. Besides, you were quite a sight. I still remember watching the best-looking pair of legs I'd ever seen jumping out the window, and being unable to do anything to stop you."

"So it wasn't about the pearls, then," she teases. Joking aside, she is positive that the real reason he went after her was recovering the necklace.

"It was 50/50." She was half wrong, then. "Of course I wanted the pearls back, but I could've stolen them from your apartment when you were out." True. "What I wanted apart from the pearls was to see you again and to show you that I wasn't just this miserable broken creep you'd seen. You'd… embarrassed me so much that I wanted to prove to you that I could be worth a second look."

"Prove to me. To a jewel thief who had robbed you." Whatever she is now, it was true then.

"To a very good-looking and obviously very smart thief who had made me realise what a total wreck I'd become. I remember lying on the floor after you'd escaped feeling really ashamed of myself, for the first time in years, of how I'd let myself go wallowing in self-pity, and thinking I deserved to be embarrassed for that. The truth is, for years I didn't give a fuck, ever since the Joker was caught." She knows what he really means by that reference. "At first I still got out and kept up appearances and put an effort into running the company. Then I had this big bright hope of building the reactor and I thought this was my chance of being Gotham's hero without the cape, I'd give the city this infinite source of power that would make life better and easier for everyone, not just the rich. Then when I found out how easily it was converted to military use and that hope died, I just stopped caring. Lucius used to write to me, I didn't really answer the phone, I mean I told Alfred to say I wasn't there, but I read the emails and answered some, occasionally, and he used to joke I must have uploaded my brain onto a computer. In reality it was worse than that, I'd buried myself alive. In a way, you embarrassing me at our first meeting was the best thing that could have happened."

So if he is to be believed, she is to be credited with being the Princess Charming who broke into his enchanted castle and woke him up, the Sleeping Beauty… to live happily ever after? Well, if he likes to see things that way, she doesn't want to argue.

"All those years I'd been punishing myself for Rachel's death, by refusing to live. I'd been thinking of her as my only chance of a normal life, the only person who would accept me both for who I was and for who I'd been, who didn't care about my bank account like most people did, and didn't think of me as a freak knowing I flew around Gotham hunting down crime lords. I think she saw that I'd sort of boxed her in, in my mind, into this future that was only possible if she was with me. In the end we both wanted to be free, but what I saw as the condition of my freedom was what she saw as the end of hers. I don't think I'd have been as bad as she thought," he continues bitterly, "but I half suspect we'd have probably divorced in a month anyway. I'd made her into a symbol, and I think she hated that. I knew, at the back of my mind, that I could never have her, but it only made me go into denial and want to fight to keep her near me. Anyway, she wrote to me just before she died to tell me she was marrying Harvey Dent, and gave the letter to Alfred."

"I know; he told me." Alfred also told her that in hindsight, burning it was one of his greatest regrets.
- but, he had added, "all's well that ends well."

Interesting how Bruce has apparently been thinking along exactly the same lines. "In retrospect, I wish he'd told me right then. It would have hurt more, but it would have allowed me to let go sooner. But so long as it brought me here, it's OK."

"As opposed to bringing you to Miranda Tate, I suppose?" she comments wryly.

"As opposed to anyone."

It is an exaggeration, surely. "I don't know. I think you have this type you're attracted to, I just happened to be the next one that fit."

He chuckles. "Yeah. Tall, dark and handsome, smart, good legs. Preferably good fighting skills."

"Well, I suppose the dark part rules out Harvey Dent," she teases.

He sounds embarrassed when he answers. "You know… I did like him."

"As in, like him?" That's something of a curveball; but it does explain all the self-flagellation over Dent's death.

"Yeah… of course it never went anywhere. I don't even think he knew. Maybe it was just displaced jealousy over Rachel, because they were together. I never even slept with her, you know."

Now that's news too; Selina has heard enough about his previous reputation to be positive that Rachel had, at some point, surrendered to his charms.

"So if Harvey had lived you two would be an item?" she muses aloud.

"Who knows. And if they both had lived, maybe we would have become Gotham's most famous threesome." He laughs, but she can tell he isn't really finding it entertaining. "But so long as I would've ended up meeting you," he continues seriously, "I would have still ended up trying to get you and left the two of them to themselves."

"How come?"

"You were too much of a challenge for me not to want you."

This is interesting; she never thought that he saw her exactly the way she saw him.

"What did you think when I showed up and saw you in the drawing room?"

That's a tricky question. Not because she does not remember what she thought – she does, and not because it would be embarrassing for him to hear – it isn't; but because it would likely lead to yet another admission of what a huge effect it ended up having on her, and even now, after a year of marriage, she is wary of exposing her feelings too much, even to him.

"You surprised me."

"By shooting an arrow to within an inch of your ear. You know, I knew it wouldn't hit you."

She laughs. "No, not that. I mean, the arrow sure did surprise me, but it was more… the way you carried yourself."

"Like a scruffy bum, you mean."
"Not quite. For one thing, you didn't have eight-inch fingernails."

His turn to laugh. "It that what you expected?"

"That's what I'd heard."

"You sure it was fingernails you heard them talking about?"

She elbows him in the ribs. "The way I recall it, the person I overheard saying it was Daggett. If he wasn't talking about fingernails, I don't want to know what the story may be behind that."

He laughs again. "Oh shit. You should have mentioned the source at the start."

"And spared you a few blushes? No, I'm glad I didn't. Anyway, what I meant was…" At least it has become light-hearted enough to keep her safely from confessing anything too deep. "What surprised me was the way you took everything in stride, the way you took me in stride. Here I was, stealing a necklace that belonged to you, having broken into a safe that you believed uncrackable, and you talked about it like it was some kind of joke, or at least a daily occurrence."

"In truth, I was too busy ogling you."

She snickers in outward acknowledgment, but it only takes her further away from acknowledging the real, serious truth: after the initial surprise of that meeting wore off, after the added surprise of seeing him at Miranda's charity ball had run its course – and sure enough, he had surprised her then by cleaning up very nicely indeed - what kept her thinking about him through the months of Gotham's occupation and the endless weeks of his presumed death and ultimately made her fall in love with him was not his defiance of expectations but his persistent refusal to judge her and his belief in the best in her – a belief that had ended up a self-fulfilling prophecy, if the direction her life has taken is any indication.

"And then when you found out the prints I'd taken were used to steal your money, you still showed up to talk to me like nothing had happened."

"I knew it was Bane's doing and not really yours. For that matter, you took me in stride too. And you were probably the only person other than Lucius who treated me exactly the same way after I was supposedly bankrupt as you had before. You were still every bit as snarky to me, and I liked that."

"I just think you're masochistic."

He snorts. "That, too... It has limits, though. By the time I was in hospital in Geneva, I was really done with the self-punishment idea, at least in the sense I'd been doing it in Gotham. I did torture myself physically, kind of, but the purpose was exactly the opposite of self-punishment. I really wanted to get into shape, to be able to have a normal life. And I must admit, the memory of lying on the floor in that drawing room was an extra incentive. If I ever saw you again, I thought, I'd better not be a miserable cripple."

This time she cannot help protesting out loud. "I don't think you were ever in danger of being that."

No matter what callous words she may have said once when escaping Wayne Manor.

"Anyway, it helped me recover faster."

"And then?" She has heard him talk briefly about that time, but she still wants to know more.

"And then I started thinking about what to do. You see, my original plan had been to kill off Batman and stay in Gotham as Bruce Wayne. That was sort of my version of the CleanSlate; if I could see
that I was no longer needed to fight crime, I could pack up the persona and have a life. I didn't see much point to it after Rachel, but when Alfred told me about her letter, after I'd thought about it, I thought I could still do it. I'd written a will and made arrangements in case I didn't make it, before I went to see Bane, just in case. Then when I was recovering in Geneva, by the time I knew I'd live, it hit me that I didn't really want to go back if it meant just being Wayne. I'd have probably been tempted if I'd heard you were there, but I realised that after I'd spent years sacrificing Wayne's reputation to protect the Batman identity, I was left with a really shitty rap sheet, and people would always see me as the guy who'd burned down his house and threw huge parties just so he could be rude to his guests and had threesome after threesome and whatnot. Some of the facts were true…” – she wonders absently how much of the threesome part was true – “…but it all added up to someone who wasn't really me and no matter what I did and what I was like, most of them would always judge me on that basis, as a foregone conclusion, and I didn't want that.

She wants to say that the only way to be truly free of that shadow is to go back and fight it, but catches herself. She does not want to give him ideas; not that it would be a deal breaker for the two of them, but it would surely complicate things if he wanted to move back to Gotham, because she surely does not. Still, if he has made up his mind, she'd better know about it.

"And now?"

"Now I feel free to go back there if I want to. Who knows, I may even come back and let people recognise me. I don't think I'd want to move there unless you want to…” – she shakes her head, relieved to hear it – "…but I'm OK with going back every now and then."

Well, she can live with that.

xxx

This is déjà vu all over again.

"Are you sure there's no way I can do it? I can leave a deposit. You can talk to my banker, he can get you a guarantee for the full cost of the glider…”

They are back at the Pedra Bonita hang-glider launch platform, and Bruce is making a valiant attempt to stick to their last night's plan and talk the twentysomething pilots into letting him – or preferably, both of them – use one of the contraptions. They have been cautiously optimistic on the way up, Bruce even quipping that "they won't let me fly a helicopter but I hope I can at least bargain for the use of a strip of cloth on a frame". Too optimistic, as it turned out. Their fallback option is to let her take the double-harness glider in tandem with one of the regular pilots, but where she was OK with being flown around in the helicopter by the official pilot, she'd rather have him as her pilot in this flimsy flying contraption, both because it would be more fun and because she is just the tiniest bit nervous. Fighting and driving on the ground is one thing; flying up in the air without engines is still a new thing for her.

She wonders whether she should offer to get her pearls from the hotel and leave them as an exaggerated security deposit – they would probably buy the entire Pedra Bonita hang-glider fleet – when it starts looking like Bruce is making headway with one of the pilots, whom the others refer to as the daredevil. He is not exactly eager, but he is not shaking his head outright.

"Come on, I'm not as bad as I look," Bruce cajoles him. "I swear I've done this before, I won't break it."

Selina figures the guy is their best chance and decides to throw her weight into the discussion. "And if you're worried he'll steal it you can keep me here as a hostage.” Never mind that she could
probably take all of *them* hostage if the situation called for it; this is the time for doe eyes and demure looks.

Whether from innate recklessness or from Bruce's persuasive tone or from her added entreaty, the kid gives in. "It's your funeral", he informs Bruce nonchalantly with a wave of his hand.

"Great." Bruce instantly changes tone from pleading to upbeat and decisive. "You guys can pick me up on the Praia do Pepino. Or my mortal remains, if you turn out to be right."

Five minutes later, he is off the platform and up in the air.

Five and a half minutes later, the entire pilot contingent is standing on that same platform gaping at the spectacular display of impossible aerobatics that the crazy foreigner is pulling off. Selina has so far avoided being a spectator at the extreme sports events Bruce loves going to – partly because she often had other things to do and partly because she did not feel like encouraging him to show off even more and be even crazier than usual, which she suspects her presence might do. Watching him now, she thinks she may need to – want to, as a matter of fact – revise her stand on that. This is simply too beautiful not to watch and enjoy. She isn't sure she'd be up to the same sort of tricks on the double flight, but knowing him, the greater danger would be that he'd make it too safe rather than too risky with her as his co-pilot.

"Who is this guy?" asks the owner of the glider, who finally ran out of what sounded like admiring expletives. They all look at her expectantly to hear the great mystery resolved.

"My husband," she replies sweetly. "Come on, he'll be landing soon and we have a quarter of an hour's drive to pick him up."

The glider crowd is not so easily brushed off, however, for when the three of them drive back up from Sao Conrado with the glider – needless to say, in spotless and fully intact condition – Bruce instantly becomes the centre of attention, with variations of "who are you, man?" directed at him from a dozen pilots in a mix of Portuguese and English.

He hesitates for an instant – presumably deciding which version of the truth to tell and weighing full disclosure against the *keeping a low profile* imperative. Apparently, vanity wins over; seeing him gawked at in this way, she cannot even blame him.

"My name's Brandon Wainwright. I used to fly... something similar, but I mostly do BASE jumping. I've been to a few competitions in Europe in the past year, but not here. You can see the clips on Youtube..."

Apparently this rings enough bells; one of the pilots stares at him before proclaiming, "You – you are the winner of the European BASE jumping competition."

"Yep."

"I saw it! I was there, man, I didn't recognise you." An iPad is produced and the clips are searched for and found. "You should come here, we have a South American event in November– "

"I couldn't compete in it."

"You could be a guest of honour, you could do demo flights!"

"I have to ask my wife's permission," he replies in a convincingly timid voice. To his credit, he does ask her about going to these things, though stopping him is usually a lost cause as he will mope around until she gives in.
She has to admit, being married to an instant local celebrity has considerable benefits. There is no more question of him begging for the use of a glider; from this point onwards, the guys themselves take turns begging him to use theirs. After three or four more equally spectacular descents, he commands and is instantly given a double glider, and Selina finally gets her chance to experience the thrill.

And what a thrill it is. She has already seen the view, sure; but there is a huge difference between seeing it from a static viewpoint, even from an engine-powered, enclosed aircraft, and seeing it like this, in motion and airborne purely by virtue of the soaring currents that Bruce is an undisputed expert at handling. The adrenaline rush is overwhelming; the second they touch down, she asks him – begs him - to do it again, and they end up doing two more flights before going to grab lunch with the glider crowd on the same Sao Conrado beach they all land on.

They come back in the afternoon, and after two more flights she finally gives in and lets him do more crazy stuff for the others' benefit – not without a bit of regret; she could so get used to this. They call it a day at four, but instead of heading down and back to the hotel, their penultimate destination is the towering Pedra da Gavea just south of Pedra Bonita. At an impressive 2700 feet, it is a good five hundred feet taller than Pedra Bonita itself and has a view that is nowhere short of breathtaking. They make it to the top after half an hour's hike, just in time to see the amazing play of light and colour sweeping Rio before sunset, the sky's glow, alternating between orange and pink like an imperial topaz or a padparadscha sapphire, reflected in the molten gold of the bay and the subtler matte sheen of the city beaches, against the jagged purple backdrop of the low mountain ridges jutting out into the ocean further east. It is a beautiful ending to a beautiful stay; as they head back to the Sofitel in the gathering dusk to pick up Armando's gadgets and head for the airport, she catches herself thinking that she is sorry to leave. She can come back, of course, but now that the mission that brought them here looms closer, there is no telling when, or whether, she'll manage it next.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

If you are curious to see a few snapshots of Rio and Pedra Bonita, feel free to check out the picspam I put together a year ago when I hoped to finish this a year earlier than now looks likely, at http://01cheers.livejournal.com/7023.html. I’ve done most of the things they do in this chapter with the exception of eating at Gero, sitting on the Pedra Bonita platform at night, and hiking to the top of Pedra da Gavea (for which last point I am now hugely envious of Selina), but have seen pictures taken from its top (if you go to Google maps satellite view and dangle the little guy above the mountains just west (left) of Sao Conrado, itself 4-5 miles west of Ipanema/Leblon, you’ll see numerous photo spots – the ones taken from the top of what looks to be the highest mountain at sunset are really magnificent.

I triangulated the value of Selina’s necklace from similar lots recently sold at Christie’s – see http://www.forbes.com/sites/anthonydemarco/2013/06/05/natural-pearl-necklace-sells-for-1-6-million/, the helpful part is the list at the end. The $70 million price tag for the Shawesh entire-diamond ring was announced by the jewellers that made it when it was unveiled.
A padparadscha sapphire is an orange-pink variety (combining both hues in one stone); of all the “fancy” (non-blue) sapphires, it is the most valued.
“How’s the view?”

To anyone who might be watching her, she looks like a typical gadget junkie, strolling around muttering as if to herself, in reality equipped with a Bluetooth earpiece – except that the earpiece is nowhere in sight, replaced by a tiny in-ear speaker and an equally tiny microphone on her collar.

To anyone who might be watching her other than Bruce, that is.

“Great. I’m looking at this gorgeous brunette walking around Circular Quay…”

Shameless flattery apart, he must be wielding some powerful binoculars, because there is no other way he could make her out from his perch on the 34th-floor. His ostensible concession to the low profile mode was booking the Deluxe Royal Suite at the Four Seasons off the western side of the quay instead of the presidential suite next to it, making him the target of subtle sniping on her part. She does not have much to complain about, with her spacious, light-filled one-bedroom suite at the Pullman Quay Grand at the beginning of Macquarie Street on the eastern side of the same quay, five hundred yards away from him and right next to the Opera House, albeit in her case, the top floor is the relatively pedestrian 12th; but the enforced absurdity of staying at separate hotels is a nuisance.

“If you’re looking at me instead of my camera feed, you’re defeating the object of the exercise.” Half of it, anyway; the purpose of her casual stroll is to test out the mini-cameras and microphone they have picked up in Rio, now disguised as snaps on her jacket, to make sure they do their job before he can hide them inside jewellery, which she is yet to buy. The mike obviously works; now if only he can focus on the picture from her minicams instead of watching her.

“All I see from the cams is the quay and a bunch of tourists. I much prefer the view through the binoculars. Now if you’d walk towards a mirror window…”

“Be careful what you wish for.” She pulls out a compact mirror, holds it in her hand just far enough for the camera to capture the reflection of her face, and sticks out her tongue in a ridiculous expression. “Happy now?”

“I have fantasies of so many things I’d ask you to do with that tongue next time we share a room…”

“Stop it, or I’ll switch off the mike.” It isn’t bad enough that he has been sending her flagrantly explicit texts when she is away in Lyon; she could bet they were timed precisely to make her blush when she got them in the middle of class – if he now starts talking sex to her when she is walking around a crowded public space, she’ll call off the test and go to her room so she can at least enjoy the performance in private. Even her love of public exposure has its limits.

“Sorry, getting distracted. It’s these jeans you’re wearing.”

She rolls her eyes, even though he cannot see it. So now her jeans are to blame. OK, they are on the tight side, but if things go on like this, they can forget about the CIA database. “You’re jeopardising the mission.”
“Nothing of the sort.” Now he sounds eager to prove that he can be businesslike. “I can tell you that I get full resolution video from both of your cams and unless you make really sharp turns, it stays in focus and holds up pretty well in motion. We’ll wait until later tonight to see how they perform in low light, but for now it looks good.”

“So I have your permission to get out of here?” It may be chilly and overcast, but it will not stop her from finally doing the Sydney Harbour bridge climb. The first time they were here half a year ago, Bruce mocked the hell out of her for wanting to do something so tame. To his credit, he rented a Cessna and flew her over it instead, but before that happened, she had to shoot down his suggestion to get wingsuits and land on top of it, or at least fly circles around it. She might concede that the idea of wingsuits, which seemed nuts to her in her pre-Rio hang-gliding days, might have some merit after all, but her argument of which part of becoming an instant media magnet interfering with the whole being dead *thing do you fail to grasp* was nonetheless perfectly sensible. Now, with Bruce conveniently out of the way, she is walking up that bridge, no two ways about it.

“Sure.” He sounds a bit disappointed. “When are you going to the bar?”

“About eight.” Just under four hours from now; enough time for her to do the bridge walk and go over from the somewhat unfortunately named Dawes Point at the southern end of the bridge to the bar in the business district. “I’ll let you know when I’m a block or so away from there so you can watch the feed.”

“You sure you don’t want me to go there instead of you?”

She can sympathise with his boredom, but years of successful heists have taught her that nothing can replace a personal recon run. “Yeah, I’m sure. You’ll just have to take it easy and entertain yourself as best you can. Talk later, caro.”

xxx

The Drunken Wallaby, as a preliminary check has informed her, is the in-house pub of the Grace Hotel, an upscale four-star just over half a mile south of Circular Quay and two blocks east from Darling Harbour, on the corner of Clarence and King streets. At a guess, that’s where Jamie, her contact for tomorrow night, must be staying. The hotel building looks like a piece of typical 1930s Gotham architecture transplanted to Sydney – impressive if out of place in the mostly-modern, mirror-glass downtown district. But the pub on its ground floor, with thick dark curtains behind glass-pane outside walls, advertised by shabby-looking brass signs, could rival an accountants’ office in terms of appealing design. On the plus side, it has entrances on either side of the corner, in addition to a third entrance from the hotel lobby, leaving her a getaway route if things get tricky.

Inside is a typical pub, dark, noisy, with chunky brown furniture and large TV screens lining the upper walls and hung above the long bar counter. It could be in Gotham, or London, or pretty much anywhere in the world; its only distinctive feature is its name. Not a bad thing when the objective is to stay inconspicuous; the place likely attracts a mixture of hotel guests, here today and gone tomorrow, and nearby office workers, coming in after business hours for a pint and a spot of gossip and maybe a look at broadcast games, who will hardly pay attention to non-regulars.

Even now, on a Sunday night, it seems busy thanks to a bunch of locals watching a cricket game with New Zealand and loudly cheering for their compatriots. She casually walks around, confirming the location of the exits and making mental notes about the best spots to either be seen or stay unnoticed. There are no cameras, either outside or inside – the only one she saw is at the doorway connecting the bar to the hotel, and that one is easily avoided. It looks like her bigger problem might be getting noticed by her counterpart rather than attracting too much attention.
Or maybe it is a hasty judgement. She asks for a half-pint of cider as the token reason for her visit, and while she is sipping it at the bar she watches, in a mixture of amusement and annoyance, one of the younger cricket fans detach himself from the group and walk, a bit unsteadily but deliberately, in her direction.

“Whassuch a beautiful laydee doing here all on her own? Are you looking for someone? Are you looking for mee?”

She is about to reply that no offence, but he is about the last person in the world that she is looking for; she could, in principle, just knee him in the balls and walk out, but she will be back here tomorrow night and should not make her today’s visit too memorable for the bartenders. Besides, where’s the fun in that? “‘Fraid not. I have a husband.”

The cheerful drunk is undeterred. “No problem, he’s not here.”

“A jealous husband,” she insists, with exaggerated seriousness, knowing that Bruce must be laughing already at what he is seeing and hearing thanks to her gadgetry.

“Jus’ means we need to be careful.”

Some people won’t take a hint. OK, time for the heavy-artillery punchline. “A jealous husband who may be watching you through a pinhole camera right now.”

She is somewhat distracted in her enjoyment of the effect by Bruce’s evil cackling – there is no other word for it – in her ear upon seeing the poor guy’s expression. Still, it is a delight to watch. The man’s face instantly grows a couple of inches longer and a couple of shades paler and he backs off a step, at which point he delivers his parting shot in a slightly shaky voice before beating a minimally dignified retreat back to his pals.

“Should’ve said so sooner, sweetheart.”

xxx

Monday morning dawns bright and clear, and between the anticipation of a busy day, the jetlag, and Sydney’s wintertime, she is up before dawn. So much the better; she puts on the warmest clothes she has and goes for a stroll in the beautiful, lush Botanic Gardens at Farm Cove to the immediate east of the Opera House, just in time to watch the dawn breaking and the rising sun washing the gleaming sails of the Opera House building in glorious golden light. It is the most peace she will get this day, and she enjoys it while it lasts.

The first chore of the day takes her to the hotel business centre to type up and print out a fake article headline, which she sticks to an inside page of the Sydney Morning Herald as a message for Jamie at the upcoming rendezvous. *St Kilda housing boom: it’s a seller’s market*; it says in bold, ¾-inch letters; hopefully the few Sydneysiders who may see it at the pub won’t be interested in buying real estate in a Melbourne neighbourhood, but the *seller’s market* should get the other girl’s attention.

As soon as the shops are open, she takes a taxi to the suburb of Parramatta fifteen miles west of downtown Sydney for her fake-identity props. The Indian dress shop she saw online looks less appealing in reality, but further down the same street is another one selling beautiful saris. A look around and a bit of bargaining gets her two of those, gorgeous swathes of silk with long narrow underskirts and fitted cropped tops to wear underneath, one in dark blue and one in burnished gold. She hopes she will have enough time in the afternoon to practice moving around wearing these in her suite; they are notoriously tricky for novices to walk in.
A further two blocks away she finds a jewellery store selling just the kind of ornate, intricately
detailed gold jewellery that a rich Tamil woman might wear, and after a careful study of the shop’s
offerings and more bargaining, she is the proud owner of a necklace just this side of gaudy, a pair of
long, heavy-looking but surprisingly lightweight earrings, and half a dozen gold bangles – there is no
way they can hide anything inside those, but they are such a typical accessory that it would be
strange for her not to wear a few. Back at the hotel, she leaves the necklace and earrings at the
reception for Bruce to pick up so that he can further embellish them with the gadgetry; he has
brought a soldering iron and a precision laser cutter courtesy of Quimetal for this very purpose.

Her next trip is more scenic but less relaxing. The first half is very leisurely, that is – she boards a
boat from the Opera House quay to the eastern suburb of Manly facing the ocean on the other side of
the expansive Sydney Harbour half an hour away, and on the way there she enjoys both the harbour
views and the fresh salty breeze. Manly reminds her of a Mediterranean resort town, with a row of
mid-rises backing a wide beach, the tree-lined promenade running along it dotted with ice cream
shacks and surfing gear rentals, and sleepy back streets beyond, between the ocean beach and the
harbour-facing Manly Cove where the boat docks; but once she has been to the MailBoxesEtc and
picked up what turns out to be a pretty hefty briefcase, she finds herself hurrying back to Manly
Wharf in a less laid-back mood. She is used to carrying valuables, but they have tended to be much
more compact than this hulk. They promised her the million in twenties, she remembers; using the
most widespread denomination is a wise move, but still a damn inconvenience. There is no way she
is taking the briefcase to the bar; if the money is called for she’ll have to deliver it separately.

Back at the Pullman once more, she heads to the spa and surprises the hairdresser girl by asking to
have her dark chestnut hair dyed jet black. The girl does not look convinced, and in fact looks
relieved when Selina tells her to make it a temporary dye that will wash off in a couple of weeks. In
all likelihood, she will not need to maintain her persona for longer than that, anyway.

By the time she is done and is examining her reflection in the salon mirror, she gets an instant
message on her “mission” phone from a local mobile number. Rocco’s Pizza; Bruce is having fun
with his pretend name. Your order is ready for pick-up. So she walks down Alfred Street running the
length of the really rectangular-shaped Circular Quay to George Street and the Four Seasons
reception, and picks up the familiar package containing the jewellery box. Once she is in her room,
she hurries to open it, curious to see how well concealed the surveillance gear is.

It is splendidly disguised; she picked a necklace consisting of carved-gold disks, each one with a
polished-gold hemisphere at its centre about a quarter inch across, and there is no way to tell that the
one in the middle disk has been replaced with a fisheye camera lens. They asked for a couple of the
cameras to be gold-plated and to have gold-coloured coating over the lens, knowing that gold
jewellery was her best bet of wearing them; other than giving the camera feed a grey tint, the coating
does not really affect picture quality. The microphones were even easier to hide inside hollow mesh
barrels dangling from the earrings; and to make sure that all of these could be rendered undetectable,
Bruce has done as intended and rigged the necklace clasp and earring backs as power switches – she
can shut the gadgets down and turn them back on by lightly pressing these, as if checking that they
are securely fastened. With the power off, they will be invisible to a bug sweep lodged as they are
inside a metal necklace. All in all, it is a top-notch job.

Now, with four hours left to the start of the Drunken Wallaby’s 7 pm happy hour, she has her
opportunity to practice wearing the sari and work on her English accent. She has already done a fair
bit of prep, what with finally watching My Fair Lady last night, sticking to the BBC as her default
TV channel, and UK radio podcasts running non-stop on her mp3 player for the past couple of days,
but she has spoken relatively little in the meantime, though she made an effort to mimic an English
accent when she did. Now, as she walks around the room taking care not to trip up on the long sari
skirt, she repeats the news announcer’s words, taking care to drop the r and lighten the l and replace
the vowels in the likes of last and fast.

…until, with an hour left before showtime, it is time for the final exam. She switches on her usual phone and calls up the number.

“Hello Alfred.”

“Good morning, my dear. How have you been?”

“Fine. It’s actually evening where I am, but we’ve been fine. Bit busy, but it should get sorted out in a few days.” She trusts Alfred to draw his own conclusions about what is keeping them busy.

Which he unfailingly does.

“Anything I should be worried about?”

She laughs. “No, not really. There’s something I should probably worry about, but you tell me. How do I sound?” She hopes he has at least noticed her accent.

“Marvellous. I’ve been meaning to ask you about your switch to proper English. Is there a reason for this?”

She chuckles at the proper English quip. “The reason is part of what’s keeping us busy. I’ll tell you all about it when we’re back. Should be a few more days. Maybe I’ll fly over to London then and we can meet for dinner.”

“That’s a fantastic idea.”

“Anything in particular you’d like to suggest in terms of the way I say things?”

“Not at all, you are spot-on. Of course to be absolutely flawless you’d have to spend a few weeks here, but you sound perfect for someone who’s never lived in England.”

“That’s the trouble. I’m supposed to be a half-Indian upper-class Cambridge graduate…” Half-Tamil, really, but she does not want to bring up the details over a mobile channel.

“Well, then there’s something you really need to know. You should refer to yourself as a Tab instead of a Cambridge graduate. A Tab alumna, if you wish. That’s the term they use for themselves. Speak as formally as you can, and watch out for the words. You know the lot, flat for apartment, lift for elevator, pavement for sidewalk, and so on. Also, use quite and actually as often as you can, and you’ll do just fine.”

“Thank you, Alfred, you’re a treasure.”

“Always a pleasure, my dear. How’s the boy doing?” Bruce may be almost nine years her senior and nearing forty, and Alfred allegedly called him sir back in the Gotham days, but he will always be a kid to his old butler.

“He’s doing great.” She remembers their chat on the Pedra Bonita platform. “We’ve just been back to the city…” Again, she knows that Alfred will figure out which city she is referring to. “…and he actually quite enjoyed it.” She smiles at herself for her linguistic prowess. “Not in the sense of wanting to move back, but in the sense of having moved on from that life.”

“I am so glad to hear it, my dear girl. You know, I’ve spent years and years waiting for it to happen. Now you finally put my mind at ease.”
Hearing Alfred’s voice grow unsteady at the words brings up a sympathetic lump in her throat. Now that she knows what it is like to unconditionally care about someone, she shudders at the idea of Alfred watching Bruce go into danger day after day and night after night, watching him get hurt and go on fighting. And she is happy that he has lived to see the day when his ward grew tired of flirting with death.

“It’s the least I could do, Alfred. You take care, and I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it. I trust you two will take care of each other in the meantime.”

xxx

“How do I look?”

She is standing in front of the full-length mirror in her suite in full battle dress – dark blue sari, gold trinkets, her hair gathered in an elaborate bun, her eyes lined in black and her lips painted burgundy, and, invisible but important, the silicone pads stuck to her fingertips.

Bruce takes a second to answer, but when he does, he sounds impressed. “You look amazing. Really gorgeous. You always do, but this outfit is a knockout.”

She has to smile. “I mean, do I look authentic enough? Do I look like who I’m supposed to be?”

“I think you look a lot better than her, but seriously, yes. I have a picture of her on my screen next to your camera feed and unless I knew her personally and knew her well, I’d believe you were her.”

That’s probably as close to a ringing endorsement as she can get under the circumstances; for anything closer to a perfect resemblance she’d probably have had to resort to plastic surgery.

“All right; here we go. You’ll see how it goes, anyway.”

“I don’t need to tell you this, but please be careful.”

“I don’t need to tell you either, but please stop worrying.”

He chuckles. “I happen to be married to you. It comes with the territory.”

Look who’s talking, she thinks, but does not say it. After all, he is the one sitting it out tonight.

xxx

The taxi drops her off at the Grace fifteen minutes after the start of happy hour. As expected, the place is busier – not enough to block the other patrons from view, but enough to necessitate a careful look around. At first sight, Jamie is not there… but Bruce is, looking like a banker or a high-flying stockbroker after hours in a smart navy blazer and dress shirt with the collar undone. He seems absorbed in his tablet; her guess is that he is watching her camera feed is proven right when he looks up at her, seemingly without a hint of recognition, at the exact moment when she notices him. She rolls her eyes and begins reluctantly to turn away, but he then flicks a sideways glance at a corner booth further down, and sure enough, there is the girl, likewise busy with a smartphone. About Selina’s age, her face looks rather harsh with the dyed hair, its flat black giving her grey eyes a washed-out quality. Selina walks to the bar counter and takes a seat at the end closest to Jamie’s booth, all the time feeling Bruce’s eyes on her. Damn, it was nice of him to show up, but it is one hell of a distraction. She asks for a half-pint of alcohol-free Kronenberg, pulls out her paper, and folds it so that the fake headline is facing in Jamie’s direction.
When the girl looks up a minute or so later, she initially regards Selina with a measure of benign curiosity. Not without reason; it is not completely unheard-of, but still very rare for an Indian woman, or someone who looks like one, to come to a pub alone. She might, of course, be waiting for a companion; that is the cover story Selina has for any other curious onlookers who might have the impudence to ask. But the moment Jamie notices the headline, her eyes narrow in an expression between consternation and resentment. Well, this is getting off to a splendid start.

Jamie gets up, deliberately, almost lazily, and walks over to Selina’s end of the bar. She is two or three inches shorter than Selina, athletic, almost tomboyish in appearance, especially with the short bob and the motorcycle jacket.

“I see you’re interested in real estate?” she asks dryly, tipping her head at the paper section Selina was pretending to be reading.

She flips the paper so that the headline is facing both of them, and replies in a close match to Jamie’s cut-glass accent. “Not really. I’m more into equipment trading, actually. But they are quite right about the seller’s market.” She looks the girl in the eye.

Jamie returns her look with a long stare. “Perhaps we’d better move over there.” She gestures to the booth; Selina nods and follows her – but steps ahead just in time to pick the seat that has its back to Bruce, so that he can watch the Brit.

“Can I have your phone?” Jamie asks coldly when they sit down. “If you don’t mind,” she adds as an afterthought. No introductions, no pleasantries.

Selina hands it to her – it is the “mission” clean phone anyway – to see Jamie pull off the cover and take out the battery. “I apologise for the precaution, but I’d rather be certain that our conversation is private,” the girl explains perfunctorily. That’s assuming you’ve done a bug sweep in here, sister. And anyway, it looks like you have no idea of what else I’ve got on me besides the phone. But she can play up to the paranoia. “Actually, I’d ask you to do the same. For the same reasons.”

Almost surprisingly, Jamie complies. “May I ask what sort of equipment trading you’re talking about?” she asks next.

Selina pretends to be evasive. “Various kinds. Hi-tech hardware, defence-related, plus supplies and spares.” Obviously talking about weapons and ammo, but not naming them. “Highly confidential contracts, of course, I cannot talk about the details. I am here in the capacity of a buyer, actually.”

“I understand.” Jamie pauses. “You said as much in your message. How did you get the initial information?”

Selina figured that some sort of interrogation would be forthcoming, so the question is no surprise and her answer is well-rehearsed. “I have multiple contacts in the region on the demand side and quite a few on the supply side, and in my recent dealings with one or two of them I heard about this… asset being put on the market. One of them expressed an interest in it, actually. As a matter of fact, I myself – my operation that is – would very much benefit from this kind of application, so I am also considering the option of buying it in my own right.”

Jamie’s expression is just a shade away from a full-blown scowl; she changes it to neutral with what looks like conscious effort. “You know that there are other interested parties.”

“Of course.” She makes it sound both deferential and dismissive. “I was expecting a competitive
procedure.” She leans in, pretending to be ingratiating her way into Jamie’s good graces. “I would appreciate your help in letting me join it. I can give you a cash advance if it can help facilitate the process…” It may be risky using her CIA money as a bribe, but with any luck, she can keep the bribe small and they can replenish the missing part if there is, in fact, a deposit required and if it stands at a round million.

Jamie does not seem in the least impressed. “I am paid by my contact, no one else.” So she herself is not in on the deal, just an intermediary.

“Would you pass on my request to your contact?” Selina asks, mirroring Jamie’s cold voice.

“What would you wish to make known to him?”

“That a businessperson active in the relevant sector in South Asia is interested in buying the asset, at any rate in bidding for it, either in her name or on behalf of a client, depending on the amounts involved.” That way, she may have room for manoeuvre if she needs to up the stakes to stall for time. “I’d like to know what the terms of participation are, and what my next steps should be.”

Jamie gives her another once-over before a reluctant answer. “I’ll speak to him about it and will let you know the outcome in a few hours. You’ll hear from me at the same address. It was a pleasure meeting you.” She gets up, as if to leave, and Selina has no choice but to follow suit.

“Likewise,” she says icily, with a fractional nod to Jamie. They have not even exchanged names, she muses as she turns toward the exit.

She pauses in the doorway just long enough to survey the scene. With a measure of relief, she catches a glimpse of Jamie slipping her half-pint glass into a handbag before walking through the hotel lobby door, and with some bewilderment, she sees that Bruce is no longer there.

xxx

She understands the reason for his early disappearance when she hears the by-now-familiar Newsnight chime from behind her suite door. Sure enough, Bruce is sitting on the sofa in front of the TV and offers her an innocent smile by way of greeting.

“How the hell did you get in?” she asks in a passable imitation of a stern tone.

He tips his head sideways. “Balcony. I saw you on it from my suite earlier today so I knew which one to get to, and the room being on the top floor made it really easy. All I had to do was hang from the roof and jump down onto it.”

Sure, hang from the roof by his hands some forty meters in the air and jump down. Really easy.

“I suppose for you, a day lived without risking your life is a day wasted,” she comments dryly.

Out comes the puppy-eyed expression, followed by a more, for lack of a better term, salacious one.

“You can’t expect me to see you looking like this,” he slides his glance up and down her figure, “and not show up here.”

“Didn’t get enough at the pub?” she teases, walking closer but staying out of his reach.

He shakes his head, still smiling. “Never.”

Call her a walkover, but this is enough to get her to sit down next to him. Which is apparently not
close enough in his opinion, because she promptly gets pulled into his lap. She wonders vaguely how come he is so proficient at unwrapping a sari and undoing those tricky tiny crop top buttons.

The damn phone pings just as she is about to give in and pull off the underskirt herself. “Shit.” She gets up, walks over to the sideboard where her bag sits, and comes back to the sofa phone in hand, ditching the skirt in the process; hopefully whatever message she has received will not prove too much of an interruption.

It is an email from Jamie to the dummy account – and while it mirrors the girl’s in-person manner in terms of curtness, it looks like Selina has passed the test – or her fingerprints have at any rate, the moment Jamie ran them through whatever database she may have access to.

**Bangkok Wednesday 8 pm The Huntsman Brian**

“Trouble?” Bruce’s eyes are fixed on her puzzled expression.

“Not sure. She has given me an appointment in Bangkok in two days’ time. Presumably with the seller, or someone else up the food chain. Can you look up The Huntsman for me?”

“In Bangkok?”

“Yep.”

While Bruce is busy doing that and before he confirms that The Huntsman is a popular pub on a busy road between downtown Bangkok and the airport – these people seem to have a thing for pubs – she calls up the travel planner site and looks at the flights. Not bad; there are three direct flights and several one-stops, though the nine-hour direct flight time is a bitch. Still, it gives them enough time to get to Bangkok tomorrow night or, at the worst, late Wednesday morning. She calls up a Thai travel portal next-

“Ffuck.”

Bruce looks up. “What?”

“I’m screwed. Thailand requires visas for Sri Lankans. I’m supposed to have Norwegian residence, but not citizenship, and I’m supposedly blacklisted in the UK where I got my second passport so they never made a fake one for me, so I’m stuck without a fucking visa. I could ask the CIA for another passport but there’s no way they can get it here in time before tomorrow night to let me make it to Bangkok by 8 pm Wednesday.”

“In the worst case, you can travel through a third country and get in under your Swiss passport.” He does not sound too sure himself. “It’s risky, I know.”

“Exactly. They know I’ll be arriving at Suvarnabhumi Airport between tomorrow and Wednesday morning. What if they have a way to hack into the immigration records and run a facial recognition scan? She’s seen my face now and has probably taken a picture for all I know. Looks like it held up against the Sivaparan record, but if they see a match between my face and my real name – my present-day real name I mean – I’m in deep shit. She may then find out that I freelance for the Interpol and then it’s over.”

“You’re right. I guess you could write to her… no, wait.” He puts a hand on her arm just as she switches the screen to the secure mail app. She looks expectantly at him. “Let’s see if our friend in Lugano can call on any favours in Lyon. It would be a stretch, but there are direct flights from Europe to Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, both two hours away from Bangkok, so he could send it to either city. You could fly there as Celine, pick it up, and fly into Bangkok as someone else.”
It sounds tricky even in the best case, but it looks like calling Theo is indeed their best shot. “OK.”

Two minutes later, it is Bruce’s turn to swear.

“He’s not answering,” she mutters. It is not a question.

“Phone’s switched off. And Marisa says he’s not in the office.”

“Try an email,” she says with a sigh. It gives them less certainty than a chat over the phone, but knowing Theo, he will at least get back to them the moment he sees it, whenever that may be. “And ask him if he can think of an easy way to bring a fucking briefcase full of twenty-dollar bills from Sydney to Bangkok,” she adds, remembering the CIA cash. “I wish that bitch Jamie would have taken it off my hands.”

Unexpectedly, Bruce leaps to Jamie’s defence. “She wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh really?”

“At least she was polite. And to be fair, she thought you were a gunrunner.”

“Nice to know that a turncoat murder suspect cares about manners and morals,” Selina snaps. She feels bad about her outburst, but cannot help a sting of jealousy at Bruce’s continued defence of the girl, especially now that he has seen her and, judging by his remarks, liked what he saw.

His next comment, however, puts her at greater ease. “Doesn’t matter. We’ll never see her again.” Of course it may have been meant to placate, but anyway, it works; she shrugs the matter off.

Bruce sets aside the phone and pulls her close again.

“There’s nothing we can do between now and the morning, and I don’t feel like going back to the Four Seasons until six AM or so when I can stay here, if that’s all right with you.” She kisses his chin by way of endorsement; he unfastens the clasp of her necklace and puts it on the side table before doing the same with her earrings. “How about we forget about it for now?”

She does not feel at all inclined to argue.

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TBC

Chapter End Notes

The Drunken Wallaby name is fictional, but the location is real. There is, indeed, an ordinary-looking pub on the ground floor of the Grace Hotel called PJ O’Brien’s Irish Pub. The hotels and other locations are true to life.

Should you want to see pictures of Sydney, I have a bunch at http://01cheers.livejournal.com/7337.html. By the way, the events here are supposed to be taking place in July, so Sydney’s current trouble with forest fires is still a few months ahead.
And Bruce may be dismissive of the bridge climb, but it is worth doing. The site, http://www.bridgeclimb.com, is pretty thin on pictures, but I am sure there is a promo video somewhere. Trouble is, you are not allowed to bring cameras on the walk (they are understandably deemed a security hazard), so there are no user pics or Youtube videos, mine or others’.

And the notion of bugged jewellery and dresses is nothing new, as shown here: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2487472/The-secret-history-CIA-women-gadgets-including-surveillance-compacts.html . The Daily Mail is a shitty paper but occasionally publishes interesting stuff.
Hell is paved with good intentions; Bruce may have meant to get out at 6 AM, but in the end neither of them remembered to set the alarm. Instead, they jump awake at seven when their phones chime a simultaneous text alert.

*Pick up IDs + props Internet point next to Customs House bar, Macquarie Place Park - TFR*

Compared to Jamie, Theo is the height of eloquence. She is still wondering how he pulled it off when Bruce says her other question out loud.

"What the devil does he mean by *props*?"

"Maybe he's found something to hide the cash in," she offers.

"No use, this kind of quantity will show up on an X-ray. It'll look like a stack of paper, but a stack this size will be suspicious."

"Well, there's only one way to find out what those props are."

"Right. I suggest that I go pick up the stuff and go to the Four Seasons, it's close by anyway, and you check out and join me there so we take a look together and see what we do next. Does it make sense?"

It does, on balance; there is a slight risk of her being linked to him, but unlike her, he is not going directly to the Four Seasons and should be able to spot and lose anyone tailing him en route. Besides, the Four Seasons is a big busy hotel, and once she goes up from the lobby no one will be any the wiser as to her destination; she can press buttons for other floors just in case. On the plus side, it also gives her a chance to see his Royal Suite.

"Sure."

xxx

It goes as expected; less than an hour later, she walks into the elegant, airy, wraparound-view apartment to see Bruce surveying an assortment of monochrome garments laid out on the living room sofa.

"What the hell is this?"

"The props," Bruce answers her with a touch of sarcasm. "You're not gonna like it."

"Oh."

"Our IDs are Saudi diplomatic passports. Or rather, they're diplomatic *UNLPs*, United Nations laissez-passer passports, but they're issued in the names of Saudi nationals and have Australian and Thai diplomatic visas stamped in them. The diplomatic status means that we can't be searched, but the Saudi nationality means…"
"…that I'll be wearing a burqa," she finishes wryly.

"It's called abaya in Saudi Arabia. And there's the headpiece called niqab that goes with it."

"The one with a slit for the eyes. Great." The arrangement does make her scowl; but upon reflection, she can see the benefits. "On the plus side, it allows you to carry a lot of cash with impunity" – as a diplomat, his personal effects cannot be searched either – "and lets me evade anyone who might be tracking me."

"Exactly. I'm assuming that was Theo's reasoning, provided he picked our cover himself. I hope we don't run into Arabic-speaking flight crew, though. All I can say is As-salamu alaikum."

"One more reason I can live with this," she comments, pointing to the black garment. "Mine's a non-speaking part."

She takes up the red passports from a side table. Each one has a photo – hers has a black hijab headdress but not the full niqab covering – and a name in Arabic and English. Waleed Mohammed Saleh Al-Juhani and Sahar Abdul Latif Al-Jaber; she'll have to memorise these. Bruce's, or should she say Mr Al-Juhani's, passport proclaims him to be a country director at the International Labour Organisation, presumably senior enough to justify the diplomatic status for him and his immediate family. Inside each one is a gold Mastercard in the passport holder's name. Her passport also holds a yellow card in the two languages; the English translation shows it to be her guardian's, that is, her husband Mr Al-Juhani's, permission for her to travel abroad on her own should the need arise.

"One way or another, it looks like we've got our travel identities sorted out." She looks up the flights again. "If we leave here in an hour, even an hour and a half, we can make the 11:25 flight."

"Sure." He picks up the tablet and clicks the travel app to get the tickets. "You know, there's an upside to being rich Arabs. The Bangkok Oriental has this really superb Royal Oriental Suite that takes up most of its top floor, and since no one will recognise you under these," he points at the black coverings, "we can stay there, and then you can change to your Tamil dress on the way to the meeting."

Staying at the same suite is risky, but one look at it on the hotel website is enough to sway her. "OK, it's a deal. Tell you what, you finish the bookings and print the boarding passes, and I'll go try out that round bathtub you've got in here looking at the Opera House... OK," she relents, unable to resist the imploring look, "you can join me when you're done."

xxx

Just over an hour later, they walk out of the hotel, he in head-to-toe pristine white and she in head-to-toe black. Someone might, in principle, recognise Bruce under the white ghutra headdress and sunglasses, but there is no way anyone would know the identity of the woman next to him under the forbidding niqab. Thanks to online checkout, they do not even need to stop at the reception, instead heading straight to the concierge to ask for a limo transfer to the airport as would befit their alter egos du jour. Needless to say, their tickets are first class, so after going through security where they are given no trouble, and passport control where their only concession to official requirements is Selina briefly lifting her face veil to let the officer – female officer per Bruce's insistence – compare her face to the photo, they go to the first class lounge to wait for the boarding announcement. She would not mind a snack, or a drink for that matter, but does not want to take off the niqab, at least until they are on the plane; it gives her an opportunity to observe the other lounge occupants without being seen. They sit down in a corner, Bruce brings over a bowl of cocktail nibbles, and she quietly sneaks her hand under the headdress to munch on a few.
She may be known for her poker face and right now she is wearing a garment that provides it by
definition, but her surprise in the next moment is immediately obvious to Bruce when she almost
chokes on an almond.

"You OK?" he mutters to her; since neither of them knows a word of Arabic, they have to resort to
talking very quietly in public lest they blow their cover.

"Look on your right," she mutters back. "See him?"

"I'll be damned." He momentarily forgets caution and says it out loud, but recovers by making it part
of his address to the newcomer. "Mr Reimann, what the f... what in the world are you doing here?"

Unlike the two of them, Theo is not surprised one bit. "Mr Al-Juhani, a pleasure to see you! And
your wife," he adds with a bow of his head to Selina. "I'm afraid I have to correct you, my name's
Tim Renner, but I remember we met in Geneva last year..." By now Theo has walked over to them
so they continue the conversation at a lower volume, which allows Bruce to resume the inquiry.

"...all of which is fascinating, but doesn't explain what the fuck you're doing here," he mutters.

"I'm on holiday," is Theo's innocent reply.

"Like hell you are. Don't bullshit me, Mr... Renner."

"I am. I took a week's leave and told Sylvie there was an Interpol conference in Singapore where I
was invited as a guest speaker. I hope she never finds out there's no conference or she'll kill me."

"Theo, stop it, I'm serious... She'll kill us both, by the way. Me first, probably."

"Well, for one thing, I've brought you the UNLPs."

"There's no way you could have left Europe after you got my message and made it here this
morning. Either you were already here – "

"Not quite. I was on my way here. I was planning to stay in Singapore overnight and fly into Sydney
this evening, but your message mentioned going to Bangkok today with this flight as your best travel
option, so I knew I had to make it to Sydney in time to drop off the passports for you. I figured we'd
see each other in here, but you needed them to get to this point in the first place."

"I take it you're on the same flight."

"Sure am. Listen, last time the two of you ran off on a save-the-world mission, she" – he tips his
head at Selina – "came back with her leg in twenty pieces and you came back a nervous wreck
because of it. I figured this time I'd at least tag along to keep the craziness in check."

"Don't hope for it," Selina mutters to him.

"Or at least take part in it," Theo admits.

"So when did you leave Europe?" Bruce asks.

"I left Zurich on Sunday night and got your message when I landed in Singapore fourteen hours ago.
Luckily for you it was the best place to pick up this sort of thing, the second best after Lyon,
anyway, and I had a two-hour stopover that was just enough to have the stuff delivered to me. I must
apologise for the outfit you have to wear," he adds, turning to Selina, "but these identities were the
best bets to let you travel under the radar and to let him carry the cash."
"I know." She thought as much. It is not her favourite disguise by a long shot, but it serves its purpose. "No need to apologise. I guess we now owe your ex-colleagues a big favour."

"Actually, I now owe a massive favour to a would-be boss. A certain Mr Wainwright."

Bruce frowns at him in bewilderment. "You mean…"

"No, Mr Al-Juhani, I mean an old acquaintance of mine. He's not really old, we're the same age, but we've known each other for almost fifteen years. A great guy named Rob, maybe you've heard of him."

If this is meant to clear Bruce's confusion, it obviously has not helped one bit.

"He's the current head of Europol at The Hague, He started out as the UK country liaison when the Europol was being set up, and I was part of the Interpol task force that helped them in their startup phase, so we ran into each other pretty regularly. Then when he was made its boss three or four years ago he tried to get me to work for him. I told him I was already working for a guy named Wainwright, which, as we now know, wasn't technically true," he continues, cocking an eyebrow at Bruce, "and that I wasn't keen on the idea of moving to The Hague, which was true, so it didn't go much further, but we stayed in touch. So now I called Rob and asked him to have a chat with the head of the Singapore regional Interpol HQ before I spoke to the guy myself, I know him very slightly but he and Rob went to LSE together. In theory I could have begged him for a loan of a blank Interpol passport for immunity and visa-free passage in Celine's case, but she'd still need a national passport to show together with it, and it could get complicated seeing how her alter ego has quite a track record. So instead I got the director's blessing to let the evidence department lend me these UNLPs, they were originally stolen and the covers were steamed so they peel off allowing to stick in new photos. And they were nice enough to throw in the cards, though I had to give them a corporate guarantee, and the clothes to go with these. Don't worry, the passports have been temporarily taken off the blacklist so you won't be getting any headaches at immigration or at hotels."

"Yep, they worked fine just now."

"Good. Glad I didn't beg and grovel in vain."

"Any way we can help you return the favour?" she asks. It is their fault he had to ask for it anyway.

"I need to find a good hacker to help Rob with their cybercrime unit. It's his biggest headache at the moment and I promised to help him find someone in exchange for this. If you know any good candidates, feel free to make suggestions."

"You're baiting me, right." Bruce is not asking.

Theo looks surprised, of all things. "I wasn't… unless you want to do it. I didn't think you'd be up for it."

Bruce sounds vaguely pissed off. "Up for it as in interested, or up to it as in good enough?"

"I meant interested. I've seen enough of your tricks to know you'd be up to it, but I've also seen enough of your secret-identity paranoia to doubt if you'd be up for it."

"Don't write me off. I mean we'll have to talk about it and I suppose I should meet this namesake of mine before I make a final decision, but I'd do it in principle."

She will probably never know if Theo really did not mean to tease Bruce into taking it up, or if it was a subtle ploy to get him to volunteer. Either way, she is curious to see how it will play out –
especially the meeting with this Rob Wainwright guy. Perhaps she can persuade Bruce to wear the spy gear into it.

xxx

"Guys, I wanted to ask you something."

They are the only people in the first class "social area" – euphemism for a bar – just behind the pilot cabin door; their furtive glances and quiet muttering have made their wish for privacy clear enough to the cabin attendant, so they have been left alone, but still have to keep voices low. Theo's presence is a blessing as it gives them an excuse to speak English, but seeing him sipping the Dom Perignon is making her envious when she and Bruce are supposed to be Saudi teetotallers – and she is still veiled so cannot drink anything at all.

"Don't get mad at me." This is meant for Bruce, whose response is a raised eyebrow. "I was thinking I should probably be your wife in Bangkok." This directed at Theo, whose response is an exaggerated round-eyed stare followed by a sideways glance in Bruce's direction. "I could be getting paranoid, but if there's a way they can hack into immigration data to monitor arrivals and tag me, they'll be then looking for a veiled woman travelling together with an Arab man who looks like Bruce. So if you swap clothes as soon as we've passed immigration, I have a better chance of slipping by as a veiled woman travelling with an Arab who looks like you. And you," she turns to Bruce, "can keep an eye on my meeting tomorrow and take a picture of this Brian guy."

For once, Bruce does not look alarmed. Not happy either, but kind of resigned to his fate. "I wish I could say it doesn't make sense," he says with a sad smirk. "There goes my stay in the Royal Oriental suite… at least it's got two bedrooms or else Mr Renner here would be sleeping on the terrace." He shakes his head at Theo. "I knew you were trouble when you showed up, but I guess you're one of…" he pauses for a second to do the count, "...four guys I know who I could possibly trust to play Selina's husband, and the other three are either in Gotham or in Cornwall." Presumably, the fourth one is Gordon, the only one from what must be Bruce's shortlist who did not make it to their wedding. Lucius and Alfred may have known Bruce for much longer, but Theo has an added boost to his credentials as Sylvie was Selina's maid of honour. "We'll need to swap the passport picture before you get to the hotel. And get yourself some dark contact lenses or you'll look like Lawrence of Arabia."

TBC

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Chapter End Notes

UNLPs are a real thing and work as described, ie as normal passports. I held a regular (blue) one, as pictured on the wiki site, at one point in my life and still have a cancelled-out one as a memento ;) The red ones were news to me, but diplomatic privileges for international organisation employees (and full diplomatic status for senior-level ones) are real. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_laissez-passer . Interpol passports also exist, but are, as mentioned, only valid in conjunction with national ones in the majority of member countries: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interpol_Travel_Document.
The permit given to Saudi women by male guardians for travel abroad is, unfortunately, also real. I am no fan of that country's treatment of women – the abaya was a tempting ploy, but for the record, I had reservations about it.

Rob Wainwright, the real life head of Europol and, if the wiki is to be believed, a nice guy, was an unexpected discovery this past September – and once I'd stopped snickering, there was no way I'd pass up a chance to sneak him, and the also-real-life cybercrime unit, into the backstory:

The first class mini-lounge on Emirates/Quantas flights is also a real thing. I could not have them talking in the first-class cabin per se as the seats on newer-model planes are suites with closing doors - only the middle ones have a partition that can be lowered. Check out http://www.ausbt.com.au/emirates-first-class-compared-with-qantas for a couple of pictures.

Lawrence of Arabia, aka Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence, is a historical character. My mental image is of bright-blue-eyed Peter O'Toole playing him in the epic film of that name: check out http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-ajeYfJwCwSY/UiCzBXyXBNJ/AAAAAAAAD0g/rsVH6zpyZVE/s1600/Lawrence+of+Arabia.jpg or, for an even brighter-eyed version, http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-ByNN9ieTAVo/UiC1EW9_DXl/AAAAAAAAD1I/UtkmRpNst5A/s1600/lawrence-of-arabia2.jpg
"What?"

The big eyes Theo is making at her are doing nothing to stop her snickering.

"You know, Bruce was spot-on. You do look like Lawrence of Arabia."

"I'll keep the sunglasses on. That way I'll look like a complete dick, but it should tide me over until I get the contacts."

The moment they step outside Suvarnabhumi airport to get a cab, the sweltering humid heat reminds them that they are in the northern-hemisphere summer. The driver speaks fairly fluent English, ruling out private conversation between the two of them, so while Theo does his best to sound arrogant when responding to the guy's chatter, she sits silent for most of the trip, hoping for a glimpse of Bangkok and its many temples on the way to the hotel – but the approach to the city from the airport is manifestly lacking in landmarks. Maybe they can take a walk around, she wonders; then again, seeing the maze of highways crisscrossing the urban sprawl, she soon reckons that it is unlikely.

Between the distance and the sluggish traffic, it is almost nine by the time they finally check in, and ten by the time they finish dinner and call the butler to take away the cart. Had it been a normal trip, the three of them would be hanging out together and would have most likely gone out for dinner, but things being as they are, Bruce joining them is out of the question, and her niqab disguise confines the two of them to room service. At least the suite makes staying in a nice alternative. Its enormous, glass-walled lounge opens onto an equally huge terrace with a panoramic view of the Chao Phraya river lined by rows of shimmering sleek towers on each bank, with the occasional floodlit temple sitting beside them like a dainty ornament. The Royal Oriental suite is fit for royalty, indeed; she can understand why Bruce was whining about not getting to stay here. He is, in his own words, *slumming it* in an Executive Suite at the Shangri-La, about five minutes' walk from the Oriental and a mere 300 yards down the river; but while they undoubtedly have the edge on space and opulence, he likely has the better view – same as theirs but from ten floors higher up.

A stroll on the terrace gives her another idea for an outing.

"Can we take a boat trip? Looks like they're still running."

Theo does not sound particularly eager. "We could, but we've already got the best river view from up here. Right now, with the boat's lights as bright as that, you won't see much from inside it. It's a nice trip to take around sunset, we can do it tomorrow before you have to go to the meeting. Plus if we get out now we'll be back at midnight, and our best shot at seeing the city tomorrow is to get out before eight, before the heat and the traffic get too bad and while the sights are open. If I remember right, most of them are only open from 8 AM till about 3 PM."

She is not sure she'll manage to get up early, with four long-haul flights in the space of a week making a mess of her sleeping patterns, but she cannot argue with common sense.

"OK… I'll go read some weapons specs and hope it puts me to sleep."
Bedtime reading consisting of semiautomatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers leads to pretty vivid nightmares involving Bane's gang, she discovers, but she does wake up at a reasonably early 7 AM; however, when she gets out of the bedroom and into the lounge a quarter of an hour later, Theo is not only already there but finishing his part of the breakfast.

"Morning. Been up long?"

"Not too long. Woke up at six thirty."

"You must be immune to jetlag."

"It's not that. I've got two rascals under ten at home, I think my brain has an unconditional reflex to wake up at six thirty AM regardless of time zone."

She laughs. "Are they more trouble than Bruce?"

Theo tries to hide the grin. "About the same. My worst nightmare and my best hope rolled into one is if they pick him as a role model."

"I know what you mean. She never meant to pick Bruce as a role model either, and look at her."

"So… are you ready to see the sights?" he asks when Selina is done with breakfast.

"Definitely."

"Then put on the tent and let's get out of here."

xxx

Taking advantage of the cooler morning air, they take a short walk in the old neighbourhood next to the hotel, with its pretty, brightly-painted two-storeyed wooden houses, then get a cab and start the tour proper with the royal palace grounds three miles to the northeast, strolling around the sumptuous, glittering Wat Phra Kaeo temple and parts of the palace complex that are open to the public.

To Selina, who has spent a huge chunk of her life scoping, stealing and fencing jewellery, these elaborate gilded structures encrusted with jewel-hued glass and covered in intricate enamel and bright tile patterns look like the inside of an enormous jewel box. The jewellery parallels bring up a few memories of her old heists, with which she regales her pretend husband and impromptu guide to his considerable amusement. Theo has been to Bangkok twice, once as a student and once more with the family two years ago on the way to Phuket; so while his recollection of Thai history and of the significance of the architecture and statues is relatively vague, his alternating stories of not-entirely-sober escapades and the kids' antics more than make up for it in entertainment value. The only hassle is having to talk in a half-whisper all the time; speaking audible English dressed as an Arab couple could raise eyebrows unnecessarily. Afterwards they walk over to the equally impressive Wat Pho with its massive reclining Buddha a few hundred yards away, and from there go to see a couple more nearby temples, somewhat less ornate but still impressive, before dropping by at the hotel for lunch at the suite.

In the early afternoon they head further north, to the green, sparsely-built-up and prosperous Dusit neighbourhood, the location of the other royal palace, Chitrlada – this one the real residence rather than the ceremonial one. The palace and its gardens are closed to visitors, but Dusit Park across the road from these is public and boasts the exquisite Vimanmek Mansion, a former royal summer
residence built of golden teakwood using wooden pegs instead of nails. Upon leaving the mansion they take the long walking route through the park in the direction of Jim Thompson's house, their next and final destination before the sunset river cruise on the way back to the Oriental. From what she saw online over lunch, the sprawling, antique-filled residence, which once belonged to an American silk merchant and onetime CIA agent who went missing under mysterious circumstances, was apparently built by putting together six authentic houses from Bangkok and its environs and creating a landscaped garden around them.

Dusit park is nearly empty in the mid-afternoon, and for once they can talk in English without risking suspicion or resorting to cryptic whispers.

"Thanks for taking me around. It's been a great day so far."

"Don't mention it, it's a pleasure. When I took the job at Wainwright ten years ago and until eighteen months ago when Bruce showed up in person, I'd have never guessed that dealing with the company owner – or his wife – would be so much fun."

She remembers the condensed account Bruce gave her of their acquaintance, back at their first-ever dinner in Lugano, and his slightly less laconic remarks the day after, on their way to Wainwright headquarters. "Is it true that you guys had never met in person before last year?"

"Hundred percent true. What happened was, I'd just got divorced from my French first wife and was thinking about moving back to Switzerland, which in practice most likely meant leaving the Interpol. I had some second thoughts, but by then I'd grown sick of working for arrogant bureaucratic bastards and wanted a job with more independence. I thought about starting my own company, but my best chance of doing that would be to stay in Lyon and set up a consultancy living off Interpol contracts, and I wasn't crazy about that idea. I talked to a couple of executive headhunters, and a month or so later I got a phone call where they told me about this opportunity in Lugano and asked if I wanted to talk to the owner. Of course I said yes, and then Bruce called me the next day."

"And he offered you the job right after that call?"

"Right during that call. I couldn't believe my luck. Mind you, I wasn't all that impressed by him, he did a good job of sounding like a rich brat."

She smirks under her veil. "Another arrogant bastard?"

"Sort of. But the questions he asked were very astute, and when he told me he'd be a hands-off owner and so long as the company stayed profitable I had free rein over its operations, I was sold."

"And then you never talked for eight and a half years."

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it? Well, we did talk about once a year. Then about three or four years ago he decided to build the house in Carona and asked if he could register it in my name. I said OK, I even went up there a couple of times to see it being built, was really impressed by the design but thought he was building it as a luxury rental, except that it stayed empty after that. Other than that, I sent him the annual reports every spring, I suppose he flipped through them, then called me and asked me a question or two just to show that he hadn't forgotten about the company, and that was it. It suited me just fine."

"I guess you weren't all that happy when he showed up then," she offers.

"Showed up was a gradual process," Theo counters. "First thing I heard was this Markus Hamele guy coming to Lugano and asking me for a sheet of company stationery."
Selina cannot help a chuckle. "You know what that was for?"

"No idea."

"It was to send me the pearls, you know, the pearls. Bruce told me he'd asked Markus to do it when he was still in hospital and Markus came back with a compliments card. You know the story of how it took me three months to open the box to see it because I thought he was dead."

"I know the part about the pearls, but it's funny how I never put two and two together between that and the card. I must say, that's one hell of a story. They should've had an epilogue scene in Dark Hero where they show you guys..."

"Except that he's really dead at the end in that one," she teases.

"I keep saying it would be a much better film if they showed Batman surviving, no matter what Bruce himself thinks. Anyway, so Markus told me that Mr Wainwright had just been in a bad car accident in the States and was in intensive care in Geneva with uncertain prospects of survival. I sent him a message wishing him a quick recovery, you know the deal, if there's anything you need, just ask and so on, though to be honest, and feel free to call me a selfish prick, at that point I was more worried about someone else taking over ownership of the company than about Brandon—Bruce that is. He replied to thank me a couple of days later but disappeared again after that, and then he called me in early March saying that he was moving to Carona and asking to meet."

"Oops."

"Exactly. Another arrogant bastard and all that. Except that the guy I saw was a very contrite, not-really-bastard, in a wheelchair, very humbly asking me for something to do at the company."

"Did he make puppy eyes?"

"He didn't need to, he looked miserable enough and really beat-up. I couldn't say no. On the other hand I didn't know if he was any good either, so I figured a bit of a discouragement tactic wouldn't hurt."

"I can imagine how well that went down."

"Well, he didn't call me on my bullshit back then. He sure would have now, or even a year ago, but back then, he just wrinkled his eyebrows when I talked crap about how boring and how challenging running a technology company was, and said that he'd still love to get a job, or something to keep him busy, anyway. I have to say, I respected the fact that he'd bothered to ask; most owners would just say I'm doing this and screw you. So I said he could pick his own job. He said he'd think about it and let me know in a few days' time. My hope at that point was that he'd have enough brains to pick a post where he'd do the least damage. In the worst case, I figured, if he was just a waste of executive office space, he'd invent himself a long important-sounding title like senior vice president for strategic initiative development and sit in a corner office twaddling his thumbs all day, still no harm done. I didn't expect him to ask to be my de facto deputy, when he is Chairman of the company. That was probably the first time I thought it might turn out better than expected. But I wasn't giving up without a final fight, of sorts."

"What did you do?"

"I made him take an exam."

"Wow. That takes balls."
"I didn't call it an exam, of course. I just gave him eight years' worth of Wainwright annual reports, same ones as I'd sent him, and a bunch of technical memos I'd received from the division managers in the last couple of years up to that point, and said I'd really appreciate his ideas for the company's strategy when ready. I was hoping he'd get bored and quietly drop the whole thing."

She laughs. "Yeah, right."

"Now I know better, but back then it really blew my mind when he sent me this twenty-page memo the next evening, with a detailed production process analysis and the implications of market trends and four future scenarios with a different strategic focus and projected margin calculations in each one. And it was all spot-on. I mean I'd been running this company for eight-plus years and here was this guy who'd maybe asked me two questions a year, who I now saw knew as much about this industry, and almost as much about the company, as I did. He confessed last summer that he'd cheated, he'd asked Lucius for market data and some of the cost estimates, but then as I told him, having good sources is an asset in itself."

"So, no twaddling thumbs in a corner office."

"Well, I did get him the office. What I asked myself after that was why he wouldn't fire me and just run it himself, not that I was complaining. I thought maybe he still had too many health problems. But then the very next day, after I said I'd like to come over to Carona to save him a trip down to Lugano and talk to him about that memo, he showed up in the afternoon, driving the Lamborghini, and walked into my office. OK, he had a cane, but I still had to scrape my jaw off the floor."

"Show-off. From what little I saw of him in Gotham, he was always like that when he had an audience."

"He might have been showing off, but it was damn impressive. We talked about that memo for something like three hours and then went for beers and ended up talking until one AM when the last bar closed and kicked us out. Sylvie had been calling me to ask where I was and then had to come pick us up and drop him off in Carona. Bruce was insisting he could still drive the Sesto so Sylvie had to confiscate his keys."

Selina, having seen her husband drunk a grand total of two times in more than a year, has to laugh. "I wish I were there to see it."

"You can ask Sylvie, she'll tell you all about it."

"So that's why Bruce is afraid of her." She recalls the she'll kill me first from the day before.

"That must be it." Theo grins. "She did refer to him as my crazy kamikaze boss in his presence on that occasion."

This gets her giggling. "OK, first thing I'll do when we're back in Lugano is call her and ask her all the sordid details."

"Please do. She probably remembers it better than either of us. I vaguely remember us getting into a long discussion about cross-referencing databases, and then Bruce betting me a thousand francs that he could get his hands on a miniature tracker with a one-week battery life and a ten-mile radius, like the one in your necklace, but my best recollection from that evening is a very detailed discussion of the concept for a jet-powered motorbike."

Selina shakes her head ruefully. "Please, please don't remind him about it."

Theo mirrors her gesture. "He reminded me this spring. I tried to steer him in the direction of
jetpacks, at least there's less chance of a collision and if things go wrong, he's good at BASE jumping. It's worked for now, but I can't rule out him bringing up the bike again."

Great; for now he's swapped something unquestionably lethal for something most probably lethal. "Could you say there are technical issues with the jetpack design?"

"No use, he's seen the working prototype already and wants to test it in a couple of weeks."

"Hopeless." There is no way Bruce will ever stop playing with danger.

He sighs. "I tried, honestly. At least I promise it's less risky than the bike idea."

Selina nods. "I believe you. So that was that, then, between the memo and the bike."

"Yep. The next morning we both had a royal headache, but by that afternoon I'd already got the CFO to move from the other corner office in exchange for a Christmas bonus, and told Bruce he could drop by any day he wanted. He showed up the following morning, and pretty much every day after that except when he had to go to the hospital, and by the middle of April I couldn't believe he'd only been at the company for a month."

"And you never guessed who he was until I asked you to call Lucius."

Theo shakes his head again. "It was just too crazy to imagine. I knew Wayne Enterprises, sure, they're huge and one of the best in the business – in a few businesses, really, and I'd heard of Bruce Wayne, but never thought he could be this smart, decent guy. Above all, I never thought he'd have kept his identity secret and never told me who he was when he hired me. With anyone else in his place, it would've been the first thing they said. I could see he knew a lot of things about security and hacking and technology in general, not just the theory and production processes but the practical side, using the stuff, and he mentioned having contacts at Wayne who helped us get supplies from them, but I never made the connection, just kept wondering how the hell he could do all that."

"No regrets about what you've got yourself into?"

He laughs at this. "You've got to be kidding me. This is the most fun I've ever had, or could hope to have, in any job. Back at the Interpol I made it to department director and could have probably made vice president by the time I retired, but I never had full control over the way I ran my department, or had an understanding boss, the way I have at Wainwright. And my background wasn't the exciting kind, it was a mix of technical forensics and database management with a lot of systems integration later on. We did some neat stuff with data analysis that helped solve a few major cases, but it wasn't the high-adrenaline side of law enforcement they show on TV. You know, as a kid I was a huge Sherlock Holmes fan, I remember I always begged my parents to go to Reichenbach falls on school holidays, and my brother argued with me because he loved pirate stories and wanted to go sailing instead. So of course I wanted to be a detective when I grew up, that's why I got interested in forensics but then got sidetracked into the IT side, kind of. I never had a chance to be on the front line, also because neither my first wife nor Sylvie would've let me do that, so having someone like Bruce hanging around is my chance to get some thrills vicariously."

"Except that right now you've joined the craziness firsthand."

"Couldn't help it."

"It's contagious, you know."

He chuckles. "I'm in the process of finding out."
"Why did you get divorced?" The French ex-wife is news to her.

Theo frowns. "I guess we married too young, neither of us was ready to settle down. Plus she kept nagging me to ask for promotions so she'd have more money to spend and a bigger house and more Chanel bags, she was really high-maintenance. Loved fur coats and diamonds and so on."

"I used to love diamonds, too, though mostly as a source of income," she comments wryly.

"Are you telling me it's a curable addiction?"

"It was in my case. At least after I got a diamond I really liked, I haven't been tempted by the rest."

He smiles. "That one's a really impressive diamond. I remember when Bruce was about to get it, he showed me a video clip of the ring from the jewellers' site and asked what I thought of it."

"What did you say?"

"I said it was one hell of a ring but you'd need half a dozen safes to lock it in."

"So it was you who gave him the idea."

"Idea?"

"For the proposal. You remember what he did, don't you?"

"Of course." He chuckles again. "I guess I did give him the idea, but I meant it as a caution, not a suggestion."

"You know Bruce. You caution him about something, next thing you know, he's doing it."

Theo can't help laughing. "The best boss ever."

She shakes her head. "The most troublesome husband ever." She does not mean it, of course.

xxx

"It's on." She hands Theo her phone across the dinner table so he can read the text that Brian, the seller or at least the front man, just sent her from an anonymous local number, as promised in their meeting. It was very quick and furtive; unlike ice queen Jamie, this guy was jittery bordering on paranoid, and while he squeezed in a few questions to confirm her identity, he almost seemed too jumpy to pay attention to the answers. That, conversely, put Selina at her ease, and she spoke almost leisurely about her and her client's interest in acquiring the database to help grow her multimillion-dollar family business, while deliberately toying with her water glass to leave enough fake prints for him to get added confirmation if needed – and best of all, in the two seconds that he was not looking, she swapped their beer mats and later, when leaving, discreetly swept the one he had been tapping his fingers on under her switched-off phone and inside her handbag. Now whatever additional vetting he must have done looks to be completed, resulting in the message.

One Suntec 43rd fl Sat 8 am 500K surety

"What's Suntec?" she asks when Theo gives the phone back to her.

"It's a commercial development in Singapore. Big downtown shopping mall with four or five office towers next to it. One must be the number of the tower he's in."

At this rate they'll end up having meetings back in Gotham, or back in Europe, by this time next
week. At least it should be a short flight, and she will see another city she has not yet been to. "We need to tell Bruce to get a ticket for tomorrow." She likes Bangkok enough to want to spend another day or two here, but again, recon for the venue takes priority.

"We also need to give him this guy's prints to send on to your CIA buddy." The three of them agreed the night before to get together after her meeting, and when Theo and she talked earlier over dinner, they agreed that it made sense to send Brian's fingerprints and a screenshot off her necklace camera to Kettering, one of the more reasonable and the most tech-savvy of the bunch they've met, to see if he could find a match for the man and help them track his whereabouts. Of course Brian could be using fake prints too, but even allowing for his jittery nerves, it is still a remote possibility. The plan is that Bruce will send a message from a number Kettering will recognise, and hide Theo's email address in an attachment asking to reply to it, so as to avoid an incoming reply on his own phone – after the Tessuti Varese incident where an incoming text almost got him killed, Theo and Selina both decided to insist on this as a precaution. "Let's see if he's figured out a meeting venue for us," Theo mutters as he types up the message.

The reply comes back five minutes later. She scans through it; the texts and emails she has been reading lately all look like treasure hunt cues. Black Ford Explorer green plates 5127 outside your hotel 10 pm sharp, SA dress, bring the 20s. "SA dress" must stand for Saudi Arabian; makes sense. She is less certain about the logic behind bringing the money, which "the twenties" presumably denotes, but then if Bruce has figured out a way to take that headache off their hands, especially now that they know they will only need half of it, so much the better.

"Looks like I need to get changed in a hurry," she grumbles, checking the time. Too bad; she was wearing the gold-coloured sari this time and really liked it – and would not mind seeing what effect it would have on Bruce considering his admiration of the blue one. Oh well, there will be time for it in Singapore.

xxx

At ten o'clock sharp, two minutes after they went downstairs to the lobby, the gleaming black SUV pulls up to the hotel entrance – and she has to bite her lip not to laugh as Bruce pulls off a creditable impersonation of a limo service driver, escorting them to the back seats with exaggerated courtesy and closing the doors for them before getting into the front seat. For once she is grateful for the disguise that hides her lingering grin.

They drive a few blocks north, through bustling Chinatown, and stop in an alley once they are certain that no one is following. She knows Bruce must have swept the car for bugs, and now, sitting in the dark behind tinted windows, they are finally assured of sufficient privacy. He turns in the seat to face the two of them, and Selina takes off the veil and hands him her phone with the message onscreen.

"Meeting's on for Saturday morning. The somewhat good news is, we only need half the money for the surety. The not so good news is, it's in Singapore."

Bruce does not seem concerned. "No worries." He smirks at Theo. "Didn't you tell Sylvie you were going to Singapore for a conference? Now we'll even be in the right country. And I've figured out the perfect way to take the money across the border." Seeing their curious faces, he explains. "You know how arms and drugs dealers use diamonds as the currency for large-volume deals, and other than Amsterdam or Luanda, we're in the best place to buy them. So I'll take care of that tomorrow before flying out to Singapore, and I can take them across the border myself in my jacket pocket with no one any the wiser. They'll be certified for weight and clarity and price, so you can just bring half of them to the meeting without bothering with cash, it will only boost your credentials."
"Sounds good." The pretend diplomatic status saved them from customs trouble so far, but it is still better to have a less bulky medium for valuables. "We also thought you could ask Kettering to help us get an ID on the seller." She gets out a USB stick holding high-resolution scans of her contact's fingerprints and the photo screenshot. "I've got the prints and mug shot here as .tiff files, maybe you can tweak them to make them look like holiday photos or something, and put Theo's address in a corner in one of the pics for him to reply to."

Apparently, Bruce does not need any convincing that the reply had better not come back to him. "Sure. The easiest way to mess up the images will be just to rename them as .jpegs – they're .tiffs, right? – and I can send him a text separately saying what they are. The message will be encrypted anyway, so this is just extra security."

"There's no such thing as extra security," Theo corrects him. "Now I know this is advanced paranoia, but say if this Brian found a way to hack Celine's phone – he has her number now – and saw you in it as a contact, he could hack your phone too and read your outbox."

"No he couldn't," Bruce counters smugly. "I only wrote to Selina once in Sydney using a local SIM, and we haven't exchanged a single text in Bangkok. Assuming she wiped the history," he goes on as she nods her reassurance, "we're off the hook."

Theo looks pleased but does not give up on the warning. "Just make sure you keep it this way."

Selina agrees with the text silence as a risk mitigation measure, but it is likely to make their lives difficult in Singapore. "Guys, I know it makes sense, but how are we going to coordinate the recon and any further plans from tomorrow onwards? We can buy a bunch of Singaporean SIMs and swap them after every message but it won't eliminate all the risk."

For someone who, by his own confession, has never manned the front line, Theo is quick to offer a tactical alternative. "We need a safehouse where we can talk. Suntec has a big crowded mall as part of the complex, maybe we can find a storage room we can rent there."

Bruce shakes his head. "Too risky. It's too close to this guy's office, if that's what it is on the 43rd floor, and they can easily spot us. The office lobby and the mall will both be full of CCTV cameras. If they hack into the CCTV system they'll have no trouble tracking Selina and the rest of us to its location. Whatever security and locks a storage room may have, they won't be good enough to withstand a professional burglar or a full-on attack for long, and we won't be allowed to change these, so as a safehouse, it won't really be that safe." Selina nods her agreement again. None of them know exactly who "they" are, or if anyone will indeed bother tracking them, but it is safest to assume the worst.

"Then we do it at the hotel," Theo suggests. "We stay at the biggest hotel there is, on different floors so we can lose anyone following us in the elevator, and meet in our rooms. They aren't secure either, but it should be harder to spot us. With any luck, it won't have Onity locks." It takes her a second to remember the significance. Onity locks, the type most widely used at hotels, have an easily exploitable weakness: the bottom of the lock has a tiny port used to reset the code. By using a special gadget the size and shape of an office marker, sticking its tip into the port, any half-competent thief or spy can open any room at an Onity-equipped hotel. "If they do, at least we can get lockpicks to use instead of keys. If they have another kind of lock, we clone the key cards to each other's rooms."

"Your room," Bruce corrects him. "Selina and I shouldn't be seen walking into each other's rooms, but so long as we don't arrive at the same time, we can both go to yours."

She wonders how long this visitation ban will hold in practice.
"OK, my room," Theo agrees. "Which means I'll be getting the biggest one."

"Just don't get the Presidential suite, in the interests of staying under the radar," Selina teases him.

"Talking of radars and Onity locks and stuff," Theo begins, "I was thinking it makes sense for me to stop over in Kuala Lumpur to go to our plant and pick up a few gadgets we may need. Anything they don't have, I can call Marisa and ask to have courier-delivered from Lugano overnight, it's still early afternoon there. I can go with the Al-Juhani passport to take advantage of the diplomatic immunity to carry the stuff, and my wife – " he winks at Selina – "has permission to travel on her own anyway so she can fly direct to Singapore. We already know we want a card cloner, Onity lockpicks, I'm figuring I should make silicone pads with this Brian's fingerprints in case we need to break into his office or wherever he's staying at, maybe the micro-drones just in case. Anything else to add to the shopping list?"

They have the minicams and bugs and a laser cutter, and Selina has brought along her fingerprint kit, but other than that, they are pretty light on fancy technology at the moment. "We have a laser cutter I can use instead of a drill or thermal lance, but I could do with a borescope. And a SoftDrill package," she suggests, "in case I need to open a safe in a hurry and leave no traces." The SoftDrill is basically a piece of software to test safe combinations so as to save her time. She still prefers to do it by ear for dial lock safes, and keypad ones are easy prey so long as she can manage to install a camera in the vicinity, but in this kind of situation, time and advance preparation are usually in short supply.

"I'd say a mini-EMP device," Bruce adds, "compact and autonomously powered, with enough power to take out a surveillance camera and infrared sensors."

"We have the ones in Lugano that are used to test camera shielding, I can ask to have a portable one shipped here. You know the effect is also a function of how long the connecting cables are, and it won't be a sure bet against battery-powered backups in power down mode, but at the full power setting it should fuck up most standard office surveillance equipment and make it look like a voltage spike or lightning strike nearby."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. I wish we had more time, I could have got Lucius to send me some. I used to have tons of them in Gotham in all shapes and sizes."

"Well, I guess your objectives back then were more about getting into places, and most of the stuff we make is about keeping people out of places," Theo teases him. "But our tester should do the job."

"OK, it's a deal," Bruce concludes. "I guess that's it for the toys."

While they have been talking, she has been checking flight times and hotel bookings, and now reports her conclusions. "If you go through Malaysia, you need to leave the hotel at about noon at the latest to stop at the plant and make it to Singapore before tomorrow night. I'll ask for late checkout and take the 4:25 pm, and the latest one you can take – " she looks at Bruce – "is the 7:40 pm arriving at five to eleven, or else you won't get there until 1 am."

"7:40 should be OK, it'll give me enough time to buy the stones."

"Great. So we each buy our own ticket and book a room. I've checked, the largest hotel is the Swissotel, we're lucky because it's pretty good and five minutes' walk from this Suntec place and has 1200 rooms and 70 floors. I'd say that's big enough for us to sneak around unnoticed."

"Sounds perfect," Bruce agrees. He takes the tablet from Selina to check. "I guess you're right, we have to pick rooms on different floors." He makes a face. "OK, Theo can book one of the Stamford Crest suites between the 64th and 66th floors, these look like their non-presidential fancy suites, you
can get the Grand room on the 63rd, and I'll have to survive in an executive suite again. What are you laughing at?"

She is still laughing when she answers. "You've survived prison, caro. Twice. I don't think an executive suite at a five-star will be much worse than that."

xxx

They have a very leisurely morning sipping ice cold bubble tea on the terrace; she still has time to soak in the bath after Theo leaves and before ordering lunch, and checks out at 2 pm thinking it should give her enough time to get to the airport in time for the 4:25 pm flight. Which, as it turns out, is a big mistake.

There is a major accident on the Chonburi Highway less than a mile after they join it from the On Nuj Road, and the traffic is blocked up for at least half a mile – not even crawling, just occasionally inching along. They are stuck on a stretch without exits, and she sits in the back of the limo fretting and watching the time and wishing she'd asked for a helicopter transfer, or at least taken the train. She makes it to the airport at a quarter to four and has to listen to the apologetic commiserations of the service desk who tell her that the next Thai Airlines flight is not until three hours later. The budget airline flights in between only have economy class, and even though she can live with two hours in economy, she does not feel like it, especially when Thai helpfully changed her ticket instead of making her pay for a new one. An added incentive is the knowledge that Bruce should be on the same flight; they will have to pretend to be strangers, but they may still find a way to make it entertaining. If the business class is empty, perhaps they can find a reason to sit close by, and she can even take off the veil and ask him something so they can have fun with a fake-stranger chat.

She could, in principle, go to the business lounge in the meantime, but sitting there for two hours seems like a bore and Bruce will likely show up at the last moment, so she looks up the airport facilities directory and goes for a window-shopping spree. With three floors of shops, there is plenty to pique her interest, from exquisite Thai silks and gemstone jewellery – she is not tempted enough to buy but is sure curious to look – to the bookshop with its excellent selection of travel guides and gorgeous coffee-table photo books. By the time she takes her purchase of the day, a Thailand guidebook, to the register, she hears the boarding announcement for the flight.

Her seat is in the first row so she does not see him come in, but she hears him talking. She is about to stand up and take a look to see who he is talking to under the pretence of getting something out of her bag in the overhead bin when the next thing he says hits her like a bucket of ice water.

"It wouldn't be fair to have such a beautiful lady sit on her own and deprive me of your company. I'll be completely heartbroken. Let's see if I can use my charm to persuade them to give us seats together."

She is still trying to recover when she hears the answer delivered in a cooing voice in an unmistakable New England accent.

"I'm sure they won't be able to resist."

TBC
Jetpacks are seen as sci-fi lore, but it looks like there is a working prototype that actually works and was tested by a pilot. To add to its cachet, it won an award in the Popular Science Aerospace category in the annual Best of What's New list: http://www.popsci.com/bown/2013/product/martin-aircraft-company-p12-jetpack

The Onity lock problem and the corresponding lockpick is real – see http://www.forbes.com/sites/andygreenberg/2012/10/02/hackers-crack-hotel-room-locks-with-a-tool-disguised-as-a-dry-erase-marker/ . The SoftDrill package was mentioned in the safecracking paper I read when writing Chinese Boxes, as were thermal lances and borescopes as tools of the safecracker's trade.

EMP, or electromagnetic pulse, devices generate voltage surges powerful enough to take out unshielded electronics. The apparent uses of EMP in Nolan's films are when Bruce shuts off paparazzi flashes and then the lights in Bane's sewer cave in TDKR, though as Theo says, the effect is greater when the target electronics are plugged in rather than standalone as a camera would be. Having read a couple of papers on EMP weapons for background research, I cannot rule out sticking some EMP-related geekery into one of the subsequent chapters, but the important thing is what they do, not how they do it.

Should you want to see pictures of jewel-box Bangkok, here is another picspam link: http://01cheers.livejournal.com/7614.html

Last but not least, here is the Royal Oriental suite: http://www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok/accommodation/royal-oriental-suite/
The fury does not hit her at once; instead it slowly builds up, like a wave gathering momentum. Her first reaction is a sort of numb shock; of all the things she might have expected Bruce to do when her back was turned, cheating somehow never occurred to her. Meanwhile, the pair take their seats two rows behind her; the high seat backs hide her from their view, but they are close enough for the stomach-churning conversation to be heard, at least while the plane is still on the ground.

She has spent half her lifetime pretending to be people she wasn't, and can spot a fake in ten seconds flat; and this girl is as fake as it gets, and shallow as a puddle in a drought. She answers the revolting flirtatious platitudes Bruce showers upon her with equally inane encouraging remarks, interspersing them with silly giggles.

"How long are you staying in Singapore?"

"A few days, maybe a week. I'll have to see how it goes."

Presumably, how it goes in bed with her. And her next question will likely be where he is staying at.

"Where are you going to stay?"

Bingo.

"Haven't decided yet. I'll just go to the information desk at arrivals and ask them to suggest a good five-star downtown."

Either he is fishing for an invitation into her bed right away, or he has changed his mind about staying at the same hotel as Selina, for obvious reasons.

If it had not been for the disguise, Selina would have confronted them. She feels like doing it anyway, but an attention-grabbing scene is not what she wants when she is supposedly travelling on a secret mission. Airline crews tend to take a dim view of on-board altercations, and the last thing she wants is being handed to the police when they land, or before they have a chance to take off, for that matter. She'd love to see him and his cooing dove handed over to the cops, but unfortunately, there are no arrests for flagrant cheating in most parts of the world – except perhaps, ironically, Saudi Arabia. She takes advantage of the pre-electronics-warning stage to look up the Singapore criminal law and gets a momentary flush of satisfaction to see that cheating is illegal there... before realising that she cannot even expose the fucker without blowing her cover. She is either a married Saudi heiress, and her pretend husband, Theo "Al-Juhani", is somewhere outside Kuala Lumpur in blissful ignorance of this travesty; or a married Tamil terrorist, and her husband, Mr Sivaparan, is in jail already.

She reaches inside her handbag for the pocket mirror and, kicking herself for being a spineless fool, angles it to get a sliver of a view in the gap between the seats; at least both the seat next to her and the two seats behind her and in front of them are empty so her spying goes unnoticed. The body language alone makes her nauseous, the way they sit turned in their seats to face each other, hands
Selina can see why he has picked her up; as he said, *tall, dark and handsome* must be his thing. No telling if the girl has good legs, but he clearly has a thing for exotic partners; Selina remembers his story of spending a few days in Shanghai in the company of an upscale call girl during his incognito travels, and of all the deliciously obscene things she taught him, which the two of them really enjoyed replicating on many occasions. This girl may sound like a New Englander, but she looks at least half-Asian, with dark glossy hair, delicate features, and skin the colour of old ivory. And she looks no older than early twenties, which explains the silly giggles but gives Selina little comfort. The only jarring feature in an otherwise seductively sultry image, apart from the manner best suited to a college cheerleader, is the colour of her eyes. Instead of a darker brown, it is a striking golden-yellow, making her look oddly predatory instead of alluring – not that it bothers *him*, apparently.

For a few seconds she thinks about putting on her music player to drown out the conversation, but her resolve does not last and morbid curiosity prevails. Instead, she reaches for the bag again, gets out her tablet, and tries to distract herself by reading the weapons specs; there is no need for it now that her arms dealer credentials have been established, but she hopes it can take the edge off her anger. No use; instead, she ends up imagining pointing some of the more destructive weaponry at the lovebirds two rows back.

When did he have time to pick up this airhead, anyway? Did he spend the day not just buying diamonds but trawling the red light district to boot? She could almost understand him cheating if he were really fascinated by someone, but it is clear that he knows exactly what sort of target he is dealing with here, and has no shame casually courting her with the stupidest tricks in the book and the shallowest flattery. So much for thinking that he appreciated mutual trust and an equal partnership. For once in her life Selina resolved to be totally honest with a man and has stuck to the resolution, only to get a slap in the face. This is what it comes down to; for all the protestations of jealousy – what breathtaking hypocrisy! – the moment he thinks she is out of earshot, he goes for a newer and more exotic model.

She should have known better, really. He may have lived the last few years in Gotham as an eccentric recluse, but stories were rife of Wayne's wild parties and a long succession of one-night stands, all the while pining for an unattainable beloved. It was a convenient excuse, for sure. Perhaps this Rachel was right in rebuffing him. What the fuck was *she* thinking of when she married him? Bruce Wayne, *Prince of Gotham*, king of supermodel orgies more like? They have been together for more than a year; should she be surprised that his eyes have started wandering and other body parts would follow suit? He may have changed his name but she'll be damned if he changed his habits. Oh, he did, for a bit, while he was weak and hurting and lonely – and the moment he felt free from the torments of his past, the moment he no longer felt broken, he must have figured it's time to have fun, like old times. Was she just the rebound girl? Enraged as she is, she is less angry at him than at herself for being such an idiot as to have thought that theirs was a trusting relationship. Serves her right for being a stupid sucker.

She waves away the in-flight drinks and snacks and tries unsuccessfully to numb her brain with playing games on the tablet. She cannot concentrate enough to play well, and a string of losses only adds to her anger. Finally she opens Minesweeper and, after several miserable failures, ends up restarting the game ad nauseam and just clicking the field at random to be presented with a succession of images of an exploding minefield. She finds it oddly soothing.

The two in the back row, in the meantime, won't shut up. The engine noise drowns out chunks of their discourse, but what Selina hears is enough to inform her that the companion *du jour* is indeed half-American, half-Thai, the daughter of an airline pilot father and flight attendant mother, long since divorced, and is spending a few months in Singapore writing a thesis in political science for her master's course at Georgetown. Apparently she was in Bangkok on a short break visiting relatives.
and is now moaning about having to go back to the horrors of statistical sampling and tutor meetings. Bruce helpfully offers to take the edge of her suffering by taking her out in the evening while he is in town; Selina curls her fingers into tight fists and wonders whether the CIA should, indeed, have put him in Guantanamo.

The girl is only too happy with the suggestion, of course.

"Oh wow, thank you! That's an awesome idea, and so nice of you! So, are you going to Singapore for business?"

It looks like he is mostly going for pleasure, sweetie.

"I should say so. I need to meet with a few people. There's an old business partner I must talk to."

What is he babbling about?

"What sort of business are you in?"

Apparently they have not had much of a chance to talk before boarding, what with exchanging basic info now. Or maybe they were too busy ogling each other.

"Asset management."

"Wow, that sounds really serious. I thought you were from Hollywood."

He has the indecency to be pleased. "Why did you think that?"

"You totally look like you could be in the movies."

Yeah, or in the gossip columns, which is probably where she saw him in his younger wilder days when she was in her early teens, and forgot who the face belonged to.

"You're flattering me."

"Well, you're an Italian guy who speaks, like, perfect English and has lived in the States, what else could I think? It's either Gotham or LA, and you said you've only been to Gotham for, like, a few days."

She wonders why he bothered to lie about that, and to pretend to be Italian to boot.

"No, I lived in New Jersey for a few years."

How thrilling.

"It's such a shame that you've moved back. Where are you now, Milan?"

"No, further south."

"I thought most financial companies were in Milan."

OK, so she knows that much.

"No, I'm in Calabria."

Yeah, right, asset management in Calabria. So we're going with the 'Ndrangheta Rocco De Stefano persona, are we? Well, that explains the need to see an old business partner – see as in shoot,
presumably, and the New Jersey sojourn. Hate to break it to you, *tesoro*, but even with the drivel you've been spouting, you don't sound dumb enough. Compared to the real guy, this version of Rocco is an eloquent, impeccably-mannered Einstein. But then the seduction objective takes priority over authenticity. Still, if the bimbo knows anything about Italian politics, this should be her cue to find a convincing reason to scamper.

Either she doesn't know or she doesn't care.

"Oh wow, that sounds awesome. I've only been to, like, Rome and Florence. Calabria must be really beautiful."

Asking for an invitation already?

"It is. You should visit it sometime."

"I'd love to. Maybe when I finish my thesis I can go to Europe for, like, a couple of months."

"Sounds like a great idea."

What about promising to be her personal escort for the duration?

"Maybe we can meet when I'm there."

See, the sweetheart is pushy enough to make up for this apparent lack of commitment.

"I hope so. If I can get away for a few days I'll be very happy to."

Ah, we are being realistic and trying to make allowances for real life, like being married.

Shallow as she is, the girl has her gold digger senses well attuned.

"I really hope we manage to meet... I guess there's a *Signora* Rocco?"

If he says *no*, Selina will walk over and punch his lights out, to hell with the disguise.

"In the interests of full disclosure, yes."

Don't sound so heartbroken, darling. Marriage does not have to be forever.

"I see." The girl does not sound disappointed enough. "Where is she?"

"Back in Cosenza. She mostly stays at home, doesn't like to travel."

Well, *fuck me*. She never knew that about herself.

"If I were her I wouldn't let a husband like you out of my sight."

To quote the girl, *oh wow*. The cutie is already setting her sights on being the next wife.

"I'm sorry to ask too, but is there a Mr. Kitty?"

Despite the shitty situation, she struggles to suppress a snort. *Kitty*, seriously?!

"No, I'm totally free."

And very, *very* available.
"Lucky you."

Don't worry, you'll be enjoying the single life sooner than you think.

xxx

Somehow she survived the rest of the flight without choking with rage, though she certainly felt like choking him when he suggested to Kitty that they go grab a bite for dinner right away on the way from the airport. But the moment the doors open and they are allowed to disembark, she jumps out of her seat, unable to withstand another second of this farce. She grabs her carry-on and practically storms off with barely a nod and a word of thanks to the flight attendants while the happy couple are still in their seats discussing the choice of dinner venue. She is aware of Bruce staring at her, and after her, but is way past caring.

Singapore is even hotter and more humid compared to Bangkok, and she is happy to be the first in line at the taxi rank. She gives the driver the Swissotel address, sinks back in the seat, and closes her eyes. For all she knows, Singapore may be a beautiful city, but she does not give a damn right now. She has to hold it together at least until Saturday without flipping out or fucking up the mission; Bruce may have forgotten about it in his renewed lust for sexual escapades, but she has an outstanding conviction at stake – after all, the CIA may still try to tag her with it, and besides, she is not one to back out of a tricky task. She'll just need to get hold of Theo – perhaps she can call him room-to-room, or catch him at breakfast – and ask him to arrange their meetings so that she and Bruce are never at his suite at the same time. He'll probably tell her she is overreacting, but he'll definitely also have a few choice observations left for Bruce regarding the admirable wisdom of letting his dick make decisions for him.

In the end it won't matter much; assuming she can get to the database and nab this Brian guy on Saturday or soon after that, she is getting out on the next flight. She won't retaliate with scandals or lawsuits or highly visible affairs of her own, she will just leave, take only what is hers and serve him with the divorce papers the next day. To hell with his money, she won't embark on the slippery slope toward being a long-suffering, cheated-upon trophy wife, and can perfectly well make a living on her own. She won't even need to steal, she can just take a full-time job in Lyon like they've been begging her to. But before then, she'll go back to Rio... for a few months. She'll steal Armando away from his sulky girlfriend, and have fun going to fancy restaurants and frolicking on the beach. She'll learn to fly the hang-glider – who knows, maybe she'll run into Bruce and kick his ass at some European event... a girl can dream, but it should not matter anyway whether she sees him or not. She gets out her phone and buys herself an open ticket to Rio before switching it off.

xxx

The Swissotel is appropriately posh but also quite sleek, its 70-storey tower sticking out like a floodlit spike into the cloudy sky; she tries not to dwell on the inevitable phallic parallels. She likes her room, spacious and modern, with two balconies offering vertiginous views of the skyscraper forest around her. On the downside, the hotel does have Onity locks, but she does not have anything obviously incriminating in her luggage, and will put her camera- and bug-encrusted jewellery, and her night vision goggles, in the room safe anyway. It is almost midnight, and under normal circumstances she would order room service and take a long shower before it arrived, but she does not feel all that hungry, despite the fact that her last meal was about twelve hours ago. Maybe she should just raid the minibar.

She stops herself from doing anything as sentimentally self-destructive as that and calls the reception asking to transfer her call to Mr Renner's room. No such guest; how about Mr Al-Juhani? This gets her the call forward. Even if Theo has finished his dinner, he may be willing to keep her company
for a drink and a snack at the top-floor bar. No luck; the room phone does not respond and she does not feel like making a big deal of her stupid situation by calling his mobile if he is dining out. Her best option, she decides, is to vent her anger at the gym; she changes into her workout kit and heads down, grateful for the gym's round-the-clock availability.

Predictably, it is almost empty at this hour, its only occupant a vaguely Nordic-looking, presumably jetlagged Westerner trudging along on the treadmill. He pays little attention to Selina at first; this changes when she puts herself through a succession of increasingly complex martial arts moves, to the point when he is so distracted he almost falls off the treadmill. Whatever; she is here to tire herself out and numb her brain, not to provide entertainment, but if he wants to gawk, she has no problem with it. It would be more fun if she had someone to practice against, but she doubts that her fellow gym visitor will be a willing victim, er, partner. A few minutes into her workout she spots a boxing punching bag in a corner, and a peek into the storage closet a quarter of an hour later rewards her with a pair of boxing gloves. This is more like it; the punching bag is a passive target, but gives her the satisfaction of feeling her fists dig into it, even though the person she would most like to repeatedly punch is not Bruce or even Kitty but her stupid self.

After an hour of this, her knuckles hurt and her knees are getting wobbly but she is both physically exhausted and blissfully brain-dead. She drags herself to the elevators and stumbles back to the room and right into the bathroom, shedding her soaking gym clothes on the floor and stepping into the shower. This is bliss, or as close to it as she can get on a day like this. She'll need to do this every evening until she can fly out of here, mission permitting. By the time she steps out, she is almost human again, and pleasantly relaxed.

All of which changes when she walks into the room itself, washed in the ambient glow from the windows.

Bruce, who clearly has no concept of shame or decency – or danger, for that matter – is asleep in her bed. He does not even stir when she walks up to it, looking for all the world like a perfectly innocent visitor who has every right to be here. How the fuck did he get in here, anyway… and when? She is pretty certain that she would have noticed him slipping in while she was in the shower – she had not even bothered to close the bathroom door – and her room being on the 63rd floor of a 70-storey building makes climbing over an unlikely proposition. She glances over at the two balconies anyway, but cannot see any signs of dangling ropes.

No matter; instead of wondering how he got in, her priority for the moment is throwing him out – because if he thinks for a single second that she is going to let him stay, he is an even greater dickhead than he gave her reasons to believe earlier today.

She could, of course, drag him out of the bed – or at least try to – but while she would have an initial element of surprise on her side, she is not sure if she would succeed, especially after he woke up and assuming he would have opposing ideas about staying in bed. No; best to wake him up and order him out by virtue of moral rather than physical superiority, but she does not have to be subtle about it. She still has her bath towel hanging around her neck; she takes it off, gathers it up into a doubled-up roll, and swats him sharply across the face.

The effect is every bit as dramatic as she hoped; he sits up, or rather jumps up into a sitting position, and stares at her in momentary incomprehension.

"Get out."

"Selina..."

"Get..." She raises her hand and swats him again. "Out."
Unfortunately, he manages to catch the other end of her weapon on the backswing and snatches it away. She is momentarily nonplussed as to why he is ogling her before the belated realisation that she is standing there stark naked. Whatever.

"You heard me. Get the fuck out of here."

"Why?"

This makes her hit the ceiling, figuratively speaking. "Why?! You dare ask why? What sort of an idiot do you think I am? You think you can fuck around as you please and come back here and expect a welcome? Go back to your new girlfriend, she'll give you all the welcome you need and all the welcome you'll ever get."

He raises a hand as if to object, but she won't let him.

"Go on, run back to your dinner companion. Pussy, isn't it? Ah sorry, Kitty. You two seemed so eager, I was surprised you didn't run to the airplane toilet for a quickie. What, she had enough already? Oh, let me guess: she stood you up."

"Selina, listen..."

"Why the fuck should I listen to you? I've heard all I needed on the flight here. I heard way more than I ever wanted to."

For an instant, he looks about to laugh and she ponders a quick dash into the bathroom to get the other towel, but then, incongruously, he speaks as if he were offended.

"Did you seriously think I was interested? Did you seriously think I could risk my chances of being with you for the sake of sleeping with her? Is that what you believe of me?"

Either he is even more of a bald-faced liar than she thought, or something does not add up. "I believe what I heard," she insists, before making her counterattack. "And do you seriously think I'll believe you now? The moment, the second you're on your own you pick up the first young female you see. What am I supposed to believe of you after this?"

"Selina… just listen."

She heads for the door instead. "I'm going downstairs to call hotel security. If you aren't out of here by the time they arrive, blame yourself." She steps toward the bathroom to grab a robe...

"OK, if you don't believe me, just hit me."

She stops, turns, and stares at him.

He repeats the invitation. "If you won't listen and think I was cheating, hit me. I'm right here and won't fight back." He puts up both hands for greater emphasis.

And that, of course, is the really low blow. She may be seething furious at him and capable of causing grave bodily harm in general, but hitting him is another matter, and inconvenient as it may be under the circumstances, she has a bad enough mental issue with it to stop her from lifting a finger. It isn't that she wouldn't know how to hurt him – she knows exactly where and how she could hit him and make it hurt really bad – but the nightmarish vision of the fight in Bane's hideout, with her a helpless spectator, having just delivered him to a monster, is seared into her mind too vividly to allow her to hurt him, now or ever. It is a somewhat different matter if the two of them would fight, or rather wrestle, on equal terms; but she cannot do this when he sits there deliberately defenceless. It
borders on ridiculous; when he asked her to slap him in the midst of pretty vigorous bedtime antics a few months back, she could not even bring herself to do that... not that it mattered in the end as she soon found other, less immediately painful and much more enjoyable ways to indulge his occasional masochistic cravings and submissive urges. Thinking about that right now, though, was a big mistake. Good luck staying angry.

"Get out." Even to her own ears, she lacks conviction.

He has obviously caught on to it. "Make me."

She could, in theory, carry out her threat and go call security. In theory being the operative words; it would be shooting herself in the foot secrecy-wise. Well then, here is her chance for a bit of competitive wrestling. With a bit of luck, she might just manage to kick him out of bed and out of the room and drift to sleep on the reclaimed bed to sweet dreams of seducing Armando in Rio.

She circles the bed to gauge the best approach vector, watching him; from what she sees, his eyes keep tracking her in a sort of reciprocal cat-and-mouse. She figures out a good landing spot in the middle of the mattress that will bring her next to him and give her enough momentum to push him off the bed – and jumps... but the instant she lands, he flings himself on top of her. It becomes a bona fide wrestling match, no holds barred – well, almost – to the point when the bed creaks and they crash against the headboard and try to snare each other with the duvet and swat at each other with the assorted pillows, and it's so much fun... except that she is nowhere near her goal and he is still very much on the bed. A silly little miscalculation on her part, and she is dragged down and pinned under his body, his hands on her wrists and his leg between hers. Damn, he is strong; her only option by now would be to bite him, and she won't stoop to that, so she just glares at him, and he stares back at her, and it is going in a very different direction from what she intended. She has no idea what he intended, but now that they are pressed together she can tell that she is not the only excited one. And then, as if sealing his total victory, he presses his lips to hers and she knows she should not but still lets him kiss her, and it soon stops being sweet and tender and becomes hungry and passionate, and he lets go of her wrists and she drags her fingernails down his back and they both moan in unison...

...at which moment there is a sharp rapping at the door and a screechy voice demands that they open "or Ah'll call the caaaaps."

They freeze and turn their heads in the direction of the door, though it is not in their line of sight. There is a second or two of silence, then the knocking continues.

"She's got to be kidding me," she breathes. "Cops, really?"

"We're in Singapore," he mutters back. "They have prison sentences for pornography and fines for outrages on decency. This probably counts as both."

"Fuck." Talk about a total fail on the low profile front.

"Maybe you... you could talk to her," Bruce suggests, rather sheepishly. She might have asked why he won't volunteer, but it is pretty obvious to her in her position that he is in no condition to do so. She shakes her head in silent wonder as to how things ended up at this juncture, then grabs her wet towel from the nightstand where he left it, and drags herself to the door.

Her unbidden visitor is a hefty fiftysomething matron of, judging by the accent, American provenance, standing there with an air of someone whose decency has been very thoroughly outraged, with a tall, thin presumably-husband hovering behind her, looking like he'd rather be many miles away – until he sees Selina, after which he has trouble peeling his eyes off her.
"What's that *aaawful* noise you're making?" is his wife's greeting.

Like you don't know. To be fair, they were actually fighting for a few minutes… and in any case she'd better act sheepish and scared and apologetic to make sure the calling the cops never happens.

"I'm so terribly sorry, I had absolutely no idea you could hear us…"

"*Hear* you? I could feel the walls shaking!" the lady declares.

"I do apologise. Please, don't call the police, please… we're both married." It might fail to appeal to the woman's sense of compassion but it's worth a try; at least her check of the Singapore penal code and the unlawfulness of cheating has told her that it is a valid fear for the guilty parties.

Her accuser does not seem much placated by her admission, but then her scowl slackens rather abruptly – and Selina notices, at the edge of her field of vision, that Bruce has managed to sort himself out and has walked up to the door wearing a pair of slacks, though little else, and is making puppy eyes at her nemesis.

"You should- should be- " It is clear that the woman likes what she sees, whether she wants to or not; if her sudden stuttering were not a sufficient indication of it, her furious blushing certainly is. The husband behind her back shakes himself to life and tries to mumble something, but she is too deep in trouble of her own now so she decides to save herself further embarrassment and, after regaling Selina with another scowl, saunters off, with a dismissive wave of her hand and a theatrical shrug, in the direction of her suite, husband in tow.

The moment they are back in the room with the door shut behind them, they fall into each other's arms, crying with silent laughter.

"Liar," he mutters in her ear in between kissing the earlobe.

She catches her breath enough to speak. "I told her nothing but the truth. We're both married, aren't we?" And maybe she'd rather keep it that way, after all.

"But not the whole truth," he counters, pulling the towel away from her. "Now let me explain what the deal was with the girl– "

She pulls him next to her and half-kisses, half-bites him. "Just shut up." Explanations and apologies and warnings and recriminations can wait until tomorrow; she'd rather not waste time on those now.

He eagerly responds to the kiss, so much so that they end up sinking on the floor. At this rate, the matron may be back before long.

"You know, I think we'd better go to your room and hope your neighbours are more understanding."

"Or harder of hearing."

"Exactly. Either way I'd rather not have to give a repeat performance."

"You have my vote." He looks like the cat that got the cream.

"How did you get here, anyway?" she asks, pulling her black jersey dress and a pair of flats out of the bag.

In response, he produces what looks like a felt-tip marker out of his slacks pocket.

"Ah, the famous Onity lockpick." She snatches it out of his hand; it looks like she will have a use for
it, and probably not only to get into Theo's suite. "And here I was, thinking you were happy to see me," she teases.

"Couldn't you tell I was?"

Could she ever. "How did you get it?"

"Saw Theo in the lobby, was lucky to catch him when he was going out for dinner."

Which explains why she did not catch him. "What time are we meeting tomorrow?"

"After breakfast. About ten, we said. If that's OK with you."

"Sure." So long as it leaves them enough time to get some sleep after they've fucked each other's brains out.

They sneak out of the room like cartoon burglars and slowly creep toward the elevator bank amid silent snickering. "Shame about this woman showing up," he complains quietly as they wait for the lift to arrive. "Your room's nicer and has a bigger bed than mine."

"It'll do. Shame she was so pissed off. You know normally I don't mind public settings."

"Not in Singapore."

Which reminds her of his surprisingly detailed knowledge of local laws regarding outrages on decency. "Been here before?"

"A couple of times."

"Ever been caught?"

He rolls his eyes. "Yes. I was 24," he adds with a shrug, as if to explain the mistake. "Got away with a fine."

"At this rate we'd better keep a stash of cash handy," she comments.

When the chime goes off and they step inside, she is surprised to see him press the lobby button.

"Which floor are you on?" she asks him, a bit bewildered.

"60th," he says, completely deadpan. She is on the 63rd. "We're taking the scenic route." The moment the doors close, he pins her against the wall. "How's this for a public setting?"

xxx

She drifts awake to the realisation that the low noise she has been hearing in her sleep is, in fact, a vibrating phone alert. Bruce reluctantly unwraps himself from around her side and rubs his eyes. "It's seven fucking thirty," he grumbles, squinting at the clock radio on the bedside table as he reaches for the phone. No wonder she is so sleepy; by the time they were too tired to move a finger, some time after three, she realised that she was starved so he had to call room service and she had to hide in the bathroom when it arrived… but all the early morning snack did was make them hungry for more in a figurative sense.

She squints at the phone he is holding and is momentarily surprised at seeing a Swiss prefix followed by a number she does not recognise. Must be a client; but then it is midnight over there, kind of late for a client call – unless it is an emergency, which is really great timing when both company bosses
are a twelve-hour flight away. Judging by the way Bruce is frowning, he must be thinking the same thing.

"Hello?" he says tentatively. "Yes, this is Brandon." This is said with more confidence but with a round-eyed look. "Hi, Tim."

OK, at least the Swiss number makes sense now. Theo must have got a new SIM card to go with the Renner identity. He is probably calling to suggest a later meeting time, which, all things considered, would be great.

"Sure, what sort of favour?"

Apparently not. She listens to the rest of the conversation with an increasing sense of uneasy wonder.

"Can it wait a couple of hours? I'm... Oh, OK. I don't have that kind of money in cash on me, I used up all our cash in Bangkok, I just have a couple of thousand US left and I'll need to exchange those. I can try see if I can get an advance at the reception against my card. If not, I'll have to wait till the bank opens at 8:30. Where do I bring it? 3-9-1 New Bridge Road... What is it, is there a sign or something? What?!" He gapes at the phone before slapping a hand on his forehead. "Are you telling me you're in jail?"

.

TBC.

Chapter End Notes

I disappoint readers again here by chickening out of the smut. I suppose my real issue with avoiding writing explicit sex scenes involving characters I really like is some sort of weird respect for their privacy (yes, I know they are fictional :P) I can perfectly well imagine them having the steamiest, kinkiest sex in minute detail… I just can't bring myself to describe it for readers' eyes :( Apologies again.

…but I can offer you a delightful bribe, even if I say so myself ;) The release of the Nolan trilogy special edition and the publicity tour for Out of the Furnace has prompted a couple of Christian Bale interviews, and if you have not seen/read them, they are a must, not to mention great fun. He has interesting comments, both serious and humorous, about the Batman character and the way he approached it in the films, and talks about the rationale for that gravelly voice and the perils of pissing in the Batsuit. For all his usual grumpy public persona, he is hilarious here.


xxx

The newest member of the Ex-Jailbird Club requests the honour of your company at a celebration of his achievement at the pre-agreed venue sometime around 11 am. Black attire. RSVP not necessary.

The invitation arrives not by email or text, but by actual printed card in a sealed envelope hand-delivered to her room by a bellboy at half past ten, making her stagger groggily to the door. Once a prankster, always a prankster.

She yawns halfway through the smile, bleary-eyed from too little sleep: between creeping back to her room at a quarter to eight and then going for an early breakfast as a cover for a spot of necessary pickpocketing, she has since had about an hour’s nap to add to the two hours she got last night. She would have skipped the nap altogether, given the latest developments, tired or not; but then Bruce assured her that once he had posted bail at the Singapore police HQ – for that was the location of Theo’s sojourn last night – he’d be free to go, at least for the time being.

Any vestiges of worry are wiped from her mind when she gets to the suite, abaya and all, and, ignoring the Do Not Disturb sign hung outside the door, opens it using the lockpick. She tried it again on her own room lock a couple of times, and is now able to do it in a fluid enough motion that no one watching her at a few feet of distance could tell that she was not legitimately swiping a card to enter.

She steps into the middle of what sounds like a heated argument, except that she can tell that both parties are enjoying it. They cannot see her yet; the vast, over-decorated Stamford Crest suite has a separate bar area in addition to what looks like two enormous rooms, and that is where they seem to be, judging by the clink of china on a countertop.

“This is a really low blow. I didn’t expect company ownership to take such a dim view of the situation.”

“Says the man who has a wall of Batman memorabilia in his company office.”

Ah; so company ownership refers to Bruce. And judging by this exchange, he does not just like his revenge cold but deep-frozen, and the concept of symmetric warfare is very much alive; the fact that Bruce rushed to post bail earlier does not mean he won’t have fun at Theo’s expense now.

Theo is defiant. “I’m not taking it down. Whatever you say.”

“Then don’t complain about a bit of reciprocal friendly publicity.”

“You have interesting ideas of friendly. What if Sylvie finds out? Someone’s bound to tell her…”

“Look at the positive side. This is definitive, 100% official proof that you’re really in Singapore.”

“Great. Why the fuck did you bring up pissing in elevators? I never did that or half the other stuff you warn about.”

“So far being the operative words. Given what you have done, how could I put the rest past you?”
“Guys, what’s the deal?”

They turn to greet her; once she has a coffee cup of her own – with the amount of sleep all three of them must have had, they will end up with a caffeine overdose before noon – she directs the next question to Theo.

“What has he done to retaliate?”

Theo responds with a theatrical scowl. “Have you checked your office mail this morning?”

Of course she has not, and now she regrets it. “I’ve kept my regular phone switched off. What did he send?”

“You’ll see it sooner rather than later, I’m afraid. He’s refusing to send a retraction or even an errata corrige.

OK, this is too much for her to resist. She left her phone in the room safe knowing that she would see both of her fellow conspirators upstairs, and now she is going to get it no matter what.

“You’d better go outside the hotel to check,” Theo advises her, resigned to her upcoming discovery. “They shouldn’t know about your regular number, but assuming you’ve had your mission phone switched on here, someone with the right equipment can triangulate its location and detect another SIM card active in close proximity."

So they’ll also have to switch off their mission phones every time they get together. “You’ve remembered to switch off your phone, did you?” she asks Bruce.

“Didn’t need to.” He has his smug expression on as he pulls what looks like a pouch made of dense wire mesh out of his slacks pocket. “Thanks to Mr Jailbird, we now have Faraday cages for phones.”

“Is that some kind of kinky bondage gear for electronics?”

The guys both laugh. “Faraday cages block out electromagnetic radiation,” Theo explains. “Including phone signals. As soon as it’s in the pouch, it looks like it’s off.” He walks over to the sitting room coffee table, which has a large metallic hard-shell suitcase lying open on top of it displaying an array of gear, and pulls out a pair of identical mini-pouches. “Here’s your lot,” he says as he hands them to Selina. “I’ve brought you the safecracking stuff as well, but we may want to keep it inside this suitcase for now. It’s 90% titanium and has a six-digit combo lock and two key locks that require different keys, plus two built-in GPS trackers that can be set to alert me if it moves more than two meters, and is booby-trapped when locked, so it’s probably a better bet compared to the room safe. And while on the subject of general paranoia, talking about these,” he points to the pouches, “it’s best to keep your regular phone inside one of them now when you aren’t using it. Phones can transmit GPS location info even when switched off so long as the battery’s inside, and this thingy blocks that out. And make sure you cover up your mission phone while you’re still in your room before coming here, they now have an accuracy of less than a meter when locating GPS devices.”

“Thanks. Now gentlemen, you’ll have to excuse me while I go to satisfy my burning need for knowledge.”

She does not need to go far; Singapore seems to have shopping as its national pastime, and there is a shopping mall complex attached to their hotel as well. It does not take her long to find a busy café where she is reassuringly surrounded by a crowd of phone-wielding patrons. She hurries through the password checks and is finally looking at the usual inbox screen.
Mr Theodore Florian “Gumslinger” Reimann, currently released on bail awaiting trial and
sentencing, was recently arrested in Singapore on charges of hacking, littering, and possession and
improper disposal of chewing gum. Despite being able to narrowly avoid a vandalism charge, he
nonetheless remains a suspect on the latter count pending further investigation. These grave offences
carry a cumulative fine of SG $7,000, and the littering charge is further punishable by community
service. If upheld, the vandalism charge could also entail an additional SG $2,000 fine and a
possible prison term. Despite being freed, Mr Reimann presents a continuing danger to society. If
you see him repeatedly committing any of the offences listed above, as well as any offences related to
outrages on decency, possession of pornography, failure to flush public lavatories, jaywalking, or
urinating in elevators, please report his location and details of the offence to the Singapore
Neighbourhood Police Centre, Central district division (c/o Mr Brandon Wainwright, via al
Municipio no. 15, Cernesio, Ticino, Switzerland, 91 5040781) – the Wainwright HQ address,
followed by Bruce’s office phone number.

She is still laughing when she shows up back at the suite. “Remind me not to piss you off,” she
teases Bruce. Granted, she gave it a very good shot last night and has got away scot-free so far, but
after seeing this, she is not so sure anymore about possible long-term consequences.

“But worry.” He winks at her. “It only applies to comic book hero fanboys. Especially ones who
bring action figures and put up posters to display at the workplace.”

“So fan girls are off the hook? That’s a relief. Now it’s my turn to ask; what’s the deal with pissing in
elevators?”

“It’s one of the things that carry huge fines here,” Bruce explains. “So is jaywalking and not flushing
toilets and so on. They have most lifts equipped with urine detectors that block the doors and sound
an alarm.”

Theo feels compelled to interject. “I don’t know how you came by that information, but I swear I
didn’t do any of that. Including the indecency and pornography. Just the three that I was charged
with... or four, depending on interpretation.”

“Well, we almost got caught at the indecency part last night, we could’ve ended up keeping you
company.” Bruce is glaring at her, but she has to offer a display of solidarity. “And Mr Wayn…
wright has been previously arrested and fined here on the indecency-and-pornography stuff, didn’t
you tell me yourself last night, caro?” Caro does not look thrilled, knowing perfectly well that any
such information may be used to devastating effect by his general manager. Still, she continues by
putting the figurative icing on the cake. “He also served a prison term in China once, for stealing
from himself.”

Bruce jumps to his own defence. “I didn’t steal under my own name. It was Wayne Enterprises
merchandise I got caught taking and I was travelling under the radar; what could I do?”

“I didn’t get caught under my own name either,” Theo is quick to point out. “If I had, I could’ve
called the Singapore Interpol HQ and been released in half an hour, I literally had a get out of jail
free card as a former director arrested on ridiculous charges when I could give them an explanation.
But I respected mission secrecy and stuck to my fake identity just in case.”

“What did you do, anyway?” By now, her curiosity has been well and truly piqued.
"It's more a question of what I didn't manage to do," Theo explains. "I couldn't get to sleep when I came back from dinner, after I gave Bruce the lockpick, so I thought I might as well walk over to Suntec seeing how close we are to it, and take a look. I left my wallet up here, it was a good move because it had cards in three different names and the police would surely think they were stolen, and grabbed a couple of mini-cameras with GPRS transmitters and a retransmitter to relay the signal to my laptop here. I thought it would help us keep an eye on the guy now that we know what he looks like. It seemed like it was going well, I walked around the One Suntec tower, stuck one of my cameras near the garage entrance, then went to the main entrance and was about to stick the other one on a column right outside, and then I saw a pair of surveillance cameras above the door."

Bruce responds with an exaggerated groan and an eyeroll; he must have heard all this already but cannot pass up a chance to rub in his opinion of Theo’s proficiency at covert tactics. Selina is feeling more charitable but still cannot help poking fun at her boss's carelessness.

"You install these things! How on earth could you miss them?"

Theo makes no attempts to hide his embarrassment. "Well, I admit I was a bit over-excited about the whole outing. At least I can promise that the one I put up outside the garage is in a safe spot."

"So what happened next, did the cops show up and grab you? How did you get those charges anyway? What I'm hearing so far would amount to nothing worse than loitering."

"It gets worse," Bruce jumps in.

"It does," Theo agrees. "I stepped behind the column as soon as I saw the cameras so I was sure I'd managed to stay out of the frame, and the lobby was empty, I mean it was about one AM by then, so I figured I might still have a shot at attaching my minicam so long as I managed to quickly disable at least one of their cameras to create a blind spot. I didn't figure they'd have a 24-hour security detail at an office building, I thought that unless an intruder alarm went off, they'd just review footage in the morning in fast forward, and by then it wouldn't matter. I had a packet of gum in my pocket and a pair of rubber bands I'd used to keep the camera cartons closed, so I chewed a couple of pieces of gum and made the bands into a slingshot to fling the gum blobs at the lens. I completely forgot about the Singapore chewing gum ban, the last time I was here was at least ten years ago. It looked like it would work, I'd just shot a third glob at it and was chewing the fourth and final one when the guards showed up. Turns out they were in a room right behind the reception, and once they saw the black patch appear onscreen they got out and saw me, if you wish, in flagrante, and called the cops. I tried to get away but I could see they’d catch up with me. At that point I remembered about the gum ban, so I spat out the gum, threw out the packet and the second camera, but had to stomp on the camera to make sure it was unrecognisable, or at least unusable, and that was when they got me. And then the cops arrived and arrested me for the gum and the littering, and said that my lens blocking trick could count as vandalism depending on how hard the gum was to get off. I was really lucky it came off easily when they tried to take it as evidence, vandalism is a non-bailable offence here so I'd be stuck in jail. But then to make it worse, when they searched me, they found the retransmitter and added the hacking charge, and that's a 5K fine. Now on the plus side, as I said, I had no ID on me, and I had two fake names I could tell them, but Al-Juhani and diplomatic immunity wasn't really an option given what I look like, especially without the lenses. So when they brought me to the police headquarters on New Bridge Road I said my name was Renner and asked if there was any chance of bail. They told me they could release me if I got someone to bring over my passport and post bail at the maximum amount of fines for all outstanding charges, which came up to seven thousand. I tried calling you at about one thirty to see if there was any chance of you bringing it last night..." He looks pointedly at Bruce.

"Sorry, I was... busy," he mutters. In reality he was still in Selina's room while his phone was left
sitting on the bedside table in his own.

"Busy trying to get arrested for indecency."

Selina is compelled to take some of the responsibility. "It was my fault... kind of. I'm sorry we kept you stuck in jail."

Theo makes it plain that his feud, if it be so called, is not with her. "No worries. It wasn't that bad. I'm sure it was nothing like what you two have been to. It was clean, I'd even say comfortable. And I had an entertaining companion in the holding cell who was arrested earlier in the evening. A very, er, bright young man by name of Batman bin Suparman."

She sees Bruce's eyes go wide; she probably looks the same. "Who bin what?"

Theo grins at them. "That was my reaction when I heard it. Apparently it's his real name, the cops had his ID and were joking about it. Got caught on CCTV breaking into a snooker hall at a shopping centre for the second time in a row, stole 500 dollars' worth of stuff in total, and also... borrowed... his brother's bank card to make withdrawals. So in a way, my stay was kind of fun. Anyway, they said they'd let me try the call again in the morning, and I was lucky then."

"I know, I... heard it," she admits.

Theo looks at them the way an indulgent parent would regard a pair of mischievous kids. "Which kind of defeats the object of meeting in my room if you are busy, well, socialising inside the hotel already."

"Last night was a special case," she points out.

"OK, we'll stick to outside the hotel from now on," Bruce quips, and she wonders whether the resulting indecency charges would take them in the direction of New Bridge Road sooner rather than later.

"Anyway, then you know the rest," Theo concludes.

"Pretty much." In fact she has participated in the rest: she took it upon herself to pinch a Singaporean ID card from the wallet of a local businessman having a business breakfast at the hotel, before playing nice and clueless and taking it to reception half an hour later as something she found at the restaurant, while Bruce got the cash advance and snuck into Theo's suite, picked up his Renner passport, and put the card cloner to the test by producing a fake Singaporean ID for his bailor role. "Except for how in hell Bruce got your mugshots."

Theo sighs. "I can't enlighten you on that. All I know is that he did get them. Unfortunately."

"It was just a matter of asking nicely," Bruce says with an evil grin.

"So now you're out on bail?"

"Now I'm about to treat the head of the Interpol office here to lunch at Hai Tien Lo, that's the best and most expensive Cantonese place in town, and take a shot at damage control while I'm at it. I already thought I owed it to him for the UNLPs, and now I have to tell him I'll need that arrest record discarded so you can get the bail back and I can get the Renner passport back so I can leave the country on it. We'll have to hand back the UNLPs once we're done and I'd rather not use my real passport as I travelled through Sinagpore as Renner just three days ago. Not to mention that I'd rather not do community service."
"How irresponsible of you. We also need to ask them to check this Brian's prints and try to run his picture through a facial recognition tool," Bruce reminds him. So far they have not heard back from Kettering, and cannot be sure when, or whether, he will respond. In the worst case they have to assume that he has not figured out the encrypted fake .jpegs with Mitchum's prints and photo and Theo’s e-mail embedded within.

"At this rate I'll have to take him to lunch and dinner every day while we're here, at the very least."

"Ask him if they want to host a free training seminar on safecracking by an HQ consultant," Selina prompts. The week-long courses she runs at the Lyon HQ have been a runaway hit to a point where there is a waiting list of participants, and offering to hold one of those in Singapore as soon as they are free may just be a good enough bribe. "I can ask to have the soft copy of my manual e-mailed to them."

"Good idea. I hope it'll make him less mad at me. Anything else?"

"Anything you can get on the Suntec One building layout," she suggests. "The building blueprints and detailed designs would be ideal, if there's a way to get those. Plus a list of tenants and the firms they use as outsourced service providers, cleaners, caterers, your friends the security guards," she winks at Theo, "receptionists and so on."

"I'll see what I can do."

"I may be able to take care of that to save you begging for even more favours," Bruce offers. "I can try the city archives and the public disclosure records. Even if it isn’t public-access info, I may find a way to extract it. If I don't manage to, then we have your contact as the fallback option."

"It's a deal. So I go to lunch, you go to the archives-"

"And I'll take a walk in this," she gestures to the discarded abaya, "and see what this Fort Knox place is like. I'll probably only get as far as the lobby, but it's worth a look before I have to go there tomorrow, whether or not we get the blueprints. I guess I'll grab a takeaway lunch at the mall. What time do you think you can be back here?"

"About two o'clock," Theo answers. “Our appointment is for noon, should be done by one thirty.”

"That works for you?" she asks Bruce.

"Should do. By then I should either have the stuff or know how to get it, or failing that I should assume that it's too much trouble."

She pulls on the black cloak and lowers the veil. "See you guys at two, then."

xxx

She is the first to show up back at the suite, but by the time she has shed her disguise she hears the lock clicking. Bruce gets in looking very pleased with life, and she assumes that his foray into the city records has been successful.

“Got what we need?”

“Yep. Piece of cake.” He grins. “And there’s something else I need your help with.”

“Not now," she chides. They don’t want to put on a display for Theo to walk into.
“I didn’t mean what you thought I meant.” The grin is still there, though. He walks up to her and pulls out his phone to show her a message onscreen. “Don’t worry, I swapped out the SIM card for a blank local one after I’d saved the text to memory.”

She scrolls through the missive, not knowing whether to scowl or laugh. *Ciao Rocco, this is Kitty :) I SO totally enjoyed yesterday’s flight and our sweet little dinner!!! I wonder if you’d like to have dinner again tonight, this time it’s on me :) We can go to Top of the M, the view is AWESOME!!!!! Is 9 pm OK for you? K xxx*

Now that’s what you’d call taking the bull by the horns. “What’s Top of the M?”

“Restaurant at the Meritus Mandarin, a couple of miles west of here. Fancy place.”

*Of course* it will be a fancy place. She is probably expecting him to be the gentleman and pick up the tab anyway, despite promising to do it herself.

“Sorry *tesoro*, threesomes aren’t really my thing.” Unless I discover that you have a clone and I can get both of you in bed.

He laughs. “What I meant by your help was drafting the reply. Feel free to give her a send-off of your choice, you can take out the phone and put the card back in and send it yourself.”

She is certainly tempted. The options range from the terse and chilly to the subtly sarcastic, and she could have a lot of fun with the drafting alone. But now that he has explicitly thrown in the towel, she does not feel the pressing need to rein him in. “You sure you don’t want to go?” she teases, and almost means it. “The poor girl will be so, like, totally devastated,” she adds, mimicking Kitty’s voice.

“She probably will be,” he admits. “But the dinner last night, and what went before it, served a purpose. Another dinner won’t really have much of a point.”

“The purpose being...?” The sort of purpose she suspected last night could be admirably served by a repeat encounter.

“Distracting her,” Bruce explains, and she looks up sharply at the simple answer.

“From what?”

“From *whom*,” he corrects. “Either I got it massively wrong, or she was looking for you so she could follow you in Singapore.”

She continues staring at him, unsure whether he is being mega-paranoid or really creative with his excuses. Somehow the latter possibility seems less likely by the second.

“What made you think that?” she finally manages.

“You judge for yourself,” he says with a micro-shrug. “I went to the business lounge, got in early as I took the train, and had an hour to kill before boarding. And the first thing I heard was her talking right outside the lounge, she must have gone out so she wouldn’t be overheard. Ironic. What I heard was, *I’m telling you she wasn’t on that plane, you can check yourself if you can get into the records, what do you want me to do now?* My first thought was that she could have been talking about you to this Brian guy who’d probably told her to follow you off that flight, and she’d lost you because you were flying as the Saudi wife. In any case I wanted to find out more about her for obvious reasons, so I walked away before she’d seen my face and pretended to be checking my phone, and then tailed her when I saw her leaving the lounge entrance. Sure enough, she went to the Thai counter and...
asked to issue the open standby ticket that she hadn’t used for the earlier flight, to take the next one, the same 7:40 I was on and, as it happens, you were on as well. I didn't think you'd be on it, but didn't want her to catch sight of you just in case you were on it and had the veil off. Then I saw her going back toward the gates and did the only thing I could do to get her attention. I bought a cup of coffee and spilled it over her back, and acted the clumsy idiot who was instantly lovestruck, or at least lust-struck. A clumsy rich idiot, mind you, because I then dragged her into an Armani store and insisted that I buy her a new top to replace the T-shirt she had. I had my ticket in the De Stefano name and used the card in the same name so it made sense that I pretended to be my Italian alter ego. I did my best to charm her, and I guess it worked a bit too well. I kept trying to find out more about her and her whereabouts in Singapore, but she just kept flirting. I thought it would make sense to at least pick up her fingerprints, hence the dinner. I was wearing the Rocco print set I’d stuck on for my diamond shopping just in case, so I didn’t have much to worry about, but try as I did, I couldn’t steal a single piece of cutlery without her noticing.”

Selina cannot manage a single word at this point, too busy burying her face in her hands to conceal what must be a rampant blush and wishing the ground would swallow her up. Now it all makes sense: the Rocco persona, lying to Kitty about not having a hotel booking, the shameless flirting, the dinner invitation... and she is a first-rate dumbass for the scene she pulled afterwards.

“Sorry,” she finally mutters.

He sounds amused, of all things. “I tried to tell you last night but you wouldn’t let me. Not that I’m complaining.”

“That was stupid of me.”

“Happens to the best of us,” he says cheerily. "I can't throw stones where jealousy is concerned."

She manages a lopsided smile. “Modesty has always been your strong suit.”

Luckily for her, the scene is interrupted at this point by Theo’s arrival. Unluckily for her, he immediately picks up on the awkwardness.

“What’s the matter?” He looks perplexed.

She shakes her head. “Don’t ask. I've done something really dumb.”

“You couldn’t possibly top my monumental stupidity last night.”

“I don’t know, I’m a really close contender. See, he was flirting with this girl on the flight.”

“Mr Wainwright likes living dangerously,” Theo deadpans.

“Of course I got mad.”

“Makes sense, if you ask me.”

“Who turned out to be a possible spy tailing me.”

Theo does not miss a beat. “So, Mr Wainwright, if you were flirting with her, where are her fingerprints?”

“I was just telling Selina I tried to pick them up but I don’t have her legendary skill at... covert appropriation.” At least it makes her smile again.
“Did you at least take a picture of her?”

Bruce shakes his head.

“And this is the man who makes fun of me for a minor recon oversight…”

“The Singapore Police Force begs to differ. Vandalising a CCTV camera here isn’t exactly minor, Mr Gumslinger.”

Even Theo smirks at that. “You’re forgetting that the vandalism charge didn’t stick,” he reminds his tormentor.

“The fact remains, you did it. You have an EMP device right here and you didn’t think of bringing it along to disable CCTV cameras? You could have been done in five seconds before they even figured out it wasn’t a power outage.”

"Have you seen its size?" Theo counters. "It's portable, sure, but the thing still weighs something like five kilo. And you're suggesting I should have brought it along just in case when all I wanted was to stick a couple of minicams on the wall."

"You've seen what happens otherwise. Anyway, it would have been suspicious if she noticed me taking her picture last night."

“You can have a second chance tonight,” Selina reminds him.

For a second, Bruce looks at her with undisguised suspicion. “You sure you want me to do it?”

“I’m sure,” she insists. “Listen, I was stupid last night but you’re right, we’d better find out more about this Kitty. If you don’t write to her to accept the date, I will.” Who would have thought twelve hours ago that she’d be saying this.

“And to make up for my earlier lapse,” Theo adds, “I can go there for dinner and swipe her cutlery or something, and take a photo of her. Maybe I can pretend I’m a waiter…”

“Actually, you look more like a maître d’,” Selina teases. “But short of me going there, I guess you going as a diner is the best option. The easiest trick would be to distract her and make her look away while Bruce swaps the water glasses, then he can get up from the table carrying it, to make a call or something, and give it to you where she can't see you.”

“Sounds good. And in the meantime I can ask my dear ex-employers for one more favour and try to tag her in the arrival records. What time did you land?”

“Eleven PM.”

“And what time, roughly, did you pass through immigration?”

“About twenty minutes later. We were in a cab by eleven thirty.”

“OK, I’ll ask them to pull up a list of all female arrivals between 11:15 and 11:30 and aged between – how old is she?”

“Early twenties, looks like,” Selina supplies.

“OK, let’s say between 18 and 30, just to be sure, plus passport details, photos and registered addresses in Singapore if available, and see what they come with.”
“Great. Did you have any luck with Brian's fingerprints?” she reminds him.

Theo makes a face. “Zero. Doesn’t mean he’s clean, just means he hasn’t been caught yet, but it’s no help either way. And this Kettering fellow is still silent. Did you guys say they gave you a contact in the region? Maybe we could try asking him?”

It is a tempting idea, but on the downside, it might come too close for comfort to conveying desperation – and Bruce seems to share the sentiment.

“We’ve been given the name of this Newell guy who has consultancy offices in Asia, including here, as a front, but I think we’d better wait until tomorrow. It’s still about-“ he checks his watch, “midnight in DC. It's true that he's had two days to look into it, but it's been only one working day that passed here. Even if he's been able to ID this guy, it won’t be much use to us unless there is practical information like where he’s staying or what his contact details are, and Kettering probably needs a series of data points to triangulate his movements before he can send us anything useful. Mind you, he'll also want to avoid sending a series of messages and will just put everything into one data dump.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” she mutters. “Because otherwise we risk having him slip through our fingers.” They agreed back in Bangkok that their best chance of recovering the database was not in buying it but in knowing where to find it in order to steal or at least destroy it. As a result they figured out what seemed like a mid-range bid for her to declare tomorrow, sure to be outdone by other bidders. They stand little chance of benefiting from placing a high bid anyway, both because they do not really have the money and because it could seem suspicious if a mid-size independent regional arms dealer came up with a huge amount, with or without a client’s help. But it also means that once the bids have been placed tomorrow, the window of opportunity will be closing fast.

“If there’s no news tomorrow, we’ll try Newell in the afternoon,” Bruce promises.

“OK. Now you said you’ve got the stuff we need. Let’s take a look at it before my brain goes to sleep.” She is not, strictly speaking, feeling tired, but with three hours’ sleep between last night and now, she knows it to be a matter of time.

He hands a memory stick to Theo, who plugs it into the laptop sitting on the sideboard before bringing it over, and opens the blueprint file. “It would have been better to make a paper copy but I didn't want to be seen walking around here with a stack of paper,” Bruce explains.

"I'll do," she assures him as they take places on the couch and adjoining armchair and peer at the files. If needed, they can always print these out.

The layout plans confirm what she saw on her recon walk; the tower starts as a square cross-section with a rectangular internal corridor that continues for 30 floors before the two opposite corners are lopped off to produce a sort of flattened hexagon for the top ten floors, at which point the corridor becomes a single straight line down the centre. It stands a hundred yards away from Two Suntec mirroring it, its own flattened-hexagon top at a 45-degree angle, with the similarly-designed Three and Four Suntec further to the east and apparently under renovation. The four buildings together form a semicircle and are linked by passages connecting parts of the shopping mall occupying the first five floors separated from the tower by CCTV-equipped closing doors, with a singularly ugly tubular structure called the Fountain of Wealth, looking more like a bare-bones tealight holder than a fountain of anything, half-heartedly spewing water in the circular open space in the middle of the complex.

Brian's message said the meeting would be on the penultimate 39th floor, which puts it firmly into single-corridor territory, meaning that once she is up there she will have no corners to hide behind for
eavesdropping and the like. On the plus side, there are fire escape stairs next to the lift and restrooms at either end of the corridor - she may pop in there before the meeting without raising suspicions and leave a retransmitter there, safe so long as she can conceal it inside a disposable carton and throw it in the trash.

A look at the building maintenance company records that Bruce has managed to hack into shows the building to be open six days a week, 7:30 am to 9 pm Monday through Friday and until 3 pm Saturdays, and guarded 24 hours a day, as Theo has had a chance to discover. The list of outsourced service providers is relatively short: receptionists, an office cleaning company, window washers, security guards, and gardeners - with the tower adjacent to the shopping mall, there must be no need for caterers as office workers surely go to the mall food court for lunch. With the unfortunate exception of the guards, these services are only available Monday through Friday, which rules out the easiest ways Bruce could sneak in or smuggle in gadgetry on Saturday after her meeting, but it can't be helped. Maybe he can pose as a pizza delivery boy at lunchtime for someone pulling a weekend office shift.

The list of tenants looks like a garden-variety collection of law firms, accountants, and traders; the 39th floor is allegedly occupied by a Dubai-based engineering consultancy and a PR firm with three large rooms each, and half a dozen Deloitte & Touche partners' offices with a common reception and a boardroom - their rank and file toil away on the floors below. Accountants may not be averse to shady practices, but imagining Brian to be a Deloitte partner selling top secret databases on the side is something of a stretch. They check out the consultancy and the PR firm; the PR firm looks alive and kicking with a string of recent press clippings, but the consultancy no longer lists a Singapore office on their site; they probably signed a long-term lease and are, in all likelihood, now subleasing to shorter-term tenants, Brian presumably being the current one.

For now, she has seen what she needed; the rest will have to wait until she has been to the meeting. "OK, I guess we're done for now. Do you guys know someplace nice I can go for a walk where I'd be unlikely to attract attention? I might as well see a thing or two while there's a bit of time." There isn't a lot she can do otherwise, and she'd rather avoid a daytime nap for fear of staying awake at night; it will be better to go to bed early.

"You could go to the bird park," Bruce suggests. "Can't remember the name but it's a nice place. They have a few acres covered in this huge net so the birds fly free. It's away from the centre so there's no risk of bumping into Kitty and Co in the street, and you can take a cab there."

A check on Theo's laptop tells her that the place is named Jurong and is open until six. It is a quarter to three; if she gets out now she'll have about two and a half hours there, a good way to spend the afternoon. "OK, I'm out of here, then." She picks up the abaya again. "Wait... when are you going to give me the diamonds for tomorrow morning?" Considering that her meeting is at eight AM, Bruce has the dinner date in the evening, and they'd better try to stay apart at night, now may be the only chance.

"I can take them to your room while you're at the park," he offers.

Makes sense; he can easily do it with the lockpick. "OK. The safe code is the last six digits of the Wainwright switchboard number." She took the habit of using it as a code combination, also because it gave her a chance to hint to associates what it was in the presence of strangers without giving it away; her Tessuti Varese emergency phone call experience showed her the value of that.

"You think I know it by heart?" Bruce quips.

"You can look up that Wanted email you sent, you put your number in there," she teases. "Swap out the last two digits for 63 and you've got it."
"We're all set, then," Theo concludes. "You write to this Kitty as soon as you're out of here and accept the invitation. I wait until the Interpol calls me to go pick up my passport and the bail money, they said they'd get it from the police and give it to me sometime this afternoon. Then I go to the Top of the M at eight thirty, you and Kitty show up at nine or thereabouts, I try to create a distraction while you swap the water glasses, I call you and you take the glass with you when you get up to talk away from the table, I pick it up and take it to the Interpol." He turns to Selina. "Then we meet here tomorrow morning after you've been to Suntec. And please, the two of you, try not to follow my example and get arrested in the meantime."

TBC

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is a reference to Singapore's popular nickname due to its draconian laws. You can check out http://singapore-the-fine-city.blogspot.it/ or http://www.businessinsider.com/absurd-laws-of-singapore-2012-6#ixzz2dSJR6Xzn for a quick recap - or just google "Singapore Fine City". I've looked at other articles, criminal laws, and police procedures, and can promise that all the stuff mentioned above is true to fact according to my sources.

I realised I set myself up for a minor continuity error in the last chapter when I said Bruce and Theo met in the lobby when Theo was getting out for dinner. Considering that Bruce had landed at 11 pm and had just had dinner with Kitty, no matter how quick, the time was going to be about half past midnight, leaving just enough time for Bruce to borrow the lockpick, drop by at his own room, and sneak into Selina's room before she got back from the gym at about 1 am. Either way, it would be kind of late to be going *out* for dinner and Theo should have been coming back from dinner instead. I've tweaked that bit in the previous chapter now, but had to say it here for readers who follow in real time.

The address Theo gave Bruce at the end of the previous chapter, 391 New Bridge Road, is the Singapore police HQ. Should you want to get to know them better, you can look up http://www.spf.gov.sg/abtspf/anf.htm

The Swissotel is found here: http://www.swissotel.com/hotels/singapore-stamford/ There is a link to the room and suite types I mention here - Stamford Crest, the Grand Room, and executive suites. The final picspam I made last year for this story, at http://01cheers.livejournal.com/7888.html, has a panorama photo of both the Swissotel and the nearby Raffles, which will come into play a couple of chapters later.

The Faraday cage to protect phones and the like is real and can be bought: http://www.popsci.com/gadgets/article/2013-08/how-protect-yourself-your-phone

Amazingly, Batman bin Suparman is a 100% true story and was a nice bijou gift to my plot. If you want to see more details and a photo of his ID, take a look at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2502491/Batman-bin-Suparman-thief-jailed-stealing-bank-card-brother.html
My description of Suntec is the best representation of what I saw of it online and on Google Earth; I have been to Singapore but have no firsthand recollection of it. The general layout is found at http://www.sunteccity.com.sg/store_directory.php; a photo, including the ugly Fountain of wealth, is here: http://www.sunteccity.com.sg/images/suntec-mall.jpg

There are numerous articles showing how cell phone tracking using GPS is widely used by the NSA et al. The most recent is this one: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/04/nsa-storing-cell-phone-records-daily-snowden

And the Jurong bird park is really a great place to visit: http://www.birdpark.com.sg
The bird park was a nice idea; she makes a mental note to thank Bruce. Maybe they both can go back there when – if – they are done with the mission. Back in her room, she orders dinner and sets the alarm for 6 AM the following morning, thinking she will go to bed as soon as she has eaten, and hoping she will not wake up in the middle of the night as a result.

It will take about twenty minutes to half an hour for the restaurant to have her order ready, they told her, which gives her time for a quick shower followed by a more intriguing proposition. Glancing at the time again – ten minutes to the early estimate – she steps over to the safe to check out the diamonds Bruce bought. She was telling the truth when she said to Theo that she was no longer a diamond fiend; but professional curiosity still gives her itchy fingers.

The first thing she sees inside the safe is a folded piece of paper revealing a note in familiar handwriting. The treasure-hunt-clue style is still very much in evidence, she thinks with a wry smile. 80 Mandai Lake Rd, your namesake’s fence, 11 pm, bring your ears. Must be a pawnshop or similar, judging by the fence mention, a place receiving stolen goods. Maybe Bruce has changed his mind and thinks it will be best if she brings the surety in cash, after all, and a criminal fence is the fastest and easiest way of doing a deal. Seems a risky strategy to employ in Singapore, but after the Kitty screw-up, she does not feel inclined to question his judgement too closely in the immediate future. Maybe his sellers in Bangkok gave him the reference. What the hell does he mean by namesake, though? She has had at least five sets of names he has been aware of, apart from dozens she used before that he has presumably not seen or heard. Selina, Celine, Chiara, Shivagowri, Sahar; Kyle, Caille, Damiani, Sivaparan, Al-Jaber… which one does he mean? Oh well, once she gets there she will look at the nearby business signs and see which one ticks a familiar-name box. And why does she need infrared goggles? Surely if he meant the earring bugs, he would have written wear your earrings instead of bring your ears…

Further inside the safe, wedged between the box containing her bugged jewellery and the goggles, sitting on top of a stack of appraisal certificates, is what looks like a large zip-up pocketbook. She pulls it out and opens the zipper – and her eyes widen at the flash of intense blue followed by a soft thud against the carpeted floor. A memory flits through her mind, the Wainwright card in her hand and the pearls dropping to the floor in Hong Kong, sixteen months ago. She leaves the folder inside the safe and stoops to pick up the escaped item, an emerald-cut Ceylon sapphire the colour of twilight sky barely small enough not to qualify as humongous, set in a platinum ring. So that is what the fence must be for; the diamonds Bruce was able to buy must be worth less than the required half a million, and the ring must be making up the difference. Except that at two-thirds by half-inch and about a third of an inch deep, it surely weighs at least 20 carats, and at this near-flawless quality and striking cornflower blue colour, it must be worth about half a million dollars in its own right.

What seemed to be a plausible scenario for an instant is further undermined by a look at the diamonds inside the folder. There are thirty credit card-sized pieces of laminated cardboard bearing the IGI logo arranged in transparent vinyl pockets on several pages, a single round brilliant-cut diamond sitting in a plastic blister in the middle of each one like a weird sparkling pill, and Bruce either knows enough about diamonds to be a savvy buyer or else had excellent advice from the dealers. She does not even need to check the labels on the cards to know that they are exactly the
same one-carat weight, and even in this light and without a magnifying glass, she can tell that they are pure white, a perfect D/E colour, and while probably not flawless, they certainly look like the next best thing, a VVS1 or VVS2 at the limit. Allowing for this slight variation in inclusion magnitude, they must be priced at about fifteen to twenty thousand each. She goes back to the safe and quickly flips through the stack of folded appraisal reports to see her guess confirmed price-wise; she does not have time for an exact calculation, but could bet that if she did, she would arrive at exactly half a million. So the ring was just a way to spend the remainder. Shame if they end up selling it; her interest in jewellery has cooled, but she would be willing to make an exception for something as simple and yet stunning as this. Then again, he said *bring your ears*, not bring anything that could denote the ring.

She replaces the jewels and closes the safe in time for the waiter to show up, but as soon as he is gone, she picks up her tablet to take a look at Mandai Lake Road and try to figure out what place she is going to. The mystery is resolved as soon as she types up the address, even before the map comes up, and has her laughing: the address is that of the Singapore Zoo, which, apparently, hosts a “night safari” every evening until midnight to let visitors take a peek at nocturnal animals. The fence is literal, then – and she realises in a flash that the *namesake* in the note refers to her Sri Lankan alter ego’s nickname; *white tigress*. Interesting. Does not quite seem like a business appointment. She resets the alarm and hopes that staying awake through most of last night will let her fall asleep fast enough to catch a couple of hours’ rest before getting out.

xxx

*It definitely* is not a business appointment. It is, in fact, one hell of a romantic setting. Not something you would normally expect from a zoo, but the Singapore Zoo is apparently famous for its landscaping and for housing its animals in non-restrictive enclosures similar to their natural environments, with just the barriers necessary to make sure they do not run off and to guarantee visitor safety. The part that is open at night is now punctuated by the dim glimmer of soft lighting, just enough to save people from tripping on the paths and to make the animals visible. She is glad she allowed herself an extra half hour before the stated time; her initial reason was to find the right fence, but it has also given her a chance to wander around. The goggles were a nice idea; it is too dark for other visitors to notice that she is wearing them under the black niqab, and they let her see much more of what is going on than the other visitors can.

She has been at the white tiger enclosure for about five minutes when Bruce arrives, or rather when she becomes aware of him having snuck up next to her.

“Hi,” he says softly in her ear, his hand brushing against her arm. “Been here long?”

“Just got here. Nice place.”

“Glad you like it.” She can tell he is smiling even without looking at him.

“I thought you’d be at dinner still.”

“Felt like some fresh air.” She chuckles at the old quip. “Theo had the smart idea of calling me in Italian, and as soon as I got back after giving him the glass I told Kitty it had been my boss who had an urgent task for me.”

“So it went well?”

“Yeah. Got her prints and neither of us got caught. Told her I was going to be busy for a couple of days, hopefully she’ll hold back from propositioning me again in the meantime.”
“Did she proposition you now?” Admittedly, her question is more playful than suspicious.

He chuckles. “Tried to. I played along until I got the call, but you should have seen my concerned face after that, when I took off like my pants were on fire.”

“I can imagine.” Bruce has mellowed out in the past year, but he is still good at concerned faces.

“I take it you’ve seen the diamonds,” he prompts next.

“Yep. Good choice, best value you could get for that carat weight and perfect as currency. What about the ring? You planning to sell it?” She hopes her regret is not too obvious.

“No, the ring’s for you.” She turns sharply to look at him. “If you like it.”

“I do,” she admits. “I don’t really need any jewellery, I have the other ring and the pearls and that’s more than enough to wear when I want to dress up, but that one’s a gorgeous sapphire.”

He looks pleased. “I hoped you’d like it. I got it in Bangkok same time as the diamonds. Figured I’ve never really given you a wedding ring.”

“So the world’s most expensive engagement ring by a factor of ten presumably isn’t enough,” she teases.

“Of course not,” he teases back. “It would go well with that blue dress you’ve got. I thought I’d give it to you… later… but there’s no point putting it off. You know there’s also a jewellery show in Singapore starting this weekend?”

“The JewelFest? I know.” She has never been, but has certainly heard of it. In fact, she remembers stealing a few pieces from a rich asshole who had just bought them at one of the previous events three years ago.

“We can go there next week and see if there’s something else you’d like.”

“We can go there,” she agrees. “But I told you, I’ve got all I need, between the pearls and the other ring and now this one.”

He does not sound convinced. “We’ll see about that. Now, as soon as you’ve seen enough of this gorgeous creature, I suggest we get away from the night safari area and take a walk on the dark side.” This time, with her veiled face half turned to him, she does see him smiling.

“You sure you won’t get lost there, or do you want me to hold your hand?” It would seem strange for a veiled Arab woman to be leading a guy by the hand, but it is a. dark and b. nobody’s business.

“Don’t worry.” He pulls a pair of what looks like thick sunglasses from his shirt pocket. “I’ve got my own gear.”

xxx

It is a thrill, for sure. Her teenage years were spent living on the streets, stealing what she could and evading capture by cops and criminals alike, but if she could re-imagine it without the risk and hardship, this is what her idea of a teenage adventure would be like, sneaking away with a sexy boyfriend for a bit of illicit fun in the middle of the night.

They manage to make it unchallenged past the simple barriers cordoning off the night visit area, into the vast darkness filled with soft noises. Soon they are surrounded by what must look like complete
darkness to anyone without night vision gear; she flips back the veil and lifts up her goggles for a second and almost stumbles. Bruce instantly catches her, his hands resting on her waist. She gets hold of his hand and lowers the goggles again, just long enough to step over to the nearest support they can lean against, an information panel looking like a sloping desk. She wants to turn and face him but he won’t let her, standing right behind her and slowly running his hands up and down her sides.

“This feels nice.” Sure it does; as soon as she figured she was likely going on a date, she decided that the only thing she was going to wear under the abaya was a satin slip, and the echo of coarser fabric sliding against the smooth silk under his touch is a luxurious caress. But between the veil and the abaya, she is fast becoming aware of being overdressed for the occasion; after a minute or so of this, she wants to feel his hands on bare skin – and she could kill for a kiss. She stays his hands just long enough to pull off the disguise, leaving her wearing the slip and nothing else. “I hope it doesn’t get us into jail.”

“Won’t,” he says confidently. “Their definition of pornography is being seen naked and performing lewd acts. We, on the other hand, are not seen,” he mutters into her ear in between kissing her neck, “and we aren’t having sex just yet.” She can agree with the former argument, but the latter one is unlikely to hold for more than a few minutes.

“This set-up is turning me into a secret lover to my wife,” he goes on. “Not complaining, obviously.”

She tilts her head back enough to let him kiss her on the mouth. “You have other duties, amore,” she whispers against his lips, “now that you’re the designated honeytrap.”

He chuckles, his breath soft against her cheek. “Better me than you, or else I’d have gone crazy for sure. The fact that I try to keep jealousy in check doesn’t mean I don’t feel it. But I’m doing my best to adapt to your ways, be it your right to flirt with guys or us having sex in public places.”

“You’re doing great.” She half twists to face him for a proper, longer kiss, as she pulls up his shirt and runs her hands up and down his back underneath it. Between his words and the delicious sensation, it feels so good as to make her feel guilty again for yesterday’s fit of fury.

“I’m sorry.” She presses her face into the crook of his neck.

He takes her face in both hands and holds it a fraction of an inch away from his. “What for?”

“Being a stupid bitch last night. Yelling at you. Swatting you with the towel. Twice.”

His response is a soft laugh. “I put it down to foreplay.” He turns her around again so he stands against her back, his hands free to roam over her satin-clad body, though it does not take him long to lift the slip out of the way. He is almost leisurely, except that his hands are trembling as he strokes her.

“I was so – so pissed off,” she manages in a faltering voice. She cannot muster the courage to say hurt, but suspects he will figure it out, – “that I bought a ticket to Rio on my way to the hotel. Figured I’d go there to keep away from you and learn hang-gliding.” There is no way she is mentioning the Armando part.

His reaction is perfectly calm and purely practical. “For what date?”

“Got the full-price open-date, I put September 1st and figured I’d change it when I knew my plans.”

“Can I suggest something?”
She tilts her head and kisses him lightly for a reply.

“Keep the date, change whatever else needs to be changed, and I’ll join you there and teach you myself. If you don’t mind.”

She turns around, her fingers working to undo his shirt buttons, then pulls off the shirt and kisses him harder. “Do I look like I mind?”

“Did you really think I’d wait until I got married to start fucking around on you?” he asks, all of a sudden.

Her reasoning ability is dwindling by the instant, but she has enough left to point out a factual inaccuracy. “Well, technically speaking, start is inaccurate considering your past life.”

He laughs. “OK, resume; it doesn’t change the substance. I’d never do something as stupid as bed another woman to risk offending you.”

“I know. Don’t remind me.”

“I will remind you,” he insists, and just as she is about to cringe at the prospect, he goes on. “I won’t remind you of Kitty, but I will remind you how much I love you, as often as I can, so you’re never in doubt. You know, what I said the other day about Rachel, how I could never have her and it kept me wanting to fight to get her? Well, even being married to you, I think I have to fight for your affections every day.”

He has her affections now and forever, but she is too busy kissing him to say it.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

The Singapore Zoo night safari is real and fun, even though I did not have a hot boyfriend to tag along when I saw it :) The zoo’s main site is at [http www] zoo.com.sg and the night safari link is at http://www.nightsafari.com.sg/ - it markets itself as a separate exhibit (to justify separate tickets, I suspect :) but is on the same, or at least adjoining, grounds. The white tiger exhibit is also real, though I am not 100% sure that it is, in fact, on the night safari itinerary: http://www.zoo.com.sg/exhibits-zones/white-tiger.html#ad-image-0

Ceylon blue sapphires are one of the two most prized blue sapphire varieties, the other one being Kashmir blue. Both are an intense cornflower colour; blue sapphire value is, if you wish, a bell curve with these two kinds at the top and lighter and darker varieties on the respective curve slopes (e.g. Thai Kanchanaburi and especially Australian, both of which tend to be very dark blue, are far less valuable. It is a similar thing for rubies, where the most prized deep red is called pigeon blood. But I digress…) The following link shows what I was going for, more or less, though I do not mention diamond shoulders in my version: http://www.jewelsdujour.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/20-
Diamonds are valued by four criteria:

(1) carat weight;

(2) colour (for white diamonds, that is, the whiter the better, normally graded from D or D/E down to Z for obviously yellow ones; fancy coloured ones such as bright yellow or orange or blue have less uniform pricing);

(3) clarity, as in extent of inclusions, from flawless (FL) to “internally flawless” (IF) to “very very small inclusions” (VVS1/VVS2) to “very small inclusions” (VS1/VS2) to “small inclusions” (SI1/SI2/SI3) to “inclusions” plainly visible to the naked eye (I1/I2); and

(4) cut (for a reason I fail to understand, the most common round brilliant-cut costs more per carat than, say, emerald-cut or princess-cut or pear, all of which look nicer).

As a result, there are matrix tables for white (non-fancy) round brilliant-cut diamonds depending on weight, colour, and clarity, with pretty standardised pricing. I could not find the table I originally used, but here is a similar example with virtually the same prices: http://www.jewelry1.com/diamond/prices.htm

IGI is one of the global agencies certifying diamonds, the other reputable ones being GIA and AGS (both US) and HRD (Belgium). My description of the modern diamond blister packaging is a best-efforts representation of this: http://www.serendipitydiamonds.co.uk/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/IGI-diamond-certificates.jpg.

The Singapore Jewelfest is a real annual event. I cheated, however, in moving it to, presumably, August; in reality it is held in October: http://www.singaporejewelfest.com
looking for sidekicks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“You’ve seen it, boys. The good, the bad, and the ugly.”

Her companions’ glum nods confirm that they share her thoughts. The ugly predominates.

It is a quarter past nine, and she has just returned from her meeting at Suntec to their Swissotel suite HQ and is shedding her silks and baubles and unravelling the complicated hairdo until she is down to a crop top and long fitted underskirt and wearing her usual ponytail.

She showed up early on the off-chance that the reception guards would let her through so she could wait for Brian at, or rather outside, his office — *wait* meaning, of course, doing a maximum of reconnaissance in the time available and giving the boys back at the Swissotel a chance to take a good look at the surroundings with the help of the minicam embedded in her necklace. Bruce was going to hack into the building CCTV network, which includes cameras in the lobby, the elevators, and some floors, wait for her to walk into the 43rd floor restroom, and freeze the feed from any cameras on that floor until Brian got into the building, at which point she would be seen re-emerging. This would give her free run of the corridor in between, while Bruce and Theo browsed the other CCTV feeds for anything useful, though they suspected that the most useful cameras, the ones inside Brian’s office, were not connected to the network, and her minicam would be their only visual source from there. Her early arrival turned out to be pointless; the guards were quiet, polite, and unyielding. But the greater disappointments were still to come.

Regardless of the outcome of her meeting, they hoped to get another look around in Brian’s office later in the day. There is no chance the guards would let her back in after hours under her current visitor identity, and it is too dangerous for her to risk blowing her cover by returning in a different persona; so the plan was to stage a fictitious malfunction in one of the elevator engines housed on the roof above the top floor, easily faked by shutting it down via Bruce’s systems hack, as soon as Brian left, and send in Bruce — Theo has ruled himself out due to his foray into vandalism — as a repairman with a fake ID from the service company they found in the building records, carrying a steel toolbox with the EMP generator, an array of picklocks, and assorted minicams and bugs. Once upstairs and on his own — if any of the guards went up with him he hoped to dispatch them by saying it would take a while after surveying the “damage” — Bruce would shut off power to all elevators to give himself an extra modicum of privacy and take advantage of frozen camera feeds to sneak one floor down and break into Brian’s office. He is not as flawlessly accomplished at unlawful entry as she is, but given enough time he could do it. Before stepping inside, he would set off the EMP to cover his tracks, just powerful enough to wipe the data on any autonomous surveillance devices Brian may have installed. The resulting local power outage might look suspicious but could be blamed on the earlier “malfunction” for the guards’ benefit, and this way Bruce would have at least five minutes to look for anything worth stealing or copying, plant his own spy toys around the office, lock the door, and sprint back up to the engine room before the guards could walk up the emergency stairs to investigate the new accident.

By the time the meeting started, she knew that the plan would never work. Brian trotted into the lobby at five to eight, looking like he had arrived for a test he was not ready for, and once they were up on the 43rd floor, her heart sank. Not only did the door to Brian’s office have a building
surveillance cam trained on it, but stuck just above the door was a big digital clock. So much for the frozen feed trick. And even if the guards do not immediately notice the unchanging figures, with the timing of the “repairs” likely being pushed into late afternoon, the difference in the ambient light between the 43rd floor feed and the other floors at a time near the fast-forward tropical dusk will probably make them notice that something is off. Had Bruce hacked into the building systems yesterday, he would have seen the clock and could have recorded footage from yesterday afternoon so they could wait for the time to coincide, but between studying the blueprints, sneaking the diamonds into her room, getting ready for dinner with Kitty, and planning their night date, she suspects he figured it could wait until today – or else he would have mentioned it last night. Waiting until tomorrow won’t work either: the building is completely shut down on Sundays and anyone, even a repairman, trying to get in will be subject to extra vetting and scrutiny. Bruce could, of course, deploy the EMP and take out the local circuits, clock and all, before breaking in, but that is sure to bring the guards upstairs way sooner than he can break into the office. The locks she saw Brian open are not exactly Fort Knox, but are nonetheless a good quarter of an hour’s work for her if she wanted to leave no trace of a break-in, and probably half again as long, if not twice as long, for Bruce.

She was in for more bad news during the meeting: there was no way to be sure that the precious database was even there. Brian never showed it to her, not even after he had examined and taken her diamond surety in the narrow meeting room adjoining his own inside the office suite. All he had to show was a series of screenshots accompanied by his sketchy explanations – for what it was worth, it did look like the real thing she had seen a few days ago in Gotham – and by promises that he would let her test the working database before she handed over, or transferred, the final payment if she were to be the highest bidder… which, with a top bid of thirty million they had decided she could realistically offer, was far from guaranteed. Brian said he would let her know the outcome by noon Monday, when he would either tell her when and where to pick up the surety if her bid did not win, minus his 50K “processing fee” – which he would presumably use toward buying himself a lifetime supply of industrial-strength tranquilisers to treat his chronic jitteriness – or tell her the meeting place and payment terms for the final transaction.

Now, her de-alter-egoing finished, she plops onto the supple sofa and starts picking absently at the room service breakfast Theo has ordered for her, keeping half an eye on Bruce scowling at the tiled CCTV feeds on the laptop screen.

“I should have hacked it yesterday. He must’ve stuck the fucking clock there on purpose.”

Bingo. She was just thinking the same thing.

Still, she cannot begrudge Bruce this lapse, especially considering last night’s date.

“Don’t kick yourself. Let’s see if we can think of a Plan B.”

“I guess I could get in from the outside after dark… shoot a harpoon line from Two Suntec next door and slide over – “

“You’ll still need a legit pretext to get into that one. Besides, they’re the same height,” Theo reminds him. “You won’t slide twenty feet before you get stuck.”

“I could try to pull myself over along the cable – “

“It’ll take an hour to do it with your bare hands. Too much risk of the hook getting undone in the meantime.”

“If I had the ones I used in Gotham – “
“You don’t. Although…”

“What?”

Instead of answering, Theo puts up a hand as the laptop speaker comes to life.

Selina’s meeting was not a total waste of time and diamonds, after all. True, her most significant accomplishment happened after she left, or rather pretended to leave: Brian stayed in his office, presumably unwilling to lock and unlock it again, giving her a chance to immediately ride back up to the 42nd floor, take the stairs up the remaining floor to avoid being caught by the camera, and sneak into the empty Deloitte partners’ reception at the far end of the hall. These people took a pretty relaxed attitude to security, with only a pair of infrared sensors in evidence; if the guards saw a signal from these and got suspicious, she’d be out long before anyone came up to check. As it was, the minute or so Selina spent at the reception desk was enough to write down the receptionist’s cell phone number from a directory printout and to pick open and rummage through the desk cabinet and steal the most valuable thing there, a spare building access card.

But more to the point, her other achievements included dropping a retransmitter into the garbage bin in the ladies’ room she popped into just before the meeting and then strategically losing an extra bugged earring under the meeting room table – if Brian found it later, he’d never recall, between her hairdo and headscarf, that she still wore a full set. Thanks to her sleight-of-hand, they can hear what is going on with subsequent visitors, in addition to getting their mug shots from the elevator cams thanks to Bruce’s hacking. They will not know the bid amounts – Brian sneakily asked her to type her bid on his laptop instead of saying it out loud, presumably in fear of eavesdroppers, and will surely ask the others to do the same – but they might pick up useful tidbits and record the proceedings, for Theo to take the data to the Interpol asking to run voice IDs and facial recognition on the bidders, and for Bruce to send them to Kettering in Langley for the same purpose. At the very least, they’ll know how many are in the running and might guess their origin already from accents and passing references. The first few minutes of the second bidder’s meeting are spent trading cautious chatter before a mention of checking with my superiors in Aleppo points them to his Syrian provenance. On the downside, the superiors part also reminds them that the bidders meeting Brian are likely to be rather low down the respective totem poles of the terrorist outfits they represent.

The real issue is that finding out who the bidders are and on whose behalf they bid will not necessarily get them closer to the prize. In theory they could try to track all bidders as they leave and keep an eye on their movements on Monday so as to ambush the winning bidder post-handover. In practice, however, there is no guarantee that the person coming to collect the database will be one of today’s attendees; in fact, it is more likely to be a more senior figure, and anyway, if the parties involved have any sense, they will send a different man if only to throw off any attempts at surveillance.

To make matters worse, Theo and Bruce have now seen that the camera Theo had put up outside the building garage may not be much help in tracking the departing bidders. The second bidder arrived in a taxi and walked in through the main entrance, asking the guards if he could use the passage leading from the lobby to the shopping mall on his way out, if the hand gestures are any indication. With multiple street exits and full of Saturday shoppers, the mall is perfect for covering one’s tracks, and it will be anyone’s guess when he might decide that he has waited enough to sneak out safely, which exit he has agreed on with his getaway driver, and what disguise he may put on in the CCTV-free mall toilets in the meantime. No doubt subsequent bidders will have thought of the same ruse. As they listen to the meeting wrapping up, Bruce is tapping away on the keyboard, trying to find a way into the mall CCTV circuit, but if his muttered swearing is any indication, he is not having much luck. Selina and Theo follow the distant conversation in gloomy silence punctuated by rapid-fire typing.
“Fucking hell.” Bruce flops back against the sofa cushions after yet another string of code produces nothing but a nasty beep, even as the bidder is making his exit toward the mall.

“It could be worse,” Theo says unconvincingly.

“Not by much,” Bruce counters. “We’ve got 48 hours before the database is sold. We won’t know who will make the final exchange, or where it will be made, and we don’t even know who will have placed the winning bid today. In principle, it could even be Selina, and then we won’t have the money ready.”

“It’s not the first time you’re dealing with crazy odds. Think about how you nabbed Falcone in Gotham. No one thought it possible.”

The unexpected mention makes Bruce sit up. But if he is pissed off at Theo for bringing up his past, he is not showing it. “That was easy,” he says after a moment’s pause. “Falcone had stupid, obvious sidekicks who helped me prove his guilt.”

“Then we do the same here, look for Mitchum’s sidekicks,” Theo shoots back. “See if there are any besides Kitty. Except that I think –“

Before Selina can interrupt and ask what the devil Theo is talking about, Bruce picks up on his drift, and they continue practically in unison.

“Mitchum himself –“

“Must be the sidekick,” Theo finishes. “Who can bring us to the real boss.”

Selina takes advantage of a second’s pause to jump in. “OK, OK, time out. What the hell did I miss and who the fuck is Mitchum?”

Theo does a pretty convincing facepalm. “Sorry, was going to tell you when Bruce started his CCTV moaning. And then,” he adds, blithely ignoring the death glare, “I figured it could wait until after the second bidder meeting. Bruce heard back from your CIA friend Mr Kettering this morning, same time as I heard back from my Interpol buddies here. We’ve got some info on the guy you just met with.”

“Brian?”

“Hugh.”

“What?”

“His real name isn’t Brian Perry, it’s Hugh Mitchum. The data from the local immigration have his photo matched with another name, Charles Burlington, but it looks like a disposable identity he used to enter the country. Kettering’s trawled the media and all sorts of records until he found a definitive face match. Doesn’t have any prior convictions, worked in finance, got fired from HSBC Investments four years ago and has been making ends meet in consulting. I’m guessing he’s in it for the money, but there is no way he’s stolen the database himself, and most likely he isn’t the one keeping it either.”

She thinks back to the fidgety guy, his furtive, insecure manner and hurried explanations. “Figures, if you ask me. But he knows a thing or two about security and secrecy.”

“Most likely, his puppetmaster does, and is good at giving instructions.”
“Good point. What else did Kettering find?”

“Not a lot, but my local contacts helped with the rest. You know the Interpol gets data dumps of hotel guest IDs from the local police, so they can run a check against the wanted lists. They store raw data for a month, and I asked them to run a search for our guy. There were no hotel bookings in his real name or the Perry name, but they found Burlington staying as a guest of the paying patron right next door at the Raffles. The Somerset Maugham suite, kind of ironic, with Maugham a part-time spy and all. And guess whose name his suite was booked in.” When Selina pulls a puzzled face, Theo triumphantly answers his own question. “Kitiya Davison, aka Miss Kitty from the flight.”

Happy as Selina is to see puzzle pieces fitting together, she could do without a reminder of her blunder. Still, as Theo said, it could be worse. “Anything on her at the Interpol?”

“Nope. Her prints came up clean. But since we know that she booked Mitchum’s room, we have her as a known associate, so Bruce and I started tracking her movements via her SIM card, the number she gave Bruce.”

“You mean your friends started – “

Theo shoots a glance at Bruce. “No, we started. Let’s say there are ways to get into telecom provider data with or without a warrant. We’d probably get a warrant for our man if we pushed, but it would cost us too much time, and I owe the local Interpol too many favours already to get a warrant laterally, as it were.”

She nods. The world is lucky her current partners in crime prefer to use their expertise for honest ends, or else their mayhem potential would be stratospheric.

“This way we can also cross-reference her GPS coordinates with other active phones. It looks like she has a secondary SIM card slot in her phone, we’ve seen two different numbers active in the exact same spots as her principal SIM twice already, so I’m guessing that she has a series of burner SIMs that she uses to contact Mitchum and maybe other associates, but her big mistake is keeping the primary SIM active. As far as we can tell, she herself stays at a campus post-grad residence, and Mitchum must have told her to keep phone contact to a minimum and not to come to the Raffles to be on the safe side. But they do meet somewhere, and seeing what numbers are active near her phone and near her last known whereabouts when it’s off, we can check who they belong to. And as soon as we see Kitty contact anyone we’ll run a location trace on that number as well. On top of that we have known locations for Mitchum at Raffles and Suntec, though it looks like he keeps his phone switched off most of the time and probably uses a series of disposable burner phones, not just SIM cards, so it can take a long time to find any meaningful patterns... “ Theo pulls an apologetic scowl.

“But it’s still better than nothing,” Selina finishes.

“Yep. We’ve also written to Kettering to ask if he can pull her SIM location history for us and do the cross-references, it is a much bigger mass of data than real-time tracking but he should have the resources for it. And now that we know Mitchum’s staying at the Raffles, guess where I’m moving this very morning. I’ll use the Renner ID,” Theo continues, seeing Selina’s momentary worry, “so we’ll keep this room I booked as Al-Juhani to meet in. But I found the perfect suite over there,” he tips his head in the direction of the window, where the Raffles sprawls in its wedding-cake colonial glory far below. “Two suites away from the Maugham suite, the ones right next to it were booked, but all these Personality Suites share a common veranda. And it’s got a priceless name to boot.”

Theo is clearly making another theatrical pause when Bruce cuts in dryly, his eyes still on the screen. “It’s called the John Wayne suite, in case you’re forgetting.”
John or not, Selina is snickering.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Burner phone is a colloquial term for prepaid, very basic, dirt cheap cell phones that can be discarded after each use to thwart tracking attempts.

We’ve seen EMP devices in the Nolan films; part of the way they are seen working is realistic, part of it isn’t. The links here are to a serious discussion too boring to read through, but I put them here as a possible cure for insomnia: http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA332511 and http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a463475.pdf

Tracking phones through the GPS locations of the SIM cards is common knowledge by now. Articles showing its extent include http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/04/nsa-storing-cell-phone-records-daily-snowden and http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2518541/NSA-tracks-locations-5-BILLION-cellphones-everyday-overseas.html


The Raffles Personality Suites, their respective names, and the shared veranda are real, as is Somerset Maugham’s intelligence stint, though the suites’ relative locations were down to artistic license on my part: http://www.raffles.com/singapore/rooms-suites/personality-suites/
They listened to the remaining three bidders’ meetings while Theo was making himself at home at the Raffles, Bruce still poking half-heartedly at the keyboard. The meetings followed the same script as her own and the Syrian’s, with “Brian” checking the surety before going through the database demo, the bidders grumbling about not getting full hands-on access, typing their bids, and briefly discussing subsequent logistics before they, too, left for the damned mall. In Bruce’s view, one of the men was ISIS; either Yemeni or Qatari, and another was definitely Boko Haram; it is not her area of expertise anyhow.

“Either way we’re better off concentrating on Mitchum,” she sums up in the ensuing lull.

“There isn’t a lot of Mitchum to concentrate on. I’d bet he’ll just go back to the Raffles and lie low, probably all the way until Monday. And if he needs to contact anyone, paranoid as he’s been so far, he’ll probably slip away to some crowded place before switching on his phone, so we may not be able to tag his contacts at all.”

“There’s still his office. If we find a good way in, we can bug it to the max.”

“It’s already bugged to the max, which is the problem,” Bruce reminds her, somewhat needlessly, as she saw firsthand what her companions glimpsed through her minicam. Both the reception and the meeting room sported the 360-degree ceiling blobs – Mitchum’s office probably had the same adornment – and likely as not, there were enough microphones to rival a presidential press conference. Not to mention the door alarm that she saw her host disable, away from her line of sight, in a side cabinet, his manipulations suspiciously looking like an eye scan in addition to a key sequence. A fingerprint scan would be possible to fool; an eye scan, not so. Still, they have their toys, too.

“The EMP would take care of all that. We just need a practical way in from the outside. That way even if the guards see the local outage, they’ll come up to the locked door, stand around for a minute, and so long as we’re quiet, they’ll have no choice but to go back down.”

“The EMP does permanent damage to the circuits,” Bruce points out. “As soon as Mitchum sees that his equipment was fried, and he’ll see it the moment he is inside with the alarm out of order, he’ll start panicking. He may even go for a bug sweep.”

“So long as the probability of that is less than a hundred percent, it’s worth a try. Besides, we may find useful stuff in the office. I’m sure there’ll be a safe – “

“No.”

“There’s no way he won’t have one, if only just in case…”

“That’s not what I meant.”

She knows it is not what he meant, but she also knows that it is a battle she can win.

“With the EMP, it makes no difference risk-wise if you go alone or if I go with you. But time-wise, it
will make a world of difference in how long it will take to crack a safe.”

“The big difference is, I could probably fly up to the tower and fly out once I’m done, and you can’t.”

Theo slips into the room at this interesting juncture, and as soon as he hears the words fly up, he knows which direction the discussion is going, his look betraying growing disbelief. Bruce sees him but goes on undeterred.

“All I need is to tell Lucius to get me some memory cloth, he can fly it over in the hypersonic in three hours’ time – “

“Are there any NATO bases in Singapore?” she prompts, pretty sure that there aren’t.

“No,” Bruce scowls. “There’s one in the Philippines, it’ll be a short flight from there to here, I could still have it before morning…”

While Selina is looking for a suitable objection, Theo gets ahead of her.

“And you’ll be joining Batman bin Suparman in jail before mid-day. Surely they’ll find an applicable charge or two. What happened to the whole keeping a low profile thing? There’s no guarantee you’ll pull it off unnoticed…”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “OK, you’ve got a better – “ He stops himself. “What were you going to say about the zip line when the second bidder came in?”

“Ah.” Theo looks pleased at the change of direction. “I was just thinking that instead of a horizontal zip line that would leave you hanging in mid-air, we could use a vertical zip line that would…”

“Leave me hanging in mid-air for even longer. It’ll take forever to rappel up that tower.”

“But you’ll have a much better chance of getting a good grapple hold against the roof ledge, with gravity working in your favour. Besides, I was thinking we could rig up a kind of winch lift…”

Selina likes the idea already. By sidestepping the flying scenario, it also makes her participation in the outing a much more realistic prospect. “Absolutely. All we need is a mid-sized motor…”

“Which will still weigh about half a ton,” Bruce cuts in.

“Actually, I was thinking we could use the elevator…” Theo offers, to Bruce’s instant consternation and Selina’s bafflement. “…as a makeshift winch. If we attach the cable end securely to the elevator roof, I can – “

Bruce does not let him finish, a spark of excitement in his eyes. “…Pull us up and let us down by sending the elevator in the opposite direction by remote hookup. Perfect.”

Selina starts nodding emphatically as soon as she hears the us.

“Precisely,” Theo agrees. “The only catch is getting access to the engine room on the roof to tie the cable – “

“I can use our earlier plan for that, the engine malfunction.”

“Too risky,” Theo counters. “If they decide to check and see the cable coming out of the engine room and hanging off the side of the building, you’re screwed.”
Bruce chews his lips. “Any other ideas?” His eyes travel from Theo to Selina and back.

“Some sort of repairman is still our best bet,” Theo muses.

Selina shakes her head as the idea hits her. “Window cleaner.”

“At night?” her companions say, almost at once.

“No. We can pretend we need them cleaned first thing Monday morning. The building’s closed tomorrow, so this afternoon will be the best time to set up the cables and harness.”

Bruce is not convinced. “Window cleaners usually work in rigs that weigh a couple of tons and take forever to set up, and it’s usually programmed months in advance, they normally do it once or maximum twice a year.”

“Normally being the operative word,” she argues. “We’re talking emergency here.”

“What sort of emergency window cleaning is there?” Bruce insists, and Selina has to admit that the idea is less plausible than it first seemed. “It’s not like we’re in Dubai where they have regular sandstorms… What?” he asks, seeing Theo grinning at them.

“A sandstorm would be hard to organise here,” he starts mock-pensively. “A shitstorm, on the other hand…”

Both Bruce and Selina give him puzzled looks.

“Would you care to explain?” Bruce prompts.

Theo is too amused to get to the point quickly. “I mean it literally. I was reminded of something you did in your… previous career.”

“If you’re thinking Lau and Hong Kong, no way. You yourself said that flying around in the cape is too risky, and if you think I’d fly circles around that tower spraying it with crap – “

Somehow, Bruce fails to see the humour in what he is saying, and is momentarily dismayed when both his listeners start shaking with silent laughter. “What?”

“The mental image,” Theo manages finally in between laughing fits.

Bruce is unbowd. “We could send up remote-controlled weather balloons, but there need to be at least two dozen. And where are we going to get industrial quantities of – “

“Stop,” Selina manages, unable to catch her breath. Her stomach is hurting already.

Theo has recovered to a point where he can speak. “Do you always go for the craziest high-tech solution?”

“It’s usually the best,” Bruce parries defensively, but by now he is smiling too, the absurdity of his own suggestions having finally hit him.

Theo takes a second to calm down. “No wonder they made you into a comic book hero. As a matter of fact, that’s where I saw it, one of the comic books about your early adventures. I can’t believe you forgot…”

“I probably forgot because I do not read Batman comic books,” Bruce snaps. “And because my early adventures were ten years ago.”
Theo gives in. “What I was thinking about was what you did to get out of Arkham Asylum when you summoned the bats – “

“Gotham’s full of them,” Bruce shoots back. “I’ve no idea how many bats there might be in Singapore city. Maybe no more than a hundred…”

“I think you need to get some sleep.” Theo chides him. “We can finish our planning when your brain wakes up.” Selina tries to stop herself from blushing; if Bruce can’t think straight for lack of sleep, it is her fault, too.

“OK, just tell me,” Bruce begs with a sigh.

“Gulls, not bats.”

“How the hell do I know what works as a gull beacon? Bats are attracted to ultrasonic – “

“Go to bed. Right now.”

“Stop giving me riddles.”

“Fish. Lots of rotting fish, the stinkier the better.”

It is Bruce’s turn to look at Theo as if he is spewing gibberish. “How the fuck –“

Selina gets the drift, however. “We fake an office delivery. It would fit in perfectly with the window washing story. I’ve got the cell phone number of the Deloitte executive assistant. So long as you can program a phone to make it look like I’m calling from her number,” she waits for Bruce to nod before continuing, “I can call the guards and tell them that Deloitte is hosting an important presentation first thing Monday morning and needs to bring in a new big flat-screen TV to show it on. We find the fish, wrap it in plastic, put it inside a TV box and pay a couple of guys to pretend they’re delivering the TV I warned the guards about. We keep an eye out for the gulls, and as soon as we see a few splatters, I call again to say that the delivery men saw the shit on the window and we need to get it off before the event. That way if the guards go upstairs to check they’ll see the crap.”

“What if they go up to the roof and see the TV box?”

“We leave the TV box, re-sealed, at the Deloitte reception. They won’t dare open it to check. All they’ll see on the roof, if they go that far, will be rotten fish, whatever the gulls haven’t taken yet, and at most the sheet of plastic underneath. And if we see them going out there on the top floor cam, I can always call again and say I’d just found out there was this disgruntled ex-employee who was recently fired and decided to leave his employers a parting gift by messing up their beautiful view.”

“There are easier ways to hit back at former employers,” Bruce points out.

“But not as picturesque,” she argues. “I’m not saying it’s a perfect story, but in the absence of alternatives…”

They ponder it for a few seconds before Bruce pronounces the verdict.

“Fine. On one condition.” He gives Theo a pointed look. “You go get the fish.”

“OK,” Theo agrees lightly. “But you find someone to go dump it. Bird feeding is subject to a $500 fine here. You can’t show up there until your window washer stint, and I’m enough of a danger to Singapore society already and have no wish to renew my acquaintance with a Singaporean jail.”
“Considering the quantity,” Selina puts in, “this would probably count as *aggravated* bird feeding and they’d put you in maximum security.”

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Mitchum is still in the office at 1 pm, half an hour after the last bidder left. They cannot postpone their plan any longer, and Selina makes her TV delivery call, surprisingly calmly received, even as Theo is scurrying the local fish market for about eighty kilo of stale supplies – as much as will fit in the biggest TV box they can hope to find – and Bruce is looking for the willing workforce.

Both the fish and the delivery men are found by 1:30, and the delivery goes smoothly enough, just minutes after Mitchum leaves the building and jogs awkwardly, constantly turning to check behind his back for anyone following, into the Raffles complex five minutes’ walk away. As instructed by Bruce, the delivery men use a clone of the keycard Selina stole, programmed to provide full access, to venture out onto the roof and leave their fragrant offering, even as Bruce manipulates the relevant camera feeds to keep their movements out of sight. They spend the better part of the following hour passing between them the binoculars Bruce had the foresight to buy on his way back to the hotel to watch, with a mix of schoolkid excitement and scientific attention, the swarm of mewling seagulls coalescing above the roof.

By 2:30 pm, the damage is done – and looks nothing short of spectacular on the top two floors, their recently-pristine mirrored glass now covered in long, thick white-and-brown splatters. Selina promptly calls the guards to complain, citing the TV delivery men as her source, and to say, in a frantic breathless voice, that they need the washer there asap to save Deloitte & Touche Singapore from an impending business development fiasco. Obviously the washer cannot come sooner than first thing Monday morning but *the company they contacted has kindly agreed* to set up the cable and harness this very afternoon. The guards do go upstairs to check and are sufficiently impressed by the exterior redecoration to let grateful Selina have her way so long as Deloitte contract the emergency washer at their own expense. She wonders for a moment about the real Deloitte assistant’s reaction on Monday morning, and the guards’ bafflement when the exact same request gets relayed to them, before recalling that guards work in shifts and it is unlikely that the Saturday bunch will leave detailed notes for their Monday successors.

The go-ahead is their cue to go shopping for props – or go stealing them, in Selina’s case. Of the five window-washing outfits they found online in relative proximity, two looked sufficiently far away from crowds and traffic and sufficiently accessible from a breaking-and-entering point of view, and arriving at the first of the two, she makes quick work of the building back door and primitive alarm system to let herself in and take a workman’s uniform from the storage room. It takes slightly longer to find a spare badge, but all in all, she is out and back at the Swissotel, mission accomplished, a quarter of an hour before Bruce shows up with his own set of supplies consisting of a black wig with a thick fringe, horn-rimmed glasses, a roll of industrial adhesive tape, and a big door handle, and half an hour before Theo comes back with his haul, a massive roll of mountaineering rope and a tarpaulin to make the harness. Considering the progress they’ve made so far this afternoon, it finally looks like their rotten luck is starting to turn.

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“Wo shi lai sheli chuangkou xidi shebei”. Selina is guessing that it means something along the lines of *I’ve come to set up the window washing kit*, but she wishes she’d remembered to fetch the in-ear translator from her room downstairs. Ever since the thingy saved her life – probably Bruce’s too, coming to think of it – back in Prato, she never travels without it. But the scene she and Theo are watching on the laptop screen, showing them an angle close to Bruce’s PoV from the mini-camera disguised as a collar snap, is too curious to watch for her to miss any of it. Theo has his own
translator, but is reluctant to give it up, a rare case of his curiosity getting the better of chivalry.

One of the guards answers him in Mandarin, and judging by his expression, is happy with a bit of small talk to while away a slow afternoon. His colleague is a somewhat different story: he clearly follows the gist, but is studying Bruce out of a corner of his eye as he is keying up the building visitor badge, not with distrust or suspicion, but with obvious curiosity, trying to place him. It is not often that someone of Western appearance shows up speaking fluent Mandarin; Bruce has further complicated matters by wearing the black fringed wig that gives him a mix of Caucasian features and Asian hair. The badge duly coded, the second guard hands it to Bruce and finally says something. Whatever it is, Bruce’s reply hits the right note as the normally dour-faced guards smile at him as they wave him inside without any intention of tagging along, and his companions at the Swissotel breathe a sigh of relief.

“What did he say?” she prompts Theo as Bruce’s camera starts zooming in on the elevator doors.

“The guy asked him where he was from, and he said he was born in Hong Kong and has a Chinese grandmother from Harbin. I guess he figured out their accents and picked the place one of them comes from.”

Bruce may have his slow moments, but sleepy or not, he still has the wits to get what he wants, most of the time.

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By the time she has made her way into the 43rd floor window – Bruce has cut open the latch with a laser cutter before attaching a handle to the steel frame, which they would take off before taping the frame shut on their way out – she is immediately aware that their luck has taken a fresh turn for the worse. Framed by the green haze of her goggle field of vision, Bruce looks crushed.

She soon sees why: sitting on the desk in front of him is a laptop, clearly not his. The EMP does permanent damage to the circuits, she remembers him say. To the best of her knowledge, the damage is worse for any equipment that is powered up at the time of the pulse, and likewise worse for anything connected to the mains – or even to a long cable, not plugged in but serving as an energy conduit – but something as sensitive as a computer is sure to be f*cked up.

She points to the door and raises her eyebrows. Bruce, wearing his own goggles, easily reads her expression as an enquiry about the guards.

“Been and gone already.” He is still keeping his voice low, but this is good news that means they can talk, now that Mitchum’s surveillance gear is out of commission. “Like you said, they poked around behind the door and went back down. Sounds like I took out the corridor lights outside, but they aren’t going to call maintenance until Monday.”

She wants to ask if he found anything interesting, but checks herself as it is bound to immediately bring up the matter of the laptop. Judging by Bruce’s expression, he is kicking himself hard enough already for her to add to his humiliation by prompting a confession.

Instead he volunteers it, but at least it the anger is directed at Mitchum rather than himself.

“The fucker kept this,” he points to the offending item, “inside a desk drawer. I had no way of knowing it was there until after I’d picked the lock. And now it’s useless, won’t even start up.”

Like he said, there was no way of knowing it. But it also means the computer was likely of little value. “He wouldn’t have kept it here if there was anything important on it. It’s probably empty
anyway and he kept all data on an external disk or datacard.”

“I know. But now we’ll never know for sure. And the desk is empty anyway, the whole office is empty. Don’t know why he even bothers locking it unless the laptop did hold something.”

“Probably the safe.” Stuck in an otherwise empty corner, the safe – a reasonably modern, even if not exactly top-of-the-line Sentry – is a hurdle in itself, but still, a determined burglar or spy would eventually force it open given time and unrestricted access.

Bruce does not look convinced. “Let’s hope so,” he mutters as he sets out planting his surveillance micro-gadgets and Selina sits down in front of the Sentry to work her magic.

When the door swings smoothly open twenty minutes later, she figures that the afternoon’s stroke of luck must have been a fluke. She is staring at an empty safe.

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It is left to Theo to try and cheer them up after the double letdown, but try as he might, they all know the truth: time is running out and they are still not getting anywhere.

“We still have his Raffles room. I took a good look at the surroundings today, you can very easily get in through the balcony.” This is directed at Selina, who has just finished peeling off the Mitchum prints off her fingers. It looks like Bruce is not even bothering to do the same.

“I’m up for it, but we’ll need to lure him out of the room, or be absolutely certain he’ll be away for a while.”

“Fire alarm,” Theo suggests.

“How do we trigger it? Bruce, do you think you can hack their network to set it off?”

Theo beats Bruce to the answer. “There’s an easier way. Put a wad of paper bags into a waste bin and throw a lit match in there. Doesn’t even need to be near his room, so long as it’s in the same wing. As soon as the smoke reaches the nearest ceiling detector, all hell will break loose.”

“There’s bound to be a cam that will catch you throwing stuff, so we still need the hack,” Bruce cuts in.

“Unless you’re willing to go there and do it yourself. You aren’t staying there, after all,” Selina suggests.

“I used to, as Wayne,” he grumbles. “If any of the staff recognise me, there’s no telling how much it can blow our cover.”

He is not talking about the risk of losing his incognito status, just of the mission cover. Interesting.

“OK, so it’s back to the hacking option,” Theo says, almost soothingly. “In the meantime we’ll keep tracking Kitty and see if we can find out who else she’s in contact with. There’s also the chance we might hear from Kettering – “ He stops abruptly at a clicking noise unmistakably coming from the suite door.

Selina has a second to wonder how much worse it can get. She half expects a full-blown SWAT team to charge into the room, or else a bunch of machine-gun-toting terrorists.

But instead, standing framed in the backlit doorway is a lone silhouette.
If you think seagull shit is a minor nuisance, check this out: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2397878/seagulls-Pest-control-firm-boss-forced-spend-500-cleaning-Mercedes-bird-poo.html On a personal note :) I was once an unwitting recipient of a splotch of gull excrement on my window pane, and can assure you that it is a major eyesore seen from the inside!
In retrospect, it was the picklock that threw her.

As soon as their visitor steps into the room and the shady outline resolves itself into the familiar – and unwelcome – figure of her Sydney acquaintance Jamie Harper, Selina's momentary panic gives way to a flash of anger. And seeing the equally familiar marker-like gadget in Jamie's hand, together with her companions' insufficiently-angry expressions, gives her an instant suspicion that Jamie is there without her prior knowledge, but not without theirs.

"What's this bitch doing here?" she mouths furiously, glaring at the two men, who only shrug in response.

As it turns out, Jamie is too good at lip-reading for Selina's liking.

"This bitch is helping your ungrateful arses," she answers without missing a beat as she shuts the door behind her.

Cool as a cucumber, as Alfred would say. The British inflection of a familiar swearword makes Selina's mouth twitch up in a half-grin in spite of itself.

"Apologies for the intrusion, I wasn't so sure you'd let me in if I asked nicely."

That much is true.

"I'm not leading anyone to you, in case you're wondering," she continues, holding up her other hand to show her reluctant hosts a disembowelled phone. And before Selina can say that this may be the only visible phone or tracking device she is carrying, Jamie walks up to the three of them and concludes, in the same casual, matter-of-fact tone, a far cry from her icy demeanour in Sydney, "feel free to sweep me."

Maybe she is betting on us not having a sweeper, Selina muses as she walks over to the metal carry-ons holding their gadgetry. But Jamie's reaction when Selina smugly holds aloft the paddle is one of relief, not concern, and it is soon corroborated when the sweep comes up clean.

"I take it you're not the White Tigress," Jamie ventures when Selina is done.

"What do you think?" Selina does her best to sound sarcastic. Standing as she is in a black catsuit and sporting a loose ponytail, she is sure that the woman she has been impersonating would never let herself be seen looking like this; a certainty Jamie shares, if her smirk is an indication.

"I think we need to talk," Jamie says by way of an answer. "I think we may have been deceived by each other's appearances."

Makes sense, sort of. And sounds almost like an apology. But there are other matters to be cleared before Selina is willing to give the other woman the benefit of the doubt.

"How did you find us?" Selina presses on.
"Followed you." Jamie sounds as if Selina was asking a silly question. "Saw which floor you went to on the lobby lift panel and eavesdropped until I heard you in here." Seeing Selina's raised eyebrows, she explains, "I'm renting an office on the top floor of Suntec Two, facing Mitchum's."

So she also knows the man's identity.

"Watched you two get in there."

And she has night vision gear.

"And figured you probably weren't a bona fide buyer." She keeps her gaze on Selina before shifting it to Bruce. "You almost fried my camera when you set off that EMP," she goes on accusingly. "You must've fried his laptop for sure. Don't worry, there's nothing on it."

"How do you know?" Selina jumps in, unwilling to be too trusting – or rather, to let Bruce get too trusting, seeing his relieved expression.

"As I'm saying," Jamie continues, a touch too sarcastically for Selina's taste, "I've been keeping an eye on Mitchum's office. I have a video camera hooked up to a set of binoculars trained on his office window, among other things, and normally fast-forward through the footage every few hours, but I happened to be around to see you two in real time. And if you play nice, I'll tell you what else I know."

The girl's cocky attitude makes Selina want to punch her and give her a hi-five in equal measure.

"Why are you watching him?"

"Just as you're not a terrorist's wife, though I'll admit you pulled off a convincing performance," Jamie begins, "I'm not Mitchum's accomplice, regardless of what you may think and of what I told you in Sydney. I gained his trust by bringing the Syrian to him, your CIA superiors are on to that man anyway so he'll be easy to catch if he wins – "

Both Selina and Bruce bristle at the implied subordination. But Bruce probably thinks his sour face is eloquent enough, so it is left to Selina to keep up the verbal parrying.

"The fact that we may be working with the CIA on this issue doesn't make them our superiors." She does her best to match Jamie's sarcasm. I'm getting rusty. I used to do this in my sleep.

"Your inferiors, then," Jamie offers, and Selina laughs despite herself. She is used to verbal sparring matches – quite likes them, as a matter of fact – but more often than not, her counterparts have literal rather than figurative balls. This one looks like she could be an exception… if they are lucky. "But if you folks aren't Langley – "

"We're not," Bruce assures her. Finally, a bit of help. "We're independent contractors. Let's say they had a way of… persuading us to cooperate."

This makes Jamie scowl in what looks, surprisingly, like sympathy. Isn't she herself a spy?

"What about you?" Selina jumps in.

She recalls what their CIA contacts told them: senior analyst at GCHQ, the UK's version of the NSA… got transferred to Hong Kong earlier this year… was allegedly pursuing a possible contact before being taken off the case, under an internal inquest into her involvement in the murder of a civilian, not conclusive enough to have put her under arrest, but enough for an indefinite admin leave pending the outcome. Now is her chance to see how much of this Jamie owns up to.
"I'm – " Jamie cuts herself off. "I suppose by now I should say I'm ex-GCHQ. It's a matter of time before they either fire me or put me in prison. Or both."

So far, so true.

"What did you do?"

Jamie's face falls, and Selina's cold-blooded bitch theory is suddenly looking shaky.

"I got someone killed."

Of all the things to get Bruce to sympathise, this is it. He is not saying it out loud, but his expression speaks volumes. Jamie is apparently encouraged by this to continue, though it takes her a couple of seconds to collect her thoughts, the rapid-fire sarcasm all gone.

"A month ago Mitchum put up an anonymous Silk Road listing for a global defence asset database for three days before deleting it. One of my GCHQ tasks was trawling the Silk Road for exactly this sort of thing, the major deals, not small-time arseholes selling sawed-off shotguns. I told my boss but he thought it was a red herring, that was days and days before your CIA… partners found out about the theft. He said if I wanted to go after it, it was my call, meaning he wouldn't stop me but he wouldn't give me additional resources or backup, either. Our top priority is monitoring sigint from the Middle East and all that. Bloody budget cuts. But I still had access to all sorts of data and surveillance software thanks to my position, so I kept digging. Pretended to be an interested intermediary, then put the Syrian in touch with Mitchum and when he swallowed the bait, promised to bring him more interested buyers. I never met him in person, but tried retracing the commission he paid me even though we dealt with each other using Tor." The allegedly untraceable anonymous browser. "It was only twenty bitcoin but it wasn't the point."

About five thousand dollars, Selina figures. Not a lot but OK for pocket money. She remembers Bruce saying something about the electronic currency preserving traces of holder identities as part of its constituent code.

"Didn't get me far so I kept stalling for time with promises of buyer contacts, and then I got really lucky. I told him my next client communicated by email and gave him my Lavabit address to write to. He made a stupid move and used a less secure service when he wrote to me, and I pieced together enough metadata on the message to get his temp IP address, here in Singapore."

Selina is not enough of a hacker to know what exactly this involves, but sees Bruce nodding his approval.

"And then I saw that my new best friend from Syria, whose iPhone we'd hacked weeks ago, had just received an anonymous message telling him to go to Suntec. I flew over here from Hong Kong, and once I'd checked the building lease records, I finally got a visual, and his real name once I'd run facial recognition, so I could monitor him under both names."

Both names? Presumably she means his Perry alias and his Mitchum real name. How come she did not catch his Burlington identity? He must have used a different disposable alias every time he re-entered Singapore, Selina muses, and Jamie must have missed them, or at least the latest one. But she is impressed with what the other woman managed to find out, virtually on her own, though admittedly using vast resources within her reach and with a two- or three-week head start on them. Most importantly, her story sounds pretty damn plausible. It would take a better liar than even Selina herself to consistently spin a lie as intricate as this, and deliberately pepper it with minor missteps on her part.
"I rented the office at Two Suntec and set up the binoculars and camera there, but it was no help in seeing his laptop password as he typed it on the keyboard, or in reading whatever he had on his desk, the angle was wrong no matter how good the resolution, so I bribed a cleaning maid at One Suntec to help me bug his office. There's a lamp on his desk, you've seen it."

Selina does not recall seeing it, but then, they were too busy getting disappointed to notice minor office fixtures.

"I got the girl, Yanisa, to bring me an identical lamp, they have standard fixtures throughout the tower and she found one sitting in a storage cabinet on another floor. I stuck a mini-camera into it looking like a bolt head facing down, and swapped the regular lightbulb for one with a built-in wi-fi transmitter to relay the image to me through a router. Yanisa smuggled it back into storage together with the router, then she pushed the old lamp close to the edge of the desk, as if by accident, when she was cleaning; he let her come in, empty the garbage and all, every three days, but only when he was there to watch her. And when the lamp fell over and the bulb assembly broke, she brought in my identical-looking rigged lamp as a replacement and switched on the router back in the pantry.

Mitchum had his laptop wi-fi connection permanently disabled, and he uses very basic burner phones, the pre-wi-fi variety, so he wasn't watching out for active networks in the vicinity. He didn't suspect anything then, she said he only told her off for being clumsy. That way I got the password to his laptop from the camera feed, plus I had a fingerprint scan from a plastic cup he'd thrown out that Yanisa pinched, and I used them to crack his laptop with an infected apparently-blank email claiming to come from the Syrian, temporarily re-enable the wifi when he wasn't looking, install a keylogger and see what was on the hard drive, but it was no use. He keeps no data on it, all he's ever used it for is checking emails - he only gets a handful on the account I've seen and deletes them at once after reading, and the ones I did see were pretty useless - and doing the Matrix demo off a thumb drive."

"You've never seen him run the real thing?" Selina blurts out.

Jamie flicks her a sharp glance. "No, I haven't, and I don't think he has it. Back then I thought he might have kept it in the safe, but when I tried to get into it, I got Yanisa killed."

"What happened?" Selina prompts when Jamie has been silent for a few seconds.

"Mitchum used to put the laptop and the thumb drive into the safe at night before... all this happened, and until I knew better I thought he might be keeping the real database in there as well, it's more secure than a hotel room, after all. He's been too scared since... to leave the thumb drive with the demo in the office, so I suspect he never parts with it now, but he'd never keep the full version on his person. As it is, he practically craps himself whenever he's outside with just the demo on him."

Selina remembers watching Mitchum nervously trotting into and out of Suntec; Jamie's assessment sounds spot-on.

"Anyway, at that point I still thought Mitchum was running the show, so I figured my best shot at finding the Matrix was inside that safe. And if all else failed and I only had a day or two before the final sale, I planned to pose as an office temp on a weekday to get in, wait on the fire escape stairs until Mitchum got out to go to the loo, I hoped he wouldn't set the alarm if it was only for a minute, then ambush him before he'd locked the door, knock him out with a hammer and drag him back in. I'd leached enough CCTV footage from outside Mitchum's office to fool the guards and get around the bloody clock."

Out of the corner of her eye, Selina sees Bruce suppress a sigh.

"It's one hell of a crazy-ass plan," she comments wryly.
"Didn't have many options left," Jamie replies. "But I knew the surveillance stuff Mitchum had inside the office was most likely independently powered, I'd tried cutting off the power to that floor and sure enough, I saw the alarm was still on. I hadn't seen evidence of any accomplices but couldn't rule them out either, and for all I knew they were keeping an eye on his office equipment from somewhere nearby. Even if I was really fast, with a mask on and whatnot, I still risked being caught, especially without the sort of EMP blackout device you used… and that's assuming I could open the safe at once. If I had to actually crack it by brute force or by dialler, there was no chance at all. I'd asked Yanisa to memorise the model name, that way I knew that it took an eight-digit code and fingerprint scan to open. I already had the fingerprint, but needed the code, and without a line of sight at the safe keypad through the office window, I had no way of getting it on my own. So I gave Yanisa a minicam to stick on the wall next to the safe, it looked like a glob of dried white paint the size of a match head, should have been practically invisible on the white wall, and would relay data via my wi-fi lightbulb. All she had to do was press her palm against the wall, it could be made to look accidental, and I thought I wouldn't need to bother her again. But she got nervous and dropped it when she tried to stick it on, and then picked it up and tried again. Silly girl, should've just swept it up with the dust or left it lying there. I saw it all through the window." Jamie falls silent again.

"And Mitchum caught her?" Selina prompts.

Jamie nods. "She panicked and swallowed it but he figured she'd been trying to plant a bug. He dragged her to security, insisting she be fired at once. I figured he was too worried about his cover being blown to take her to the police. She ran out in tears and I wanted to go after her but had to stay put to avoid drawing attention to myself… I was about to go find her parents' flat after midnight and take her to a safehouse, but they announced on the 11 o'clock news that they'd found her body under the Rochor flyover, right across the road from Suntec, she had an ID on her… It isn't a sort of thing that happens here often so there was extensive coverage. And then the police saw my number in her phone memory and tagged me as a person of interest. She didn't have that many contacts, and mine stood out as the odd one among local friends and family."

"What did she die of?"

"The files I saw before my access was revoked talked of a possible heroin overdose. You should have seen the girl, she couldn't have been older than eighteen or nineteen and I'm positive she's never touched drugs in her life. But you know what the laws are like here, I'm sure her family were too afraid of the drug angle to press for an investigation. In the end it was quickly swept under the carpet as a hit-and-run."

Theo, who has been watching from the sidelines up to this point, greets this with a knowing scowl. "And with heroin there's almost no way to tell murder or suicide from an accidental overdose, especially in non-habitual users who have a low tolerance. All the autopsy can show is that the subject died of severe respiratory depression, their breath just gives out."

Jamie sighs. "And of course the syringe was never found, so there was no way to prove I didn't do it."

"So much for presumption of innocence," Selina mutters. Not that she herself hasn't followed the CIA's lead in presuming Jamie's guilt.

"The police didn't really believe it, they had me in for questioning as a person of interest, but didn't arrest me or even order me to stay in the country. I used a fake ID to go to Sydney just in case, but it wasn't to run from them."

"From whom, then?" Selina asks.
"I wasn't running," Jamie snaps. "My boss ordered me to get the hell out of Singapore until the internal inquest was over."

*And look where you are now.* "Did he hold you responsible for not recovering the Matrix?"

"No. Considering he'd hung me out to dry from the outset, it would have been flagrant hypocrisy even coming from a spymaster. But he did revoke all my access privileges so I couldn't use GCHQ resources and had to keep on snooping on my own. When I met you in Sydney I took you for the real thing, I still had old offline archives on a few thousand targets including the Sivaparan couple and your prints were a match, and thought I could follow you to pick up more dirt on Mitchum. Well, good luck with that, without real-time access to immigration records, you lost me before you even boarded the flight to Bangkok."

Selina cannot help a smug half-smile, though their easy escape was really Theo's doing. This explains why Jamie never mentioned Mitchum's Charles Burlington alias; she no longer had a way of knowing.

"I could be wrong," Jamie goes on, "but I think the inquest was the CIA's idea more than the GCHQ's, seeing how they woke up and saw this whole situation as a major intel fuck-up that they wanted to handle directly. At which point, I suppose, they brought you in."

Selina sidesteps the implied question. "If you aren't blamed for the theft, why are you still looking for it? You think the GCHQ will thank you for disobeying orders?"

"I no longer give a flying fuck about the GCHQ." Not a prudent tactic by any measure, but on reflection, Jamie's anger is understandable. "And the Matrix is your job by now. I'm after Mitchum."

"You're after a bit of vigilante justice," Bruce suggests, with more than a hint of disapproval.

Jamie shakes her head. "I got an eighteen-year-old girl killed. I paid her, but she trusted me enough to keep her safe. It doesn't matter that it isn't a formal charge, I know I'm guilty. But I want to know who did it and I want Yanisa's family to know who did it. I want that cocksucker behind bars, that's the only way they'll get any closure... I don't think it was Mitchum himself, he's too much of a coward for that, but he is my best lead to find whoever's pulling his strings."

"In which case we're looking for the same things," is Bruce's verdict – and Selina sees no reason to disagree. "So we might as well keep looking together."

"I was hoping you'd see it that way," Jamie replies, her eagerness only thinly disguised. "Even though I still know fuck all about who you really are."

For someone with a posh accent, she has a peculiar tendency to swear like a drunken sailor when she gets upset – or excited, as she seems now.

"We're security consultants," Selina tells her before tipping her head at Theo. "He's my boss."

"*They're* security consultants," Bruce puts in, not quite helpfully. "I'm the toyboy. What are you two giggling at?"

By now they are not so much giggling as wiping their eyes with laughter; the giggling is left to Jamie, a sea change from her habitual dour expression.

"Well... you sure do have... interesting toys," she blurts out in between.
Keylogger software is relatively well-known (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keystroke_logging); the wi-fi lightbulb is more recent and more exotic, but also real (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/lifi-revolution-internet-connections-using-light-bulbs-are-250-times-faster-than-broadband-8909320.html).

Sigint = signal intelligence = electronic data (including phone records and emails) in spy lingo
"What else do you know about Mitchum?" Selina asks eventually, but as Jamie rattles off what they already know – the HSBC job, the odd-job years, his university grades and other peripheral facts – Selina's mind keeps wandering. She may lack the hacking expertise to accurately judge Jamie's prowess that seems to have quite impressed her more tech-savvy companions, but for most of her life, she survived and got ahead by being street-smart and using common sense to judge people... and something about Jamie's demeanour does not add up. Above all, it is simply too good to be true: just when they thought they had hit a brick wall, along comes this Girl Wonder to save them. Even if she is not quite as wonderful as she claimed to be, she can obviously make for a useful ally, so long as there is enough substance behind her technical claims. Selina has kept a close eye on Jamie when she was describing her tortuous pursuit of Mitchum, and as far as she can tell, the other woman's nonverbal cues were consistent enough with telling the truth; but if so, how can this apparent show of competence be reconciled with her excited, almost silly eagerness once Bruce had floated the collaboration proposal?

A second after Jamie has finished, Selina pounces, her tone joking but her serious intent obvious.

"So if you're as good as this and have all this info, why do you need us? You can probably catch them all on your own without the GCHQ resources."

For a split second Jamie looks uncertain whether to take Selina's remark as mockery or at face value, then decides on a sort of midway response.

"I may be good but I'm not perfect," she says with just enough irony to show that she has caught the taunt. "And no, actually I can't do it on my own, I wouldn't be here if I could."

So much for helping their ungrateful arses and telling them to play nice. Let's see what else she was shitting us about.

"But why do you trust us? What made you think we were on the CIA's side? We could be mercenaries; we could be working for a different interested party that just wanted to steal the thing and bypass the bidding..."

"I don't think so," Jamie cuts her off, a bit impatiently for someone who should, by all accounts, be feeling cornered.

"Why not?" Bruce joins in.

Jamie shoots him a quick look and is palpably hesitant to reply, and it is obvious, looking at Theo and Bruce, that their suspicions by now are as acute as Selina's.

"Or," Theo says, mock-pensively, riffing off Selina's train of thought, "you could really be working for Mitchum, and could have come here to tell us what we already know as a way to win our trust so the two of you can play us."

Jamie looks offended, but does her best to sound unperturbed. "I can give you copies of my files and let you see the footage – "

"Here we go again," Selina picks up the attack. "But how do you know you can trust us with this intel? You just said you didn't know who we were."

What should have stumped the other woman has rather the opposite effect; Jamie looks as if she has
made up her mind, and calmed down as a result. Selina wonders what the confession, or the next cover-up, is going to be.

"I don't know who you are. Well, you two," Jamie says glumly. Tipping her head at Selina and Theo.

And leaving out Bruce.

The next couple of seconds pass in a heavy silence.

"I saw your obituary."

Interestingly, Bruce looks relieved even as Selina bites down on a curse and Theo does his best not to look worried.

"When?" Bruce asks her, completely casual.

"Just now. Well, actually about an hour ago, by now. I told you, I saw you getting in there. You had to switch off and put away your goggles before you set off the EMP so they wouldn't get fucked up. I hadn't seen you before and until you joined him," this is obviously meant for Selina, "I had no idea you two were a team. It was quite clear you weren't friends with Mitchum, considering what you were doing, but as you say, I didn't know who you were and why you wanted the Matrix and whether you could be trusted or had to be neutralised, not that I had an easy means of doing that. I no longer have access to updated GCHQ info, but I still have facial recognition software and an archived copy of a 90-terabyte photo ID database, pretty much everyone alive who has ever had a criminal conviction, and everyone alive who has ever crossed a state border in the past 10 years." So it would have still caught Bruce just before his self-imposed retirement. "I thought if I saw you were a terrorist, I'd sell you out to Mitchum to gain points with him and get closer, and if you were a mercenary I'd try and blackmail you into cooperating, bluff and say I was working on MI6 orders, I did a secondment with them so I know the basics of how they operate, enough to fool a layman. I ran the screengrab I'd taken of your face against that archive, and your name" – she pauses; Bruce still looks incongruously relaxed – "came up within two minutes. I didn't believe it at first so I did a search for Bruce Wayne for something with a photo." She looks at him point blank. "The obituary was the first news item that came up." This, unexpectedly, makes Bruce chuckle. "So I knew you folks weren't criminals."

It is Bruce's turn to get sarcastic. "You have so much trust in corporate sharks?"

Jamie apparently fails to see the irony. "I remember all the media discussions during the Gotham occupation, the panellists asking, if Wayne owned the nuclear reactor that would have made him even richer, why had he been pretending that it wasn't working? And the only reasonable answer was that you were too concerned about it being used to do harm. It wouldn't make sense for you to go back on that principle now."

"You never know. People can do strange things when they're dead." Is he enjoying himself?

"I reckoned that the CIA must have blackmailed you with your identity to make you work for them," Jamie goes on.

"And so," Bruce picks up; he is definitely enjoying himself. "...you knew I was an ex-tycoon with money and access to weapons, who wanted to stay dead, and the best idea you had was to come here and blackmail me too?" he looks as if this reminds him of a joke he has heard before.

For the first time, Jamie looks profoundly embarrassed. "I... I thought about it. But in the end I
realised… well, the obvious. So I tried not to show that I knew who you were, and look where it got me. I just wanted to make sure it was really you and to see if there was anything I could do to help. The truth is, I really want Mitchum and his boss in prison. It probably won't make me feel less guilty _-"

"It won't." Bruce had better watch his tongue, or else she'll end up figuring what _other_ identity the guilt issues had once steered him into. "But yeah, I know what you mean."

"But I still want it to happen, and by now there's nothing else I can do on my own to get them."

"So you pretended to be in control when you really needed our help?" Selina taunts, but lays off the sarcastic tone for once.

"Didn't work, did it?" Jamie shoots back.

"For a couple of minutes it did," Selina grants her. "But then you yourself told us the whole story."

Jamie looks resigned by now. "I used to bluff for a living, sort of, as part of my online snooping duties. I may have done a good enough job of it in writing, never seeing the others' faces, but it's very different from… _this_." She gestures helplessly to her audience.

This, finally, makes sense. Jamie's brash attitude early on and her almost childish eagerness later; the combined result of technical proficiency and lack of streetwise experience and probably being in awe of Bruce to start with, that made her overdo it with the bravado and let her underlying relative naïvete show through in the end. Selina may not know how to parse metadata, but she sure as hell can run circles around a computer geek, male or female, when it comes to figuring out motives and intentions.

"Are you going to report me to Newell now?" Jamie asks, dejected; like a schoolgirl caught smoking.

Selina is momentarily at a loss as to who Jamie means until she remembers: their CIA last-resort contact. It should not be surprising that Jamie knows him, being from a partner-country spy agency; but somehow it still is.

"What made you think that?"

"He's the CIA top man in the region. And he hates me."

"Why?"

"Long story. Nothing to do with this case." She does not look evasive so much as pissed off, and Selina lets it go for now; it is not the best moment to be discussing petty rivalries.

"No, we won't," Bruce assures her in the meantime. "We haven't been in contact with him."

"Well, that's up to you," Jamie sighs, "Just let me go back to Sydney and I'll be out of your way."

Bruce looks amused. "No," he drawls, shaking his head, "by now you know too much. I'd rather keep you around and think of a way you can make yourself useful, now that you know who you're dealing with."

"Well, I know _you_," Jamie's answer is meant for Bruce but she is looking pointedly at Selina.

"Céline Wainwright," she offers; considering that Jamie knows who Bruce is, her own ironclad
current identity poses no additional risk. "And you're Jamie Harper."

"Pleased to meet you," Jamie replies airily. "That's not my real name… either," she adds with a glance at Bruce, "though I changed mine ages ago."

This makes Selina curious. "Are you supposed to be dead too?"

Jamie laughs. "No, nothing like that. Quite innocent, actually. I hated my given name and changed it by deed poll as soon as I was sixteen. Of course my mother hates this one, can't see why I insist on being known by a boy's name."

"What was it?"

"Don't ask," Jamie groans.

"Come on, how bad can it be?" Selina insists, too curious to give up. She tries to think what more-feminine name Jamie could have been derived from. "Jasmine? Gemma?"

"Jemima," she sighs.

Selina makes a noncommittal gesture as an indication that she does not find the name particularly awful per se, though it rather makes her think of an elderly aunt in pearls and a twinset looking nothing like the tomboyish woman before her. At least your real name doesn't have an unfinished prison term that goes with it, she thinks.

"By the way," Bruce says, all too casually, "Outside of present company, I am known as Brandon –"

Jamie recognises the name before he is finished. "Of course. That was absolutely fucking dumb of me. You're Brandon Wainwright of Wainwright Security –"

"What, are we famous in the spy community?"

"Well… in a way."

"Bad reputation?"

"Not really. I mean, the equipment you sell has a great reputation. You two, however –" by now she has figured that Theo is part of the same outfit, "are known as picky bastards who are very particular about vetting buyers and use insanely complex encryption standards in your software…"

"Good," Bruce says smugly. "Can't let the stuff get into the wrong hands. We've all seen what happens then."

"But then… don't you also own the hypersonic research outfit near Oxford?"

"Yep. That one too." This is turning into an accidental Wayne ego trip. "And a couple of smaller alternative fuel research labs. And the bulk of Wayne Enterprises over in the US, though they still think I'm dead…"

"…and they think we Brits are eccentric," Jamie jumps in, a note of the early sarcasm creeping in.

"I had Welsh ancestors," Bruce shoots back.

"And as far as I recall, as Mr Wainwright you also own one of the twenty limited edition…"
“…Sesto Elemento models ever produced,” Bruce finishes for her.

Jamie shakes her head. "Some people have all the luck."

Bruce smirks at her. "Only the dead ones."

TBC
“Well, caro, this time I’ve had to do it your way,” she grumbles at Bruce instead of a greeting; he is the last to arrive, still looking sleepy, joining them in Jamie’s rented office at Two Suntec, and immediately grabs Selina’s coffee. Looking out through a gap in the Venetian blinds at Mitchum’s office windows less than fifty yards away, Selina can see what the other woman meant about the prime view; in fact, zooming in with the camera Jamie had set up on the window sill trained on Mitchum’s desk, she should just about be able to read a newspaper headline if the man were there reading it, but she can also see what Jamie meant about not being able to see the keyboard, or read anything useful off a laptop screen, from this angle and distance.

“What, did you blow it up?” Bruce asks, raising an eyebrow at her.

She shakes her head. “I may be warming to your methods but unlike you, I still prefer having enough safe left to open.”

She spent the early morning hours patiently waiting in Theo’s Raffles suite for Mitchum to get out of his room. They had reckoned the night before that as soon as Mitchum – or his handler who probably monitored the Suntec office – woke up and discovered the white noise from the camera and microphone feeds, and the alarm out of commission, thanks to their EMP handiwork, Mitchum would try to get a closer look at the office to ascertain the cause and extent of the damage, or dash off to discuss the disastrous developments with his boss from a convenient location if not in person, or both.

In the end it was both: between the two of them at the Raffles, grumpy Bruce armed with binoculars on his Swissotel balcony, and Jamie watching from her Two Suntec observation post, they watched Mitchum take off toward the One Suntec tower at his trademark trot at a quarter to seven, just before sunrise, to stare helplessly at his office window from the pavement outside, unable to get into the locked building, try knocking at the massive glass doors to get the guards’ attention – to no effect – and hail down a cab to take off in the direction of Chinatown to the southeast.

Following him was out of the question: at 7 AM on a Sunday morning the streets were deserted, and the sun had just risen to make any attempt at pursuit blatantly obvious. He’d probably dive into the market and find a quiet corner there to switch on his next burner phone to make the call.

But his absence gave Selina an opportunity to slip in through the suite balcony, wearing Mitchum’s prints, and take a look around – even if Mitchum only went as far as Chinatown and made it back in record time, she would have at least half an hour, and in reality likely more. Jamie, who had tagged him to the Raffles a couple of weeks earlier, had managed to slip in, her cover in case of emergency being a maid mistakenly delivering laundry to the wrong suite; but her quick survey had found nothing of particular interest, just clothes and toiletries – and not being an expert safecracker and not having the luxury of a few hours to have a go at the hotel safe with SoftDrill, she could not even see what was there, though she suspected that the pickings would be slim. Much as Selina would have loved to prove her wrong, her own, albeit longer, visit came up with much the same results; and while she did get into the safe – the short time window had forced her to do it a la Bruce with the laser cutter, carefully carving out a rectangle of wood and metal from under the shelf the safe sat on until the bottom fell out, only to stick it back on with a helping of industrial-strength adhesive later –
the contents revealed themselves to be relatively uninformative. There were two open-date tickets in the Burlington name, one for Jakarta and another for Hong Kong, and about ten thousand dollars in cash; nothing more.

“I take it there was nothing useful in there,” Bruce ventures, seeing her sour face.

“Nope.”

“So the only way to find anything Mitchum holds would be to ambush him, and that would immediately alert the mastermind,” he concludes.

“And would likely get us nothing but the demo version and his passport, at most,” Jamie remarks.

“Too bad we can’t get a helicopter here. Or at least a long-range drone,” he continues sulkily.

“I guess I could talk to the Interpol,” Theo starts. “I used to work for them,” he adds for Jamie’s benefit, “see if we can somehow get an orange notice out of them using your cam captures of screenshots,” he finishes, addressing Selina.

“It’s not likely to get you far, we have too little concrete proof,” Bruce comments.

“And the CIA would crucify you for it,” Jamie adds. “They’ll take major issue with anyone they see as civilian, even the Interpol, getting on their turf without their explicit sanction... I could, in principle, talk to my former temporary boss at the MI6, chances are he won’t have heard of my GCHQ suspension, they way it’s all been under wraps, and they’re the ones who largely took over from the GCHQ on this case, it’s more their sort of thing anyway. If they can sort out the pecking order with the CIA, they’ll be able to give us backup quicker than the CIA would. They still have quite a few people stationed in Hong Kong...”

Bruce shrugs. “It’s an option, I suppose.” He is clearly unhappy with having to ask for help, but by now even he has to admit that with 24 hours left, the chances of success are too slim to be playing proud. “And I can call Kettering when he wakes up and sort it out on the CIA end. I won’t mention that you’re here,” he tips his head at Jamie, “If you give me your MI6 mentor’s name I’ll just say I know him and tell Kettering to talk to him.”

“You can also ask him for a no-objection to my talking to the Interpol, who can then liaise with the local police,” Theo cuts in. “It could help to have backup if we ever get a chance to catch anyone in flagrante.”

“That sort of decision may be above Kettering’s pay grade,” Bruce argues. “Let’s hope he does not bring our beloved Mr Wrigley into this.”

“Well, Wrigley may relish a chance to humiliate us seeing how we have to stoop to call for help. And if he also smells a chance of promotion, he’ll go for it,” Selina offers.

“So much for rubbing their noses in it,” Bruce mutters sourly.

“Don’t give up hope yet,” Selina mock-admonishes him. “Knowing Wrigley’s quick wits, there’s bound to be an opportunity or two.”

xxx

By lunchtime they have seemingly shared, compared and analysed every relevant bit of data they and Jamie have on Mitchum’s recent activity – and are still, it seems, at square one. The greatest obstacle is posed by the man’s untraceable phones that keep both his movements and his communications off
limits to them: what little Jamie gleaned of his e-mail account is, indeed, of very limited value by
now.

“If we’re lucky, Kettering may have dug up something on your girlfriend’s phone use history by
now,” Selina suggests. “Another question to ask him when he wakes up,” she offers, addressing
Bruce.

“Your what?” Jamie stares at them both.

“I was just going to bring that up,” Bruce says with a chuckle. “She’s not so much my girlfriend as
Mitchum’s, if anything. There’s this half-American grad student called Kitiya Davison who booked
Mitchum’s suite at the Raffles in her name, but he’s had to sign in as her visitor named Charles
Burlington…”

Jamie slaps her forehead. “Serves me right for being a fucking idiot. I only ran a check for Perry and
Mitchum in the guest register, he’d previously flown in as Perry, and of course there was nothing so I
just followed him there to see where he was staying, figured he was there on a disposable ID
anyway, and by the time he went to Thailand and back to meet you, I could no longer get into
immigration records. Never thought of digging through the guests’ backgrounds…”

“It would have taken you days.”

“I knew he was in a bloody Personality Suite, there are only – “

“Anyway, now’s your chance to make up for it,” Bruce cuts off her self-punishment session. “This
girl has seen each of us – “ he gestures to Theo and Selina, “so none of us can physically tail her. But
we have a SIM number she permanently uses. It’s switched off a lot of the time, but does crop up
occasionally.” In fact, their tracking from the past 24 hours or so has shown her to have been to a
gym, a supermarket, two shopping malls, and a dance club, but all in all, this amounted to perhaps
three or four daytime hours of SIM card activity, with no calls and about a hundred messages
swapped with, judging by quick search results, two female fellow students and a male gym
instructor. And the nine hours it stayed switched on at the graduate dorm at night were pretty much
devoid of activity. “She hasn’t checked in after she switched it off at the dorm at 10 am. As soon as
we get her next location, you go tag her there and keep an eye on her.”

Jamie nods. “I’m not a field operative, but so long as you show me what she looks like I’ll do my
best.”

“And you,” Selina adds, turning to Bruce, “can write to her when you see her phone is on and keep
up the chatting to give Jamie time to get to her. She fancies the pants off him since they sat together
on the inbound flight,” she explains to the other woman.

“I’m not sure I can compete with a gym instructor, though,” Bruce offers, if only to hide his
embarrassment. “After all, she thinks I’m just an asset manager for the Italian mafia – “

“I think her, er, heart is big enough for more than one man,” Selina quips as she pulls up a camera
screengrab of Kitty on her tablet, the result of Bruce’s dinner date the other night. “Here you go,
meet your new best friend,” she adds as she hands the tablet to Jamie.

…and has to quickly catch it again when the other woman nearly drops it.

Jamie has gone deathly pale and looks too shocked – scared even – to start her typical swearing.

“I... oh fuck. I think – I know who’s behind it all.”
Definitely not good news, by the looks of it.

“You said you haven’t talked to Peter Newell since you got dragged into this?”

*Dragged* may be a somewhat unflattering way of putting it, but it is no time to be nitpicky. “No.” Selina looks to her companions for confirmation, and is relieved to see them nodding.

“It’s him.” Jamie takes a couple of nervous breaths. “I’ve seen him with this girl in Hong Kong. Didn’t think much of it, thought maybe she was an asset he was developing, or just a casual lay, she didn’t really look like much of an asset unless she was someone’s mistress. So she’s the messenger between Newell and Mitchum, and he’s the one who stole the Matrix...”

And the worst thing is, it all makes sense. Selina remembers Wrigley’s glum warning: *no one is behind suspicion*. Well, he can say *that* again.

“I guess it still counts as progress... of sorts,” Theo offers.

“Except that it doesn’t give us much of a chance of nabbing him,” Bruce mutters. “What do we do, try to arrest a CIA spymaster because he has a girlfriend?”

“She’s likely his drug courier as well as his messenger,” Theo counters. “Assuming he killed the Suntec maid, he had to get that heroin from somewhere, and I don’t think he’d have risked buying it himself. Now that would be a good angle – ”

“We’d still need to have enough reason, or at least a chance, to search his PanAsian front office and wherever he’s staying at, if we’re hoping to nab him for drugs possession,” Bruce argues. “When you saw them in Hong Kong,” he continues, turning to Jamie, “did she see you?”

Jamie scowls. “She did, once. The second time I just saw them getting into a car together, but the first time I was in his office when she stopped by. He looked rather pissed off about the timing.”

“So no polite introductions then?” Selina quips.

Jamie smirks, but her face stays glum. “He was too busy ripping into me to mind his manners, anyway.”

“For what?”

“I told you, the guy hates me. Ever since – “ she pauses, apparently weighing the risk of divulging the story, but goes ahead. “Ever since I fucked up his attempt to catch Sutcliffe.”

So Wrigley’s reference to Jamie’s alleged role in the *Sutcliffe debacle* was not a red herring, after all.

“How did you manage it?”

“Wasn’t actually a matter of doing much. More of a matter of not doing what he asked.”

“Were you in a position to say no?” she asks the other woman, not quite believing it.

“Of course not,” Jamie scoffs. “But there’s always sabotage,” she goes on. “I wouldn’t have done what this guy did, but a lot of what I’ve seen in the years I’ve been in this business is pretty sickening, frankly. So I can see where he’s coming from. And when he made his statement in Hong Kong and The Guardian carried the story, I thought he had a point in making it public. Newell didn’t see it that way, to put it mildly. He really hit the ceiling.”

“Probably hated the guy for publicly disclosing things he might have made money selling,” Selina
suggests.

“Probably. Then again, he was probably crapping himself thinking there would be a far-reaching investigation and his own very recent theft could come to light. He must have found a way to make his copy at about the same time as this guy came to Hong Kong with his haul. Newell was known to be a hacking wizard, so he probably used some sort of backdoor to leave no record of his access.”

“Or to fake someone else’s, more likely,” Bruce jumps in.

“Exactly. But it was much more likely to have passed undetected before Sutcliffe’s bombshell.”

“And then he probably figured that he could use it to his advantage by blaming it on Sutcliffe,” Bruce goes on.

“Makes perfect sense, in retrospect. From his point of view, at least. Also explains why he was acting so extremely furious and frantic trying to catch the guy. It was Newell’s mandate anyway, seeing how it had happened on his turf, but he was so damn bloodthirsty about it, it bordered on being unprofessional. He wanted Sutcliffe dead or alive.”

“Dead would suit him better,” Selina quips.

“Absolutely. I couldn’t understand it back then, his real motives, but it was obvious that he’d jump at a chance to kill the guy and saw it as a vastly preferable alternative to Guantanamo or whatever else Sutcliffe would get if he were captured. And I didn’t want to be part of that.”

“What did he have you do?”

“I was supposed to hack into the Guardian guys’ accounts and scan their communications for signs of where Sutcliffe was staying. Newell was too busy manning a stakeout at the airport hoping to apprehend Sutcliffe if he tried to fly out, so he had to use additional resources to help with the online data sifting, I remember there was also a junior CIA guy he’d urgently brought over from Jakarta, and maybe others. I’d figured out where Sutcliffe was by matching the interior from his TV interview footage to file pictures of hotel interiors on the major booking sites, so I knew he was at the Luna, but didn’t say anything and pretended to keep looking until some local journalist figured it out and shouted about it. That was my first offence, as it were.”

“What, did he find out you’d known it?”

“No. He was just furious with me for being a slow stupid cow, the way he put it. Told me my last chance was tracking Sutcliffe to where he was staying after that, and trying to see if I could find an online flight booking in his name. Well, the guy isn’t an idiot, I suppose he just had his local benefactors book blocks of tickets on the flights he thought of taking through agencies, it looked like packaged group tours, that way when they cancelled their bookings at the last moment he could be sure there’d be a free seat if he bought one for cash at the airport. Which, incidentally, is what he did in the end. Anyway, I didn’t exactly kill myself looking, and when I did see something suspicious in a local lawyer’s e-mail, one of the people Sutcliffe used as it turned out, I snuck away to drop a handwritten warning note into that lawyer’s hand just outside the court, I reckoned if I’d found him out then the CIA people would soon find him too.”

“And that’s when you got nabbed?”

Jamie shrugs. “Newell could never convincingly prove it was me, we were at the very edge of CCTV coverage and I’d made sure I wasn’t facing any cameras, and with my hair dyed black it was easy to blend in, that’s why I’ve had to look like a Goth ever since I moved to Hong Kong,” she
explains. “But between the Luna and this, he was angry and suspicious enough, so he ordered me off the case and complained to my superiors.”

“But that’s not when you got suspended,” Selina prompts.

“No. My boss thought it was typical CIA dickhead behaviour and told me to concentrate on my GCHQ work. Which, at that moment, happened to be looking for the Matrix.”

And Newell, who was behind that, had to eat his stupid cow assessment in the most unpleasant way possible when Jamie almost nabbed Mitchum. “And when Mitchum told him about the maid and the bug, he probably figured out it must have been your doing, panicked and killed the girl hoping to blame the murder on you to shut you up.”

Jamie does not look happy with the scenario, but she does seem relieved to realise the likely truth. “Looks like it. Either way he realised someone had got too close, and killing Yanisa was a way for him to discourage further snooping by whoever he thought it was. But I know he was the one pressuring my GCHQ boss for the internal inquest after the murder, I just thought it was his way of hitting back at me for letting Sutcliffe slip away.”

“That was probably a contributing factor,” Selina agrees. “After all, from his perspective these were parts of the same plan, and of the same problem.”

“The good thing is, he must have thought he’d dealt with the threat you posed and was free to go ahead with the sale.”

“Until today,” Jamie points out. “As of this morning, as soon as he found out about the Suntec cameras, that’s no longer the case.”

“Do you think he’ll cancel the auction now?”

Bruce jumps in while Jamie is still pondering her answer. “Unlikely. If he doesn’t sell the Matrix now, he may never get another chance, and the data may be obsolete in a few months, or even weeks, the CIA will sure make an effort to shift their assets between the field and HQ if the stolen copy is not recovered. He stands to get at least 30 million from selling it – “ That, of course, is a reference to Selina’s bid; and they were betting on others bidding more. “And so far nothing points in his direction, all that’s happened is that someone fried the cameras in Mitchum’s office.”

“Someone with an EMP generator,” Selina reminds him.

“They are rare, but my own example shows that not all these devices are in government hands. It could still be an interested party hoping to get the Matrix for free, as you said,” he adds, looking at Jamie. “I think he’ll still try to pull it off. Mitchum is the one at risk, and to Newell, he is 100% disposable.”

Which makes Mitchum’s state of permanent panic quite understandable, in retrospect. “But then, if he thinks Mitchum is too compromised, he’ll need to show up in person at the moment of handover to bring the database and get the money,” Selina reminds him.

“And that’s the only point when we can catch him,” Theo points out, “that will be definitive proof of his involvement and will be sure to get us the Matrix.”

“If I am the winning bidder,” Selina counters. “Which is far from certain.” In fact, they had hoped it would be anything but certain. They will likely have IDs on the remaining incognito bidder by tonight – Jamie has been able to identify two others apart from the Syrian – but knowing who they are does not help them much in knowing where they are staying so as to track them and tail the
winner as he goes to the meeting; hotels and other official establishments that track staying guests are not the preferred sort of accommodation for terror suspects. And while they can find out Newell’s registered residential address as the head of the fictitious PanAsian, it is practically certain that he will not use that place, or his PanAsian office that is probably monitored by his CIA colleagues, to hold the exchange. It is either Selina’s win, or their loss. “I suppose I could try to contact Mitchum using the email and numbers he’s used to contact me and say I’m increasing my bid,” she offers.

“There’s no guarantee he’ll check the phone messages, he probably ditched those cards days ago,” Jamie argues. “Email’s possible, but he may have become even jumpier now that he’s scared, and if you increase your bid too much” – which is, of course, the only way she can guarantee a win – “he may smell a rat and stick to selling it to the current highest bidder.”

Much as she hates hearing it, Selina cannot argue with the logic. “So basically, our base case scenario is, one of these assholes will buy the Matrix tomorrow and then we’re fucked.”

She is surprised to see Bruce perk up looking positively pleased with his latest idea, whatever it is. “No. I’ll buy it tomorrow. And then they’re fucked.”

It is good to see him this upbeat, but Selina has to confess that on this occasion, his optimism seems very misplaced.

“You can’t show up and buy it as a small-time ‘Ndrangheta hitman. If they’d wanted it, they’d have put out feelers much earlier, and would have sent in the big guns for the final deal. These people are formal as hell – “

Bruce interrupts her, his excitement showing no sign of diminishing. “No, I’ll buy it as myself.”

Selina narrows her eyes at him. “As Wainwright?”

He shakes his head.

“As Wayne.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I’ve done what I could to make the references to Hong Kong events consistent with the way the real-life version went according to The Snowden Files, though obviously, a degree of “artistic license” was inevitable.
Damn you, Wayne.

It is 12:30 AM.

She stands on the narrow balcony of her suite peering down at the soft sparkle of lights a couple of hundred metres below. That’s what Bruce’s view of life must have been, for years; from his Gotham penthouse and from countless city rooftops. He is probably fast asleep now; he took his leave from the three of them shortly after 10 pm, yawning and quoting his 6 am wake-up call that morning, when they kept their Mitchum watch, as the reason for calling it an early night, besides the obvious reason of needing to get all the rest he can get before the day ahead. If only she had his ability to instantly fall asleep. With the adrenaline dancing under her skin like electric current, she’ll be lucky if she gets to snooze for a couple of hours.

It would have been so much easier if it were her walking into that meeting tomorrow.

But his damned flawless logic left no space for argument.

Naturally, their first reactions to his idea went more or less along the lines of you’re fucking nuts. Even Jamie, a relative stranger, asked him cautiously if he was sure he wanted to blow his cover, and pointed out that Newell’s most likely tactic if anything went wrong, or seemed to be going wrong, would be to take him hostage… to which Bruce replied lightly that he knows a thing or two about fighting from having spent months at a ninja retreat in his youth. And went on to calmly talk them through the logic behind his idea, starting from Theo’s argument that catching Newell at the time of the transaction was their only sure bet, to the point that it could only be guaranteed if the highest bidder was one of them, and the only one of them who was plausible as a last-minute buyer was he, with a face and a name Newell was sure to recognise and a Swiss numbered account to back up his claim; his motive for buying the database being, in an ingenious blend of reality and invention, a desire to keep the CIA at bay following their discovery of his survival by flipping around their blackmail attempt into a promise of mutually assured destruction.

All reasonable, and none of it any help to her now, when she is standing here wondering if he will be standing next to her on this balcony tomorrow night; or crouching, bound, drugged, and beaten, in some dark shithole; or lying in a hospital bed; or stretched out on a steel slab with a sheet over him. He says he will just buy the damn thing and leave it to the MI6, or to the Singapore police SWAT team, to get Newell afterwards; but what if something, or everything, goes wrong? What if Newell has armed backup; what if he has a reason to shoot at Bruce from a distance where he cannot be easily disabled? Or if, on learning that he is dealing with a rich loner rather than a terrorist organisation, he decides to keep both the money and the Matrix and brings along a syringe of pure heroin, and it takes too long for medical help to arrive? Twice she has seen Bruce go to his death, and continued in the belief that she had outlived him; and twice he came back… but there is no guarantee that his luck will last forever, and the prospect of outliving him a third time for real freezes her blood with icy dread. Somehow, when it was larger-than-life villains and momentous battles, the sense of danger was not as unshakable, as insidious; maybe it was the fact that he inhabited a superhuman persona, or maybe it is the closeness that magnifies the fear of loss, the simple fact that she did not know him and love him as much as she does now.

12:40 AM. Damn, damn, damn, damn. She slams her fist into the balcony railing and gets back into the room.
Her only sure chance of getting a few hours’ sleep is to go downstairs to the gym and tire herself out until she has to crawl into bed. But that will give her sore muscles and stiff legs on a day when she may need to be in top shape. As an alternative shortcut, she can pop into the upstairs bar before it closes at 1 AM for a drink; just one, to make sure it does not mess with her reaction time in the morning, something transparent, a sake or a gin and tonic or a shot of vodka, to cut down on the risk of hangover. It may not help, but it is worth a try.

The top-floor CitySpace bar greets her with the subdued reddish glow of its concealed lighting, a warm contrast to the gold-flecked deep black-blue of the city rising up beyond the glass wall of its three-storey windows like a sea shimmering in the moonlight. The waitresses are clearing away empty glasses and snack mini-trays from the scattered tables, the last patrons are signing their bills, and the barman has already started dimming the lights; at a quarter to one, he is ready to go home. Selina walks up to the bar – and decides, at the last moment, that getting a stiff drink is a risk she cannot afford. She will go run a couple of miles on the treadmill instead, and hope it helps, after all.

“I’ll have a Perrier, please.”

The look the barman gives her on handing her the bottle and glass is not so much flirtatious as conspiratorial; and as she wonders about the reason, she sees, out of a corner of her eye, Bruce turning to face her from the tall armchair he has been sitting in, next to the window, his hand holding a glass in a salute, an identical green bottle on the table in front of him.

“Hello stranger.”

“Couldn’t sleep either?” She pushes away from the bar and saunters over to him. Even to her own ears, she sounds grumpy, especially compared to his easy good cheer.

“I woke up,” he explains readily when she has sat down in the chair next to his. “Should’ve stayed awake longer.”

Right; and tomorrow’s showdown has nothing to do with it. “And drinking mineral water at the hotel bar is the best cure for insomnia.”

“Obviously.” He shifts his eyes from her bottle and glass on the table to give her a mischievous look. She declines the bait and says nothing. “I like this place,” he continues. “Reminds me of my old penthouse.”

“Miss it?” she asks, as gloomily as before.

“No, not really. I did like the view, though. And it’s the right setting to remind me how to act the rich egocentric bastard.”

This, finally, gets her to smile. “Is it working?”

“Can you tell?”

She glances sideways at him, still smirking “Not really.”

They sit in silence for a few seconds. The barman at the back is putting away the bottles and stacking glasses into a dishwasher; he must have decided to leave them in peace while he is closing down, probably mistaking them for lovebirds reconciling after a tiff.

“You really sure about all this?”

She knows it to be a pointless question, but it may be her best shot at getting him to admit to any
niggling worries; if she cannot stop him, perhaps she can at least help him iron out the potential glitches.

But he takes her question in a different light. “I can’t let people die out of greed. If this database gets to any other buyer, there’s bound to be blood.”

She shrugs, not from doubt or disbelief but out of frustration at getting a philosophical answer when she was angling for a practical one. “We’re talking about a lot of cash,” she comments matter-of-factly. His plan was to offer to buy the Matrix for fifty million.

“I can’t put a price on lives,” he insists.

“Your call, Bruce, it’s your money.” She cannot argue with his priorities, or his motivation; but what angers her is the sneaking suspicion that the CIA knew his priorities too, and bet on him to put up the cash to pay for their blunder.

“I would have spent it anyway,” he counters.

“On what?” From what she has seen, he does not make a habit of pointless spending. Outside of business, his three most valuable – admittedly, very expensive – possessions are the Ligurian boat, the villa, and the Sesto, in that order; and his most expensive purchase she has indirectly witnessed was her engagement ring, which costs more than the other three put together. He did finally buy the San Salvatore restaurant, though that one only cost him a couple of million francs and is a business acquisition, of sorts, what with it being profitable and all. But other than these, he will pick an adrenaline rush over a lavish purchase anytime.

“This and that,” he answers evasively. “What would you have done?”

“I don’t know.” She does know, but it reluctant to admit it when he is not fighting fair, banging on about taking the high road to draw attention away from the fact that he is risking more than money. “I’m afraid your crazy attitudes are beginning to rub off on me… but you know there’ll be no way to keep it all a secret.” Remembering how closely he used to guard his identity, she hopes he does not come to regret his present decision.

He looks away at the distant lights, but his expression as he ponders his answer, and his voice when he speaks, is calm and steady.

“It’s ironic, isn’t it? I thought the best way to make peace with my past life was to leave it behind and start from scratch. And it really helped, it put the necessary distance between the present and… all that. But the more time passed, especially after we finally went back to Gotham, the more it occurred to me that the only way I can really, completely move on and be free is not by running away but by accepting it, embracing it even, the person I was and was known to be, the good and the bad, and still going on with my current life the way I want it to be now. And the even greater irony is, our friends who made the deal with us thought that the best way to get my cooperation was to blackmail me with who I am and promise to bury my old self as a reward, and instead I can be most useful to them by openly announcing it.”

She does not like this sort of philosophical musings… not least because she can see the truth in them, and all this deep significance is making her sentimental and even more worried than before. Bruce is reckless enough at any time; when he starts thinking and talking about destiny and freedom and past and present lives, he becomes a mortal danger to himself.

He sees her upset expression, and misreads the cause, at least partly. “Don’t worry, I’m not thinking of moving back there… and doing things.”
It is somewhat reassuring, but not nearly enough. “In order to move back there and do anything, you’ll need to make it alive to this time tomorrow.”

“I treat it as a certainty.”

“To me it still seems like an open question.” She is stubbornly looking away.

“Bullshit.” He leans in close to her. “The only open question right now is…” She shivers as his fingers brush her neck as his other hand gets hold of hers. “…how we’re going to get to sleep tonight. More specifically…” he whispers right in her ear, “your place or mine?”

Now here is a prospect worth smiling at.

“Yours,” she mutters, with a sideways glance at him as she disentangles herself from his hands and gets up. “I don’t know if that woman is still staying in the room next to mine, and I wouldn’t want us to find out the hard way.”

TBC
"Ms Wainwright, are you all right?"

Selina's eyes fly open as she starts in her seat in the gloom of the surveillance van.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry, just dozed off for a sec."

She tries to hide the blush. Dozing off had little to do with it, but she is not going to tell a virtual stranger that she was daydreaming about the mind-blowing sex she had the night before. Normally, often as not, Bruce would let her take the initiative, delighted to submit to her wishes; this time, however, he would hardly let her lift a finger, insisting on being the most passionate and yet excruciatingly tender lover, his gentle hands and eager lips roaming her body all over, the proverbial calm before the storm adding a poignant urgency to the passion. What they may have lost in novelty over the past year, they have more than made up for in being, by now, perfectly attuned to each other, to be able to elicit intense pleasure with a single touch. She bites down sharply on the inside of her lip before her eyes flutter shut again at the memory.

Her companion du jour is one of four MI6 agents urgently summoned from Hong Kong and Dubai to help them catch Newell and, more importantly, recover the Matrix; Director Wrigley, who was, not surprisingly, called upon to make the big decisions, had to admit that a CIA HQ team could not make it to Singapore in time for Monday morning, with the 24-hour dateline difference working against them, and was forced to delegate. One of the men is now sitting with her in the van, driven by a trusted local freelancer, outside Newell's apartment complex; the second one is manning an identical observation post with Jamie outside the Pan Asian office; the third and fourth are, respectively, in yet another van parked just outside One Suntec, and in Jamie's office opposite, the last one armed with a sniper rifle trained on Mitchum's desk. Theo must be back at New Bridge Road in a radically different capacity from his previous stay there, talking to the local police chiefs, at this very moment; Wrigley was far from thrilled at the prospect of local involvement, but agreed to give the Interpol a limited mandate based on minimum need-to-know information to apprehend "an illegal weapon sale", which was enough to involve the Singapore police force and get them to have a SWAT team on standby, waiting to catch Newell as soon as Bruce gave them the location.

Plan A was that he would lead them to it using the gadgetry they had painstakingly prepared on Sunday afternoon, once he had come back from his shopping trip. His booty included a Hermes tie – he already had a smart suit and a silk shirt but the tie was a crucial part of the ensemble – an understated but obviously expensive affair with enough gold accents to make his second purchase, a gold tie pin, blend in. The pin was the real "crown jewel"; once Bruce and Theo were done with it, it became a masterpiece of surveillance gear, its onyx decoration replaced with an identical-looking "stone" with a built-in camera, the inside of its bend concealing a miniature microphone. The image and sound thus captured would be relayed to his associates via his third and final purchase, a smartphone, also extensively modified: they had opened up the inside lid covering the circuitry to install a powerful retransmitter and a second power source connected to a touchpad toggle switch at the bottom of the battery recess. That way, when the main battery was removed to ostensibly demonstrate that Bruce had rendered himself untrackable, both the main phone circuitry and the retransmitter would shut down to pass a bug sweep, but he could switch the retransmitter back on by discreetly pressing the toggle switch within seconds, as soon as he was reasonably certain he was out
of danger of detection. If that should fail, the surveillance van outside Suntec carried a compact mid-
range drone, and the respective agent doubled as a drone operator, so that, if Bruce was unable to
transmit his data but was still brought to Newell, the drone could follow him there and relay the
coordinates to the police. It was less precise, but was the best alternative as Plan B.

It is eleven AM by now. The three active screens inside the van show them the outside of One
Suntec, with occasional latecoming employees hurrying in, the outside of PanAsian on a quiet side
street just north of the downtown business core, and Mitchum's empty office seen through the
window, from the respective PoVs of the other two vans and the sniper; for now, the respective
audio channels are muted on standby. Bruce's PoV camera is still switched off; to conserve power,
he will only enable it once he walks into Suntec from the mall where he is now waiting, and that will
only happen once the Suntec van people send him a message when they see Mitchum walk into the
building. It is virtually guaranteed that he will have been ordered to go there to ascertain the damage
to the gadgets in his office, to placate any pushy bidders who may decide to show up in person at
deadline time, and to generally play the unenviable role of the canary in the coalmine. The
conclusion the four of them reached yesterday is that, most likely, Mitchum has never seen Newell
face-to-face, the other man being careful to conduct most dealings through Kitty, and with only a
disembodied voice to link him to Newell, his capture, be it by law enforcement or by terrorists, poses
little risk to Newell himself so long as he can still pull off the deal in parallel.

At a quarter past eleven, one of the speakers crackles to life just as a figure is seen scurrying past the
glass doors. "Mitchum's just walked in," the Suntec agent informs them. Bruce will have received a
text with a seemingly meaningless letter sequence to inform him about the same; two minutes later,
the fourth screen flickers on, zooming in on the reception and the guards from a PoV at his chest
level.

"Good morning. I'm here to see Mr Perry. I don't have an appointment but I'm sure we'll agree on
that once I talk to him."

His voice hits her without warning; deeply familiar, and yet completely different. Confident,
arrogant, smug, condescending; the voice of a man who has the world at his beck and call and is
perfectly aware of the power he wields. Everything Bruce Wayne never really was, but was known
to be.

It is working. One of the guards picks up the phone.

"Mr Perry? Good morning." She hears indistinct bleating on the other end of the guard's receiver.
"There's a gentleman here who would like to talk to you."

"Mr Mitchum?" Bruce takes over, oozing the same smug, unshakeable confidence. "I know there
may have been a mistake. But I assure you I need to speak to you quite urgently. No, we haven't met
in person yet; you've met an associate of mine, though. I'm sure you'll know who I am when you see
me. What I suggest is," he lowers his voice as he turns halfway away from the reception desk, "look up Bruce Wayne obituary online, yes, that's right, print it out, and come down to the lobby."

A couple of minutes later a visibly shaky Mitchum stumbles out of the elevator and approaches the
reception. As soon as his eyes lock in on Bruce he gives a start, his hand with the obituary printout
flying up, his look darting from the face on paper to the man in front of him.

"Mr Way…"

"Wainwright, if you please," Bruce cuts him short. "I think you'll agree that we should talk."

"Y…yes."
Bruce makes a show of pulling out his phone and removing the battery; seeing Mitchum's distracted face, he does not hesitate to immediately switch the retransmitter back on, the one-second break registering as a mere glitch on their screen. Mitchum turns to the guards, asking to have the pass issued, and they walk toward the elevator bank at the back. Bruce enters first and gives the mirror – and his worried audience – a frivolous wink. *Finally in his element,* she thinks bleakly. Selina has never been keen on having kids, convinced that she was not cut out to be a parent, but she can just about get to the point of reconsidering, seeing him like this. After all, people with kids are usually much more careful with their lives.

Bruce follows Mitchum into the office; she gets a glimpse of the familiar inner reception room followed by the equally familiar office, this time in daylight and from a new angle, approaching the desk through the door rather than the window. Bruce sits opposite Mitchum on the other side of the desk; the sniper's camera picks up a long-range image of him as he settles down.

"Mr Mitchum," he starts again, in an easy, almost affable voice, slowly drawling out each sentence. "I apologise for disabling your surveillance equipment in here the other night. You see, it was important from my point of view that we could have this conversation completely unobserved." *Oh, the irony.* "I know you're surprised I know who you are. But you now know who I am, so I think it's only fair that we start our meeting on an equal footing. You may imagine I have… ways of finding out things. You can be sure I'm keeping this knowledge private, it's not in my interests to share this information. You've met my associate, or rather my freelance subcontractor, the Sivaparan woman." She sees a flash of recognition in Mitchum's anxious face. "She's been quite diligent, if a touch too careful with my money. Pity, as it will cost her her own success fee. I'll still pay her original commission, so she shouldn't complain. At any rate, I've decided to take this matter into my own hands. You see, I really want this asset you're selling."

"Why?" Mitchum manages, at last.

"When was the last time you had to file a tax return?" Bruce asks him, his voice dripping with condescension, and while Mitchum is still scouring his fear-frozen brain for an answer, Bruce continues. "Doesn't really matter, but I'm sure you'll agree it's a shameless rip-off. More so in my case than in yours, believe me. So two years ago I decided I'd really had enough of this daytime robbery, and moved to a more accommodating jurisdiction under a different name. I had ways of still benefiting from my US industrial holdings, you see, through various charitable funds I'd set up, where I was able to… harvest a good portion of the proceeds." It is amazing how smoothly he can blend in blatant lies with the truth, turning logic on its head and transforming his humanitarian efforts into instruments of theft and tax evasion. "It worked perfectly for a while, until some conscientious idiot at the IRS started getting too curious. And since they had no easy way of tracking me down and proving I wasn't dead, they dragged the CIA into this, seeing how it was an international matter and how much money was at stake, from their point of view. So now these narrow-minded fuckwits from Langley," Selina can hear the real anger in his voice; finally, Wrigley has turned out really useful, if only as a way of adding verisimilitude to Bruce's performance, "have started trying to corner me. I could, of course, give them what they want, but it would cost me a couple hundred million," she sees Mitchum's eyes flashing wide at the mention, "and I think I can strike a much better bargain. As soon as I'd found out you were selling their prized asset, I knew I had an excellent chance. I may not use it, but I'll make it known that if anything were to happen to me, it would go public immediately. The threat of public disclosure, or of my selling it on at a bargain price to their enemies, should be enough to make these people accept whatever terms I may feel like proposing. Starting with a tax amnesty."

Mitchum is staring at Bruce as if the other man were Einstein, or God.

"And then," Bruce delivers the coup-de-grace punchline, "I'll offer to sell it to them. Cheaply,
something around ten or fifteen million, just to drive home the point that I'm not to be fucked with. And to give me a track record of the transaction as a guarantee of my future survival, seeing how embarrassing it would be for them if this whole affair ever came to light."

It takes a few seconds for Mitchum to find his voice; he is still too much in awe.

"Wha… what's your offer?" he stammers.

"Fifty million US," Bruce says lightly. "I reckon it would be at least ten mill above your current highest bid." Wild guess, but Mitchum's face registers no disagreement. "And I can throw in something extra to reward you for your goodwill."

To Mitchum's expectant stare, he continues. "You see, I've reckoned that the easiest and least suspicious way I could transfer the funds would be for the purchase of an asset here, let's say a portable but high-value object. So I've already put in place the arrangements for the transaction, a purchase of 50 million US Dollars' worth of bearer bonds here using funds in my numbered account in Basel. The transaction will be finalised at 3:30 pm this afternoon, as soon as the Basel bank is open for business. You'll then have a choice between the bonds themselves, or the object I was going to buy using them that is worth five million more. I already left a deposit with the sellers, and you will be free to use it toward the purchase, or cash it in as you may prefer."

While Selina is wondering what on earth Bruce could be talking about and whether that, too, is an inspired piece of bluffing or a real deal, Bruce pulls out a folded sheet of paper from his inside jacket pocket and hands it to Mitchum. Mitchum looks at it as if he were admiring a holy relic; the five million Bruce is casually offering to throw in surely represents a significant multiple of the success fee Newell must have promised him for his efforts, or, to put it more accurately, to shut him up.

"Mr Wayne, I agree." He both looks and sounds completely sold; even the habitual fear has taken a back seat to his eagerness. Whatever may have been said about Bruce Wayne's person and lifestyle, he was always known as a man of his word in business. "But I'm not the person holding the asset. I'll call him right away – " Mitchum continues hastily, hearing an impatient sigh on Bruce's part, "and ask for an immediate meeting."

_Bingo._

"You'd better also inform the other bidders," Bruce comments lazily.

"Of course, Mr Wayne." Newell may be holding the Matrix, but he is about to pay the price for having left the intermediate dealings to his cowardly minion; Mitchell will now be able to effectively pre-empt Newell's sale meeting by informing all bidders about a postponement. Sure enough, a minute later Selina's phone pings with a text delivered to the number she gave Mitchum. _Decision postponed, will send details by 1 pm._ He must have been too excited to have remembered to delete her name from the addressee list. She allows herself a tight smile as she shows the text to her MI6 van-mate and forwards it to Theo and Jamie.

Mitchum is presently on the phone to his handler.

"Good morning, sir," he bleats hurriedly. "I apologise for disturbing you, there have been some urgent developments. There's a buyer who has previously bid through Mrs Siva- through one of the current bidders who has now come forward with a much higher amount. He's offered fifty – " Mitchum pauses as Newell, presumably, asks him to repeat. "That's right, sir, and he's offering to pay it in bearer bonds or – yes, sir, he's a verified bona fide purchaser, I assure you. You can look up – " Mitchum glances down at the sheet of paper Bruce has picked up from his desk, where he has hastily scrawled a message, "the Gotham Times obituaries section for January 24th last year for his ID."
Must be an unusual way of identifying a bidder, but it's worked on Mitchum himself. Surely there will be several other obituaries there, what with Gotham having lost many prominent citizens in the weeks of the occupation, but there was probably only one wealthy enough to have been remembered on that day to be a viable candidate.

"Yes sir, it's him," Mitchum confirms half a minute later. "He can tell you in person – " he pauses, and Selina wonders what Newell is saying while Mitchum waits, phone at his ear. "Yes. We'll be there."

For better or worse, it is working.

"They're off," the Suntec van occupant tells him; presently the sniper joins him, his stakeout no longer needed. "I'm following them east-northeast, I think they're getting onto the East Coast Parkway…" He, of course, meaning the drone he has sent after the taxi they got into, once they were able to track Bruce's retransmitter signal down to it.

"Theo, you'd better tell your guys," Selina suggests.

"Already done," comes the reply, and if she were not so worried she would have been embarrassed for having pointed out the obvious. After all, Selina and her buddy, Theo, Jamie and the Suntec van people all get the same feeds, minus their own in the case of the van cameras. "But they'll be a few minutes behind."

How far behind depends, among other things, on where Bruce and Mitchum are going. The farther away the location, and the more deserted and visible the approach, the greater the distance that the SWAT team vans will have to keep between themselves and Bruce's taxi to avoid raising suspicion. Without a visual on the SWAT team vehicles, she can only guess.

Selina pulls up a map and does a quick check on the length and direction of the ECP. Going almost straight east after the initial northeast-bearing section, it stretches fifteen to twenty miles along the coast in the direction of Singapore's Changi Airport, other highlights in the vicinity including a Singaporean Navy base, an airbase, and a cluster of desolate-looking industrial buildings.

And on the GPS monitor screen showing a near-identical map, she sees the white dot of Bruce's retransmitter crawling along the wide arc of the highway, further and further away from the city centre, toward the end where a single road branches off to the left away from the coast, between the airport and the airbase, bound to be virtually traffic-free.

Not looking good.

xxx

"Mr Wayne."

Newell's voice is nothing like Bane's; drier and crisper and less jumbled. But the tone and the setting are still jarring enough to send spikes of fresh fear and old pain through her chest. Bruce is walking toward the far end of an enormous open space, toward what looks like an office tucked into a corner of what they now know is the Changi Exhibition Centre, a sprawling H-shaped building, currently deserted, sitting behind the airport on the northeastern tip of the peninsula of reclaimed land that is the Changi area, at the very end of Aviation Park Road, 20 kilometres east of downtown Singapore and mere paces to the international airport, guaranteeing Newell a quick and easy exit once the transaction is complete. Smart thinking, asshole.

Newell, an average-looking, middle-aged man with military-short hair, is waiting for him next to the
office door, dressed in a cleaner's overalls, a cart stacked with detergents next to him concealing, presumably, a laptop with the precious database and heaven knows what weapons; or rather, what other weapons besides the gun he is quite obviously packing in his overalls pocket.

"Good morning," Bruce delivers his own greeting in a level voice when they are several paces apart, giving no hint of knowing Newell's identity. "I've taken the necessary precautions," he continues, seeing Newell reach for a sweeper paddle.

The image and sound go out for a long couple of minutes before abruptly cutting in again. By now they are in the smaller office space, virtually empty, with only a basic desk and a handful of conference-room stackable chairs.

"…has already told you the financial basics," Bruce is saying. "I'll have 50 million USD in bearer bonds available to pick up here as soon as my Swiss bank opens, at 3:30 PM Singapore time. You can either take these, or if you prefer, the bonds can be used toward the purchase of a high-value asset that can be either rendered untraceable or sold at a good margin to interested collectors. You can look it up." He motions either of the men for a pen, and when Newell hands him his smartphone instead, types up a word onscreen. "I'm happy to stay with you until the funds arrive, and have you or Mr Mitchum accompany me to the bank to ensure my cooperation..." He pauses as Newell takes back the smartphone to check the asset Bruce mentioned and probably also flight times, to accommodate the change of plan. When Newell nods again, Bruce finishes: "…so long as I can be sure that I'll be receiving the genuine article at the completion of our deal."

"You will be, Mr Wayne." Newell pulls out a laptop from the square plastic tub at the top of the cleaning cart and powers it on as he sets it on the desk. The password and fingerprint scan complete, he pulls out a thick black disk drive from the same hiding place and connects it to the laptop, once again typing in a sequence of characters and scanning his fingerprint. Presumably, Selina thinks, with a silicone pad attached, pretending to be someone else. "When our transaction is finished, I'll modify the code, adding you as an authorised user," Newell adds. "I need your fingerprint for that."

And for added verification that the man he is dealing with is actually Bruce Wayne, no doubt.

"Of course." Bruce sidles up next to him and offers his thumb for a scan; beyond the laptop screen, Mitchum can be seen fidgeting in the doorway, keeping an eye on the exhibition area outside the office.

For several minutes, Newell takes Bruce through the basics of the Matrix, and Selina watches the alternating screens through Bruce's camera. They look exactly like the ones she saw in Gotham; the same screens, the same database structure, the same commands. This, at least, is a relief.

"They're right outside," the agent next to her mutters. She has been too absorbed watching the camera feed and listening to the goings-on to pay attention to anything else.

"The SWAT team?"

He nods.

The problem is, of course, that with the huge open space separating the exhibition centre entrance from the office door, and with Mitchum on the lookout, there is no way the team can approach in secret.

"Are you satisfied, Mr Wayne?" Onscreen, Newell's sharp eyes turn on Bruce.

"I am. How and where would you like to receive payment?"
Newell looks thoughtful.

"The object is… very recognisable, and its purchase is bound to attract attention. I'll take the bonds, Mr Wayne."

"Very well," Still the same easy-going tone.

"We'll stay here until 3 PM. Which bank are you going to to pick up the bonds?"

"Sir…" Mitchum pipes up sheepishly. "I'll go back to my hotel now, if it's OK..." Newell sends him off with a shrug, confident in Mitchum's loyalty assured by the yet-unpaid success fee, but Mitchum hesitates. "Mr Wayne, if you give me the receipt, I can meet with you to cash it in afterwards..." No matter how great his fear, greed outweighs it.

Newell's ears prick up. "The receipt?"

"I've promised Mr Mitchum a small reward for his services," Bruce explains dismissively. "I left a five million deposit for the purchase of the object with the event organisers..."

Newell looks instantly pissed off. "Mr Wayne, your dealings are with me. I'm paying Mr Mitchum a commission for bringing me buyers, and he is not supposed to receive any other remuneration from anyone." This is delivered with a withering glare at Mitchum. "If you're willing to throw in an extra five million, I'll be happy to receive it." He holds out his hand to Bruce, who seems in no hurry to produce the slip.

"Sir…" Mitchum starts, with the closest approximation of indignation, but seeing Newell reach ominously into the side pocket of his coveralls, the vestiges of greed-fuelled courage leave him, and he darts off at a crazy run across the empty hall towards the outside exit.

This throws Newell off balance. He whips out the gun he was reaching for and points it in Mitchum's direction.

"Don't," Bruce says steadily from behind him.

What the hell are you thinking? Selina does not know whether to be angry or distraught. Let him shoot the bastard, what difference does it make? But of course, it always makes a difference to Bruce, even if the life he is trying to save is that of a worthless coward.

Newell's head snaps halfway back toward Bruce, one eye still on Mitchum, before he makes up his mind and once again trains his gun on the escaping man, cocking off the safety –

"Your game's up, Newell," Bruce says calmly, standing up and stepping toward Newell from behind the desk. "Don't make it worse by committing another murder."

Newell's combined anger and fear reach boiling point at hearing his name; his face distorted, he spins to face Bruce, the gun in his hand staring Selina in the face on the screen. The next instant she hears a deafening bang, and the camera feed picture shakes violently as Newell shoots Bruce point blank.

TBC
The Changi Exhibition Centre is 100% real: see http://www.changiexhibitioncentr.com/siteplans.html, and other pages on the same site.
This time the agent does not ask her if she is all right. He watches discreetly, out of the corner of his eye, as she gasps, her hands gripping the armrests of her seat, and closes her eyes to stop her head spinning; her heart seemingly stops beating. She *knows* he is wearing Kevlar under the shirt; she is damned if it helps her calm down now. What if it did not hold up at such close range?

Gingerly, she opens one eye to squint at the screen. The image is jumping like crazy for another second or so, but when it steadies, the picture resolves itself into a close-up of the back of Newell’s head, and is accompanied by a thud and a pained squawk that tells her that Bruce has twisted his arm to get rid of the gun. Another violent lurch later, the view becomes a wider-angled shot of an unconscious Newell on the floor, Bruce presumably looking down on him.

“Weeeellll, Bloody fucking hell,” Jamie exhales over the intercom, her voice shaky. “Good thing the bugger didn’t go for a head shot.”

“You said it, kid,” Selina echoes, her own voice no steadier.

The camera feed now shows the SWAT team policemen rushing into the office; the sound of the gunshot was their cue to storm through the front doors, and by now they have covered the hundred metres that separated them from the smaller space. “You OK, sir?” the first of them asks Bruce.

“Yes, I’m good. Thanks for dropping by, guys.” He could have been thanking acquaintances for a social call. “Take his sack of shit out of here.”

As Newell is dragged away, Bruce walks over to the desk to pick up the laptop and disk, but just before he does so, he finally remembers the people watching him from around the city. The picture spins, performing a fast one-eighty, and presently he is seen grinning into the camera.

“Well, that was easy.” He is lucky to be beyond her reach, or else he would be physically under attack. “See you guys later.”

He winks – again – and shuts off the feed.

xxx

“Now this was unexpected.”

“Yes.”

It is not often that Bruce is seriously impressed, but this time he is the one still shaking his head, and she is the one agreeing with him. “I must say though, it went pretty well.”

“Sure did, bella.”

They have just stepped outside the PanAsian offices, and nodded their goodbyes to the guards now stationed outside the building. Outside, it looks like a typical old Singaporean two-storey wooden building, brightly painted with white trim. Inside, they could have been forgiven for having believed
themselves transported back into Gotham, what with Newell’s nondescript office and conference room being virtual clones of the Gotham Park Row premises they visited two weeks earlier.

The videoconference invitation arrived via Kettering, calling in the open, in the early afternoon; luckily for them, though perhaps unluckily in view of missed gloating opportunities, Wrigley was already on the plane for Singapore, no doubt to claim his share of the victory and get a shot at the coveted Intelligence Star – with little real intelligence in either sense of the word, Selina thinks, to show for it.

And a victory it has been, decisive, quick, and, all things considered, nearly bloodless save for the poor cleaning girl. Mitchum was caught by the incoming SWAT team right outside the Exhibition Centre building, and broke down in a wailing fit there and then, promising to fully cooperate and tell everyone everything he knew in exchange for a more lenient sentence, or at least for sparing his life; so much so that Bruce had to order him to keep his extensive revelations to himself until the MI6 and the CIA were there to debrief him, instead of spilling everything to the local police.

Newell’s travel arrangements have undergone a drastic change. He did not have to leave Changi for that, but instead of the international airport two miles west, he was taken three miles south to the Singaporean Navy Base, where he is by now enjoying the comforts of the brig at the somewhat ironically-named USS Freedom stationed there, in preparation to being deported to Guantanamo – a marginally better fate compared to what would have happened if Singapore had had reasons to oppose his extradition, as he would have been hanged for drug possession. The safe at the PanAsian offices held nothing but official papers and petty cash, but once Selina and her MI6 counterpart had broken into his apartment, she found, after a few minutes of recon, a concealed private safe built into the bottom half of the freezer; and when she was through with that one, it revealed, to their not-really-surprised but very satisfied eyes, a huge heap of 100-dollar bill packs, a familiar bag of diamonds, a vacuum-sealed hard drive, later revealed to contain a backup copy of the Matrix; and half a kilo of heroin and a bag of disposable syringes. No way he had bought so much shit just to kill a teenage girl; the man was, most likely, a heavy user, and the desperate need for concealment in a position like his, and for money to fund his habit, must have driven him into debt and prompted his theft. Pretty crooked, but quite straightforward investigation-wise.

Kitty is, so far, the only one to have escaped the clutches of the law, but not for long. She is now known to have boarded the first available outbound flight, but while that saved her from a hanging in Singapore, it will not help her for long to stay ahead of the CIA, once Mitchum starts singing. Selina is almost sorry for the little idiot; her airheaded love of a glitzy lifestyle will now result in her being a CIA slave for life, sent to play bait in whatever unsavoury undertakings they may be up to, under penalty of a prison sentence should she hesitate to cooperate. Oh well; she has brought it upon herself.

“The good thing is,” Bruce continues, taking her out of these musings, “we’re officially welcome in the States under either name, no strings attached.” He is still basking in it.

She bumps a fist into his arm. “I still can’t believe you told the President You can call me Wayne, sir... Do you have any idea how condescending you sounded?” She means it half-jokingly, of course, but has her fun cut out for her needling him about it in the days to come. She may be acting calmer than Bruce, but all things considered, it was quite a shock to her when, instead of the CIA top brass they had been expecting, the picture they saw on the other end of the call was one of the Oval Office.

“Well... I did call him sir, you know,” Bruce mutters in his defence, but he is still blushing.

xxx
“You look as if you’re drinking poison.” She watches, with some amusement, as Bruce makes an incredibly disgusted face after sipping from a champagne flute. “Or cow piss.”

“I suspect his multibillionaire tastes are too refined for a humble Dom Pérignon,” Theo teases him, likewise entertained by the display.

“Stop it, guys.” He gives them a look of long-suffering patience. “I told you, I don’t like champagne.”

“Then why the hell are you drinking it?” Theo asks, pretty reasonably.

“Because that’s what you got us.”

“I got it because that’s what people normally drink when they celebrate.”

Bruce is halfway through the demonstrative sigh when she snatches the flute out of his hand and drains it in a long sip.

“Here.” She hands him a mini-bottle of Gordon’s and a can of tonic from the minibar. “Make your own poison. We’ll save the good stuff for when Jamie’s here.”

They are back at the opulent Stamford Crest one last time; and by now it looks like an uprooted camp, with bags and suitcases stacked off to one side of the open living space, and a bunch of tied plastic bags with assorted trash heaped next to the tiny trash can. Theo is flying out in a few hours’ time, back to Lugano and the family, to tell Sylvie an unenviable and patently fake tale of the fictitious Interpol conference – or more likely, knowing Sylvie, to confess what he has really been up to. Bruce and Selina, as a result of her and Theo’s plotting, have left their respective rooms at the Swissotel and are, as of tonight, transferring to Theo’s Wayne suite at the Raffles. When they finally got hold of Jamie, it turned out that she was also flying out this evening, but had about half an hour to stop by and join them for a drink.

“To the Varese babies.” They have just received a text from an excited Gianfranco informing them, in a profusion of exclamation marks, that Chiara has just given birth to twins.

“And to us,” Selina adds as they clink the glasses together.

“No, wait,” Theo shakes his head at her. “That’s a separate toast, we’ll drink to it next... Brandon and Giacomo.” He looks at Bruce; it seems that the two of them have conspired to embarrass him today. “Who would have thought you’d be a real life godfather.” She must confess, it was something of a surprise to learn that Gianfranco and Chiara had named one of their sons after Bruce, or after what they think Bruce’s name is, even though they never stopped saying how much they owed them. “Now you’ll have to go to the battesimo, and tons of other Catholic ceremonies after that.”

“You know,” Bruce poises himself for a counterattack, “One of you is next. They say they’ll try for another baby next year. And if it’s a girl they’ll call her Selina.”

“They’ll call her what?” She eyes him suspiciously.

“Céline, in Italian. If they stuck to the French version, it would end up sounding like Che-linne,” he points out.

“And if it’s a boy?” she prompts.

The half-smug, half-mischievous look is back on his face.
“Then it’s his turn.” He tips his head at Theo. “I’ll tell them to call him Floriano...”

The words are barely out of his mouth when he has to dodge the champagne cork flying his way.

“You do that,” Theo does his best to sound threatening, or at least serious, “and I’ll put up a statue replica... you know which one. Full-size. In the company lobby. To greet you every morning.”

Bruce is still pondering the prospect when a knock at the door is followed by the clicking lock as Jamie lets herself in.

“You know, I did knock this time.” She grins at Selina.

“Come on in. We have three-quarters of a bottle of ten-year-old Dom Pérignon that this ignorant creature is refusing to drink.” Jamie’s round eyes at the mention of the treasured tipple become even more round at the news of Bruce’s resistance; he just rolls his eyes as Selina pours out the champagne and hands the flute to Jamie, who raises it to the three of them. The two champagne drinkers touch their glasses to hers while Bruce salutes her by proudly raising his G&T.

“How’s it going, kid?” Selina asks.

“I told you, I’m five months older than you,” Jamie responds, mock-sulkily. Selina had assumed her to be a couple of years younger and was surprised when they figured out the actual difference earlier that day.

“But I’m two inches taller,” Selina counters.

“That’s height discrimination,” Jamie deadpans.

“So sue me,” Selina shoots back, but both are grinning. “You look different.” An understatement, if anything; with her hair dyed back to what must be her natural dark blonde, she surely looks less harsh, though still quite a tomboy.

“Told you, it was just for the post.”

“So you’re out of here for good?” Selina assumed it was only for the debriefing, and now that Jamie has been officially cleared and the inquest closed, she will be back in Hong Kong, maybe even with a promotion.

“I am. As soon as I get to Cheltenham I’m handing in my notice.”

For all Jamie’s unhappy talk about the GCHQ, Selina took it to be the bitter grumbling of a temporarily wronged employee that would go away once the truth came to light, rather than permanent disillusionment. Apparently, she was wrong.

“I’m done with spying,” Jamie continues. “In the early years I liked it for the challenges. But now... I’ve had enough of the daily moral dilemmas.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Bruce jumps in, and Selina hopes he has the wits to shut up before he says more than he should. She suspects that it may be a matter of time before Jamie, like Theo before her, puts two and two together on the Batman front, but surely there is no reason to hurry her along.

“So what now?” she asks Jamie instead, to steer the subject away from dangerous waters.

The other woman shrugs. “Don’t know... they’ll keep me at Cheltenham for at least another month, I
suppose, debriefing, exit formalities, this and that. And then I’ll just lie low. Stay in the UK for a bit,
see friends, try to get my boyfriend back if he hasn’t given up on me yet, I haven’t been back there in
months.” She chuckles. “Settle down. Become a librarian.” Somehow this seems unlikely. “So from
now on, you can refer to me as bitch emerita.”

“That was hasty judgement on my part,” Selina admits.

“No worries.” In fact, Jamie does not seem in the least put out. “I took it as a compliment, actually.
I’d rather be a bitch than a sweetie.”

“You and me both, girl,” Selina mutters, but files away the sweetie bit as something she can tease
Jamie with if they meet again.

“You could work for us, you know,” Bruce remarks, all-too-casually, indicating Theo and himself.
“You know we have interests in the UK.”

“You mean the LAPCAT project?” She also sounds a bit too casual to be genuinely uninterested.
“The passenger hypersonic?”

“That, and a few others. I own a couple of research outfits there through Wayne that are looking into
alternative fuels, trying to get cars to run on air, saltwater, and the like, pretty interesting stuff.”

“How would an ex-spy come into that?”

“You never know, we might need a librarian.” He grins as he continues. “Fundraising and vetting
potential investors, for one. With a bit more practice at face-to-face bullshitting,” he winks as Theo
makes a face, “you’d be a great candidate for approaching interested financiers. These guys I’ve
invested in aren’t fully owned by Wayne, and we keep having to shoo away oil and gas lobbyists
trying to sneak in with a significant stake, pretending to be angel investors just so they can shut them
down. Wayne has spare cash, sure, but this research is pretty capital intensive, and I make a point of
donating at least half the profits to charity. So we could use conscientious partners with money. And
I’d rather be sure I know who we’re dealing with before we sign anything, or even get into serious
discussions. I’ve had... a bad experience with that once.” An understatement, if there ever was one.

“I think I know who you mean,” Jamie smirks wryly at him.

“I think you do. So to avoid any reruns of that, I could really use a former spy who could to a bit of
background checking.”

“I won’t have access to GCHQ data as soon as I’m out of there, you know,” Jamie reminds him.

“You have brains and principles, and that counts for something,” he counters. “You don’t have to
decide now, just... think about it.”

By now Jamie is confident that this is, indeed, a serious offer. “I will,” she assures him, and try as she
might, she cannot quite hide the excitement.

“But you’ll have to cut down on the swearing,” Bruce adds.

“Look who’s talking,” Selina mutters through her teeth, loud enough for all of them to hear.

“I mean when meeting outside contacts, not us.”

“In any case,” Selina cuts in, to save Jamie from further embarrassment, “you’ll have to come visit us
in Lugano. Especially if you like cars and want to take the Sesto for a spin.”
“Holy fucking – “ Jamie starts, and immediately clamps a hand on her mouth. “Sorry.”

Bruce takes pity on her. “No worries. You should, you know. Though I imagine you probably have an Aston Martin with ejection seats and built-in missile launchers...”

“Make that a Subaru,” Jamie shoots back. “It’s pretty fast, though.”

“Then you’d have no problem with the Sesto.”

“You could also try my quad bike,” Selina cuts in. “It’s pretty fun.”

“You drive a quad bike?”

“It’s not as goofy as it sounds.” She can understand Jamie’s incredulity, and pulls up a picture on her tablet to prove her point. “For one thing, this baby’s got a Ferrari engine...”

“Holy crap. This thing looks like the Tumbler, the one the Batman was driving and you – “

She turns to Bruce, and her voice falters.

“- were making,” Bruce finishes seemingly unruffled, though at this point his cover is looking very close to blown. “I know, he stole it from us.”

Jamie gives him a funny long look, and to Selina’s eyes, she is not buying it one bit; but she says nothing. Instead, she turns back to Selina, all apparent innocence. Taking the bullshit practice seriously already, by the looks of it.

“So which one do you prefer, the Lamborghini or the bike?”

“Neither,” Selina says with a grin. There is a degree of truth in that, even though she likes both, for different reasons. “They’re a bit too obvious. My favourite is the Volkswagen Beetle that I drive to work.”

Jamie just stares at her.

“Céline is a true follower of the Reimann car ownership philosophy,” Theo explains for her, “whose central tenet is don’t flash your muscle until you really want to. What she isn’t saying – “ Selina tries to motion for him to stop, still hoping to salvage enough of the secret to pull a prank later; but it is too late – “that it’s got a MacLaren engine built into it.”

This gets Jamie to laugh.

“You see, I wanted a Mini, or better still, a Cinquecento, but when we tried to get the engine into those, it kept spinning the cars around when doing turns. With the Beetle, with the wider base, you can lower the centre of gravity enough to keep it steady...”

“OK, forget the Sesto,” Jamie interrupts her. “If and when I get to Lugano, I’m driving that.”

xxx

“Do you think she knows?” Bruce asks sheepishly after Jamie has run off to catch her plane.

“What do you mean, do we think?” Theo repeats theatrically. “It’s obvious she knows.”

“But I don’t think she’s going to talk about it unless we do,” Selina cuts in. She is feeling more than a little mortified; it was her bragging about the bike that brought up the sensitive subject.
Whether from sensing her embarrassment or for other reasons, Bruce shrugs and wiggles his eyebrows to demonstrate a no-hard-feelings kind of resignation. “I guess it would have happened sooner or later.”

“I’ve been telling you for ages,” Theo insists, “just admit it and be done with it.”

Bruce shakes his head. “Nah... I’d rather not. I don’t want my past life to be endless gossip fodder.”

“And you think that flying back to Gotham for a board meeting isn’t going to provoke that?”

Bruce smirks. “They’ll just put it down to another case of billionaire eccentricity. You know, live as a hermit for eight years, come back from the dead from time to time, that sort of thing... And I couldn’t really give up on a chance to fly the hypersonic…”

“So that’s what it’s about?” Theo teases. “A bit of fancy flying?”

Bruce grins. “That and... other things.” He looks serious now, almost sombre. “I figured it was time I stopped pretending I wasn’t Bruce Wayne. I have no wish to move there permanently and be another local billionaire celebrity, but you know, I realised that the only way to get over it was to accept it. The Wayne part, I mean, not the other part. I thought I’d fucked it up too badly back there with the reputation I had, but then I figured there had always been people who had secretly detested me no matter what, and I couldn’t do anything about that, and didn’t really care; then there were always those who knew me and cared about me for what I was, and that wasn’t changing either. And then there were those who’d wished me well who I’d disappointed, and the only way to make things better with them is to show up and make amends. I just...” he shrugs again, “don’t want to live the rest of my life under a double identity skulking in the shadows.”

Usually Selina does not like it when he spouts philosophy, but she loves what he just said.

“So no more Batman?” Theo prompts.

“Nope. Blake’s got it sorted out, I don’t think he’d let me back there even if I’d wanted. Besides, as you know, I’ve got something closer to home to get my teeth into.” What he is referring to is his offer, joking at first but increasingly serious as they discussed it, to help repay the favour Theo had procured from Bruce’s “namesake” the Europol chief by signing on as an electronic crime consultant, an offer that Rob Wainwright has apparently enthusiastically accepted on the strength of Bruce’s Wainwright CV and Theo’s endorsement, probably also intrigued by the name coincidence. “For one thing, I’ll be happier hunting down credit card fraudsters and drug smugglers than dealing with the likes of Director Wrigley.” Well, he could say that again.

“Let’s see...” Theo’s thoughtful voice leaves Selina in no doubt of the teasing that will follow. “You plan to be a major industrial entrepreneur and investor, and a freelance crimefighter on top of that. So how exactly is this different from — “

Bruce does not let him finish, seemingly indignant at the suggestion.

“This is totally different,” he insists, waving his hand for emphasis.

“How?” Selina prompts.

“For one thing,” Bruce starts resolutely, “I won’t be wearing a cape.” Seeing their expectant faces, he continues, “and I’ll be based in Europe.” He seems to be gasping now, the way he keeps opening his mouth, visibly floundering; and the instant Selina’s and Theo’s eyes meet, they start laughing.

“What?” an exasperated Bruce finally cuts short their merriment.
Selina shakes her head at him. “Plus ça change, darling… plus ça change.”

to be concluded

Chapter End Notes

This one and the epilogue both have something of a whopping notes section; as I wrap up I get rather sentimental about stuff I dug up over the past two years, wanting to bring up all the references in case readers get curious and want to take a look.

1. I take a few seconds here to re-declare my love for Wikipedia (it is probably the only non-charity to which I religiously pay an annual 20 euro donation and consider it money exceptionally well spent). Just as I was poking around for a suitable battleship to send Newell off to, I found this gem on the US Seventh Fleet page (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Seventh_Fleet)
It was reported on 10 May 2012 that USS Freedom (LCS-1) would be dispatched to Singapore in the northern spring of 2013 for a roughly 10-month deployment. On 2 June 2012 the U.S. and Singaporean Defense Ministers announced that Singapore has agreed 'in principle' to the US request 'to forward deploy up to four littoral combat ships to Singapore on a rotational basis.' Officials stressed however that vessels will not be permanently based there and their crews will live aboard during ship visits. Couldn’t have done better if I had made it up ;)

2. The stuff Bruce talks about when he mentions his UK subsidiaries is all true… except, of course, for the minor matter of him owning them ;) You may be familiar with the name of Reaction Engines from Chinese Boxes and the earlier chapters here, and I apologise if I repeat a link I pasted earlier (I’ll check later but I’ve got too many), but the most detailed and well-illustrated articles on both Reaction engines and their passenger hypersonic project are:

One step closer to civilian space travel: Engine breakthrough could see jets fly from London to Sydney in less than five hours
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2239665/Engine-test-success-removes-key-obstacle-development-Skylon-space-craft.html

The Next Space Shuttle: Hybrid Engines Make Runway-To-Orbit Missions A Reality


…and of course, the moment there is a technological breakthrough, the military find ways to make weapons from it – Mr Nolan has a point in TDKR:

http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/aug/26/hypersonic-weapons-global-
3. On a less downbeat subject, the stuff about cars running on air and saltwater is not sci-fi, but so, unfortunately, are the lobbyists’ attempts to undermine them:


http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2739768/The-sports-car-runs-SALTWATER-Vehicle-goes-0-60mph-2-8-seconds-just-approved-EU-roads.html

http://qz.com/261450/this-sports-car-runs-on-saltwater-but-its-no-threat-to-tesla/

4. The very Tumbler-like quad bike was a fun find – check out the photos to see the resemblance! The Volkswagen is less elegant; the reason I stuck the link here was to demonstrate that Selina’s souped-up Beetle is not quite as impossibly crazy an idea as it sounds, but I hope hers looks better ;)


http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2512765/Volkswagen-Golf-Design-Vision-GTI-costs-staggering-3-4m.html

5. By way of odds and ends,
- here is a somewhat entertaining article showing what dubious dealings former spies get into: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2827781/Former-MI6-spy-probed-defrauding-woman-centre-one-Britain-s-toxic-high-profile-divorces.html

- and here is a taste of what Bruce might end up doing in his new hobby ;) http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/nov/07/silk-road-20-arrest-six-britons

- Finally, when double-checking stuff on the Swissotel, I noticed that they put up nice new photos at http://www.swissotel.com/hotels/singapore-stamford/media/photos/ including a less-gaudy version of a Stamford Crest suite. For some reason I cannot move between photos in Internet Explorer but have no such issues in Chrome.
Some time later

This is ridiculous.

She knows she has brought it upon herself and could have avoided all the hassle, but Selina is not one to back away from a challenge. She crouches down on the sloping tiled roof, doing a mental calculation of where she must be relative to the rooms below, peeks down, then crawls forward a few more feet and, satisfied that she has reached her target, lies flat on the edge of the roof before lowering herself down, as carefully as the straining muscles in her arms will allow, until her toes touch the balcony railing. From there, it is a matter of a split second to grab hold of the partition with one hand to steady herself and, crouching down again, make a fluid half-jump to the balcony floor. She gets out the strip of plastic she had the foresight to have picked up on her way here and, sidling up to the door lock, pushes a corner into the tight gap between the door and its frame right above the lock, applying pressure until she has two inches of plastic inside. Dragging it down, she feels, with a frisson of satisfaction, the moment when the latch gives and slides back into the mechanism – and, giving the door a sharp push, she is inside.

…to see Bruce standing right behind the curtain, barely out of her line of sight in the dark bedroom, regarding her with an indecent grin as he pulls off the goggles.

"You could've knocked, you know."

"And where's the fun in that?" Of course she could have knocked; or else she could have just walked over to the reception and asked them for a spare keycard, both perfectly easy alternatives once she had discovered, on her way back from the spa, that she had left hers inside their suite… but neither of them quite as entertaining. Besides, she was sure Bruce would sleep all the way up to dinnertime, and thought that sneaking in would avoid waking him up. Well, no luck in that department.

"How long have you been awake?"

"About a quarter of an hour. I woke up but was too lazy to get out of bed, and then I heard you jumping around outside." Impressive, considering that she had tried to make as little noise as possible. "How did you get onto the balcony?"

"Rooftop."

He looks at her with profound disapproval.

"What, not enough metal in your leg yet?"

"We're on the third floor, darling."

"And last time you were jumping from the height of the second floor. Trust me, it would've been enough – "

just kidding
"OK, OK, I won't do it again. Happy?"

"Hungry," he grumbles.

"Then what are you waiting for? Get dressed, or else we'll miss the after-dinner appointment." She walks over to the closet and pulls out a dress.

"At that rate, I'd rather skip dinner and get a takeaway," he calls after her.

"If we get out in ten minutes we'll have time for both. Stop daydreaming and get out of those pyjama pants."

xxx

It is 8 PM on Tuesday evening, and they are staying in Singapore for one more day and one more night after that, before they fly out on Thursday morning back to Thailand, to spend a long and lazy weekend at a remote mountainous paradise on the Burmese border, a postcard-pretty village called Mae Hong Son. She was hooked on the idea from the moment Bruce showed her the photo of its gold-tipped temples reflected in the miniature lake at its core, though his own reasoning centred instead on the hilltop the picture was taken from, his idea being that the hilltop was a perfect spot for a late evening excursion, meaning, of course, another bout of sex au plein air. She is not in the least inclined to argue… not that they have to wait until then.

Now that the mission has been accomplished and their assorted cover identities are out of the way, they can finally stop pretending they are not married and take full advantage of their status. The most obvious consequence is the fact that they are staying together at the Wayne suite; but apart from what they can enjoy as law-abiding visitors, they have been determined to have fun staying ahead of the Singapore laws by breaking the public decency rules when opportunities arose without getting caught.

She has to admit that their first attempt, getting a ride on one of the Mount Faber Jewel Box cable cars last night, did not quite live up to their high hopes: they discovered, to some consternation, that there was a two-minute stop at a station halfway through the 12-minute ride each way, and seriously, six minutes is really pushing it even for a mega-quickie. Not that they did not enjoy the ride still, not to mention the view… but tonight, they are heading out for an early dinner so that they can make it to the Singapore Flyer ferris wheel, the world's largest observation wheel less than a mile away from the Raffles at the edge of the marina, to take one of its famous 30-minute rides before it stops at 10:30 PM.

And if that one is as nice as they say, views and all, then they will be back on it the following week when she has to spend five more days educating the regional Interpol HQ about the finer points of safecracking, repaying one more favour Theo had procured on their behalf. Bruce, on hearing this, managed to rearrange his plans so he could hang around, making it into a very enjoyable proposition, especially considering that once they are back in Europe they will see little of each other for two weeks: it will be Lyon for her and the Hague for him until the mid-August lull when they are off to board the boat in Liguria to take it south along the Tyrrhenian coast and then east to the fairytale island of Santorini, where Alfred has promised to join them for a couple of days. Pretty busy, but all in all, a pretty good plan.

They are finishing the hors-d'oeuvres at the 70th-floor New Asia restaurant back at their old base the Swissotel. It is the fanciest and highest restaurant in the vicinity, highest meaning, of course, unbeatable views; and, no less importantly, it is even closer to the Singapore Flyer: they can get there in a 15-minute walk or a two-minute cab ride. They have been running through their daytime options for tomorrow, assuming they get up at a non-obscene hour; so far they have agreed to take a quick
look at the famous, enormous man-made "singing trees" on the other side of the marina at lunchtime, and are trying to decide between a repeat trip to the bird park and a soak in the rooftop swimming pool at the Marina Bay Sands hotel as their plan for the late afternoon. The pool is a nice idea on a hot day, but their fear is that it will put them in the mood for activities that it will be too public to comfortably permit.

"The park, then," Bruce concludes. "After all, we've both been there, but we haven't been there at the same time. We can stay until it closes... and maybe pretend to have got lost to stay an extra half hour or so."

"Sounds good. You know," she sits up and leans closer to him, "on a different subject, there's something I've been wondering about. When you were talking to the Matrix sellers the other day, what was that high value asset you were baiting them with?"

He grins at her. "Ah, that... I was hoping to be able to show it to you by now, but seeing how you never left the suite until 6 pm and I never left it until now, it had to wait. I could explain it to you, but I think it's best if I show you tomorrow."

She makes a puzzled face. "Intriguing... what, no clues until then?"

"Well, you know how a picture is worth a thousand words and all that? I figure the same goes for the thing itself."

Tomorrow it is. But between then and now they still have the ride to catch.

xxx

"Labour day."

"What's Labour Day got to do with it?"

"OK, Columbus day."

"Ditto...?" she shoots back.

"OK, what's your date?"

"Christmas."

"Come oooon," Bruce chides her. "That's five months away."

"It's been twenty years, Bruce. It can wait five months."

"No, it can't."

"OK, Thanksgiving. That's my final word." She makes a face. "Although I really have nothing to thank him for."

"Nonsense."

"Name one thing."

"Being born."

She ponders it for a moment. Ever since her legit status vis-a-vis the US authorities was finalised in their Presidential videoconference two days ago, Bruce has been subtly pestering her to get in touch
with her father, whom, as it turns out, he has traced to his current residence, that same South Dakota farm where he has been living with his second wife, two teenagers and a pre-schooler – Selina's half-siblings – for the past fifteen years or so. She was, to put it mildly, less than excited about the idea, though the mention of half-siblings did arouse her curiosity. But it is obvious by now that he is not letting go of it.

Which nonetheless does not mean that she has to give in easily, or else he will be telling her to call her mother next. That is, thankfully, more of a remote prospect; Bruce has confessed to being temporarily stumped by the sheer number of American women named Emily Williams, and has bemoaned her decision to marry a man with the third most popular surname in the US, with a full 1.7 million of Williamses recorded, and not keep her previous surname. Selina sees it as a reprieve, though, she suspects, a temporary one.

"If I hadn't been born I wouldn't have known it," she shoots back sulkily, "and it probably wouldn't have made a lot of difference to the world as a whole…"

His response is to walk right up to her and take her by the shoulders, looking her straight in the eyes from about four inches away.

"It would have made a world of difference to me." He sounds dead serious. "And I'm sorry about nagging you. It's just – I just think it's the greatest luxury in the world, being able to talk to your parents…"

A luxury he has not had for thirty years.

"Sorry," she says softly, all desire to argue gone out of her. "I'll call him at Thanksgiving, I promise… Maybe earlier."

xxx

"Are you sure about these?" he asks her cautiously about half an hour later, as they are getting ready to go see the trees, the birds, and the mysterious object in between, seeing how she has picked out a rather, well, short pair of shorts for the outing.

Normally he is fine with whatever she is wearing; if anything, it tends to be the opposite, with Selina teasing him trying to get him not to wear black. What in the world is the matter?

"Don't like them?"

"Love them," he responds enthusiastically. "It's just that the place we're going to see this… thing… is a bit on the boring side."

"Ah." Has he decided to buy a museum artefact? "OK, if boring's what you want, boring's what you'll get."

He does not really get boring in the end; what he gets is Selina at her society-lady sleekest, wearing the cornflower dress they once picked out together in Lugano, its relative simplicity the perfect backdrop to the gorgeous pearls she is once again able to wear, its deep colour echoed by the sapphire wedding ring on her hand, his recent gift. The other ring is sitting in a vault back at their company HQ, but wearing nearly a million dollars' worth of jewellery should be sufficient proof of her serious credentials. She would have worn her hair done up to complete the image had she not cut it into a short, boyish bob earlier that morning, tired of the heat and humidity and momentarily envious of Jamie who boasted about never even needing a blow-dry. Bruce was less than thrilled and threatened to grow a goatee in retaliation, until she promised to grow it back after the summer, all the
while relentlessly needling him for his Neanderthal male chauvinist taste.

She takes a half-spin in front of the mirror. "Am I presentable enough?" she asks over her shoulder.

"Perfectly. Ready to go?"

"I don't know what I'm ready for," she points out, "but ready I am."

xxx

No, she wasn't quite ready for this.

The walk done and the trees seen, and the birds still waiting, he hailed a cab and asked the driver to take them to Ngee Ann City Civic Plaza on Orchard Road. Try as she might, Selina had no way of figuring out what that address stood for without an online check, which Bruce playfully but persistently discouraged. She was left chuckling at her sieve of a memory when their destination revealed itself as the Singapore JewelFest, a huge annual trade fair and the showcase for the latest and greatest creations available for sale, or for avid window-shopping. She used to remember these things, and Bruce himself mentioned it to her just a few days ago when they arrived in Singapore… but with all that happened in between, she could be forgiven a bit of forgetfulness. He seemed happy to have surprised her, for that matter, and she was not going to begrudge him that.

She is now gazing in impressed wonder at a rather huge diamond necklace in a bulletproof display cube shooting off radiant reflections with every minute change in the light angles as Selina walks slowly around it. Its centrepiece is a positively enormous yellow diamond drop, at least 400 carat, apparently flawless and elaborately cut to maximise the sparkle, suspended off a stylised array of branches, each carrying a large brilliant-cut white diamond at the tip. There must be a total of 600-plus carat in it; no wonder it is called L'Incomparable and the jewellers who made it, who clearly know Mr Wainwright from a previous visit and have high hopes for his purchasing power, have assured them that it is certified to be the most expensive necklace in the world. 55 million US, she remembers Bruce's promises from the Matrix negotiations; yes, it is easily worth that much.

"Like it?" Bruce asks her sotto voce as he walks up to her.

She is impressed, without a doubt; whether she likes it, however, is less of a dead certainty. Whether she likes it enough to have him buy it is, in fact, unlikely. But again, she cannot begrudge him the intention.

"It's interesting," she starts. "Kind of chunky though… so that's what you were going to exchange for the Matrix?"

"As a matter of fact, it was the other way round," he explains, still in a half-whisper, making it clear to the assistants hovering around that their discussion is a private matter. "I thought of buying it before I decided to join the bidding, and then it was a useful bargaining chip, especially the deposit I left."

"Buying it for…?"

"For you." He seems surprised at having to state the obvious.

"Any particular reason?" she looks sideways at him, half-smiling.

"I don't really need one, do I?" He mirrors her expression. "But since you're asking, this past Monday was our wedding anniversary…"
"Oh fuck." She feels the blush burning up her cheeks. "Can't believe I –"

"No worries. We were kind of… busy anyway."

"I wasn't," she points out. "But yes, some of us were busy getting a huge whopping bruise on their chest." Needless to say, Bruce got off very easy, the bruise being the only temporary reminder of Newell's shot; but it is still a good argument to use next time he says something about her being reckless.

"Anyway," he adds, steering the subject away from the bruise territory, "hopefully we'll have many more to celebrate properly."

"Yep, you said it... No gifts though, you've got to promise." The best anniversary presents – the only ones she needs – would be having him, alive and there, to celebrate with her.

"OK… but maybe just this one? Please?" He looks obscenely endearing when he gets puppy-eyed. "Try it on, at least, see if you like the way it looks on you."

"OK, you win, I'll try it on," she responds with a chuckle. "No promises beyond that."

This predictably sets off a rather complicated procedure – the room being sealed off, the guards summoned to stand outside it as the alarms are deactivated from somewhere within and the cube is opened, the assistant donning gloves to gingerly lift the sparkling artefact and place it on Selina's neck. Two years ago, she would have been thrilled.

"What do you think?" Bruce asks.

She looks at her reflection, cocking her head sideways one way and the other, watching the light play on the stones.

"It sure is sparkly…" she begins, and before she can continue with the more critical part of her assessment, the one where she meant to mention its considerable weight, for one, he is about to motion to the manager, no doubt to complete the purchase formalities, so Selina has to quickly put a hand on his wrist to stop him.

"But seriously, I have all the jewellery I want, I swear. I've got the world's most beautiful pearls." Not to mention the most useful. "I've got the world's most expensive, one and only whole-diamond ring." I've got you, which is a trillion times more valuable. "And now I've got a wedding ring. Which I really like, more than this one."

Her mind flashes back to their wedding at Lugano's Palazzo Civico, allowed to go ahead after she had managed to explain the loss of her birth certificate to expedite it by blaming it on the Gotham occupation; a simple, low-key affair, just the way they wanted it, its only other attendees being three men in dinner jackets – Alfred, persuaded to play best man, Lucius, and Theo – and Sylvie as maid of honour, her elegant silk suit an ironic contrast to Selina's bridal outfit of an ankle-length red sundress, the only one long enough to cover her splints and loose enough to let her hobble around easily with a cane.

"It's just a sprig of big rocks," she continues. "Beautiful, but impractical. We can do much better things with the money."

"Such as…?" He sounds intrigued, probably assuming that she has a plan, which she doesn't.

"I don't know…" she begins distantly. "Buying spy databases, for one thing," she suggests as he tries not to laugh. She hands the treasure back to its owners and leans in closer to his ear. "Comunque se
"She sees the momentary terror in his face even as her reflexes kick in, her eyes providing her with an instant readout of the room and the layout of the security arrangements. Two cameras inside, three outside, one on each door; five motion sensors, the central one probably doubling as a temperature gauge; the cube has a pressure switch and the metal latch acts as a circuit breaker sounding the alarm unless it is deactivated in advance... doable but a pain and might need explosives, or at least the EMP. No, the best way to do it would be to wait until they move it, something like this has got to go to the vault at the end of each day, or it can be apprehended once bought, by ambushing the armoured van, creating a distraction with a couple of smoke grenades, cutting open the back, then getting out on a courier motorbike parked nearby before switching to something innocent-looking away from cameras, like a scooter or a cab. Easy.

For a fraction of a second she is excited... but only for a fraction.

She has too much to lose by now, and a momentary thrill is not worth it. There are things in her life much more precious than sparkling rocks, no matter how big or expensive.

She turns back to Bruce, still looking quizzically at her, with her best innocent expression.

"Just kidding."

This is it. Three stories, 26 months, 54 chapters, and almost 200K words later, I bid this extended tale my fondest farewell. I love these guys to bits, and have aimed to give them my best; I am now content to leave them in their happily ever after, with its share of craziness. Thank you, dearest reviewers, for having been my collective muse and for having had faith in me to stick through with this. And thank you to all readers who have made it to this point, for taking an interest in this little corner of the Batman universe.

I have one last bit of an epilogue to tack onto this, and apologise in advance for leaving things on something of a businesslike note in there. But I've had it written for more than a year by now and might as well stick it in for completeness' sake.

... and when I am done I will finally respond to the lovely reviewers. It may not look like it but I do appreciate the kind words.

Chapter End Notes

1. I follow the TDKR convention in having them wear night vision goggles; however, something more advanced exists or is likely to be produced soon:
The contact lens that could let you see in the dark: Researchers reveal graphene 'supervision' sensor
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2584617/The-contact-lens-infrared-vision.html

2.
Williams is, indeed, the third most popular US surname, with 1.7 million bearers. I have no idea how many women named Emily Williams there really are, but amusingly, there is definitely one that isn't:
How 'high-level US government agency' fell for fake femme fatale created by two hackers

3.
Mae Hong Son may have come up in an earlier link, but just in case, you can find a few photos at http://01cheers.livejournal.com/7614.html – namely, the last fifteen following the Bangkok ones.

I will not subject you to a personally-procured picspam of Santorini, but if you have not been or seen slideshows of it, do look up online images (looking for Santorini and/or Oia, which is its most picturesque village). I figured it was a beautiful alternative to Liguria for their summer holiday.

4.
I will, however, subject willing readers to a non-personally-procured picspam of a really beautiful boat. Finally I have seen something that looks 100% like an interior Bruce and Selina would approve of. It is about half again as long as the 115 feet I allowed him to buy in Chinese Boxes, but we can just imagine some of the spaces being smaller (and I think they can do just fine without a grand piano music room ;)


5.
My trip to Singapore was in prehistoric 2007, and by now the picspam I put up of it no longer reflects the latest additions to its highlights. The Mt Faber cable car ([http mountfaber.com]mountfaber.com) was there, but the Singapore Flyer (singaporeflyer.com) wasn't; nor were the singing trees. For a more up-to-date overview of the city, check out http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destination/78902/Singapore-city-break-guide.html

6.
The JewelFest and L'Incomparable are both real. The only tweak I did was to move the time of the JewelFest from mid/late October into, presumably, late July/early August when the guys were there. The necklace was there in 2013; I do not know who bought it in the end.

www.singaporejewelfest.com;
epilogue and endnotes

Chapter Notes

NB The endnotes are so damn huge that I had to put them into the main text.

epilogue

*Bruce Wayne’s address at the Wayne Enterprises Board of Directors meeting, September 15*

Please... if simply showing up gives me the right to a standing ovation, I should do this more often. It sure is better than the welcome I got from the Gotham Times: *Bruce Wayne cheats death again*. I’m flattered that this is front page news, but it sounds kind of disappointed, if you ask me.

It’s good to know that you don’t share that sentiment. Today is the second anniversary of my last – my previous attendance at such a meeting, and when Mr Daggett told me I didn’t belong here, I confess it was a sad thing to hear. I knew it was temporary, I knew we were dealing with a case of fraud, but I had no idea at the time that it would be two years before I saw all of you again.

The person directly responsible for my coming here is Mr Fox, whose CEO appointment you’ve been endorsing for the past ten years. Last year he literally made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. He told me he’d let me fly the hypersonic prototype Wayne Enterprises has been working on, in close competition with my UK company Reaction Engines, I may add, to come to Wayne Board meetings. Reaction Engines have been successfully developing the pre-cooled jet technology for the European LAPCAT project, as distinct from the pulse detonation engine Wayne Enterprises has designed, and have excellent results testing the engines on the ground... but until they have a *flying* prototype, I’ll be tempted to attend meetings here in Gotham, so long as my wife will allow it. I see you smiling but it’s a serious matter, I assure you. This time we made a deal, she let me fly here but she’s waiting for me to join her for a hang-gliding course in Rio de Janeiro after this meeting is over. I’m terrified already. I really am, Lucius.

Seriously though, it’s good to be back. It’s good to see familiar faces and to welcome the new members. I’ve been an absentee owner and, even worse, and absentee Chairman, but I am deeply grateful to Mr Fredericks who has been an exemplary Acting Chairman following his retirement from top management duties. Douglas, I owe you a huge debt.

To the unvoiced question of why I’ve played dead, I can only say that the news of my death was an honest mistake on the part of those who announced it. I didn’t escape the Gotham insurgency unhurt, and while I lay in a coma, no one, including myself, had a way of knowing, or of making known, the fact that I’d survived. Besides, the city had other urgent priorities to deal with. I was happy to know it had been saved from destruction, and am grateful to the man who laid down his life to make it so.

In the following months that I spent slowly recovering in Europe, I thought about coming back, but I
could see that between my shaky health at that point and your excellent leadership, there wasn’t much I could contribute to the company besides financial resources that I was able to direct back to it anyway, after the Wall Street fraud was exposed.

Still, I’ve closely followed the fortunes of Wayne Enterprises while running my other business in Europe alongside its general manager, Mr Reimann, no, not the one Lucius poached, I’m talking about his uncle. And I’m happy to say that not only did I successfully defend it from a Wayne Enterprises takeover, enthusiastically proposed by top management and supported by Mr Fredericks, who I must compliment on his impeccable business judgement, but I’ve also been able to help Wayne Enterprises pick up new business from US, UK, and Italian clients; and I intend to continue doing so, so long as our top managers stop trying to take over my Swiss company.

To the other unvoiced question, of why more and more of our new business relates to civilian rather than defence technology that Wayne Enterprises became famous for in recent years, I must answer that my father’s vision for the company wasn’t to enable warfare but to save and improve lives, and I want us to be true to this vision. We still have defence contracts, but I know that Mr Fox takes great care in selecting and vetting clients and contracts under your guidance, and our long-term plan is to phase them out over time. This clearer focus also involves being more selective in developing and producing surveillance technologies that can increase the risk of invasions of privacy. This is a greater concern for our European company whose main business has been security equipment, but I plan to align our policies in this respect and put in place more stringent checks. It may lose us additional revenues, but recent events have shown that advanced technologies are often misused in the absence of public accountability. Our remaining priorities in the defence and dual-use sectors are to promote innovations that help keep soldiers and police officers safe, not help them kill.

Let’s not forget that the project that made Wayne Enterprises a household name in Gotham was the elevated urban railway, my father’s dream that Mr Fox brought to life when he created its pioneering design. Building on this legacy, we plan to focus increasingly on developing groundbreaking transportation technologies like commercial hypersonic travel, driverless cars, personal flying vehicles, developing more efficient engines, and making fuel from renewable and widely available resources, which is what our recently acquired subsidiaries aim to do on an industrial scale. I wish I could’ve bought those two directly, Lucius, but I had to bow to Wayne Enterprises’ superior means. Besides, I now have a promising career in European law enforcement as a cybercrime consultant for my namesake. No, not Wayne, I’ll tell you later, Douglas.

I have great faith in this company’s future, and supreme confidence in this Board and in the management’s ability. As you know, I take no share of the profits, they are reinvested and donated to charity, but I have a responsibility for the business that my family built. And I look forward to working with you again.

fin

Really endless endnotes

1.

Remember where it all started? I always liked Lugano, but these stories got me 100% hooked. When I was back there this past summer I made a point of going up yet another funicolare, this one far from Lugano itself but opposite the lake from Carona, with very good views of it; and here are the results.
If you look at the bridge, Carona is above its left-hand end, with Mt San Salvatore, the location of the restaurant, beyond it to the right, and Lugano behind that one, around the bay. The point where the bridge meets the hillside is the beginning of the Grancia tunnel that also figures prominently in Catching Up. Mt Bre where they went later at night is also in the picture on the far right, but it blends into the higher mountain immediately behind it.

http://tinypic.com/r/34rd11c/8

A close-up of the Carona side is here:  http://tinypic.com/r/2a7hrv4/8

and an even closer close-up is here. If you see the clump of taller trees below the bright red building, that is the location of Bruce’s villa, though the house actually sitting there is far from being a marvel of modern architecture.

http://tinypic.com/r/1f8ivq/8

Finally, here is a wide-angle view of the same place.  http://tinypic.com/r/8vpv6e/8

2.

I came across a couple of nice photos of Anne Hathaway for an Elle photoshoot that seemed a good representation of Selina, especially if she really cut her hair short:

http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/30/1412101113416_wps_29_Anne_Hathaway_photographe.jpg
http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/09/30/1412101129321_wps_30_Anne_Hathaway_photographe.jpg

I was never a huge fan of hers but she made a great Selina, and after watching Interstellar, I must say that she has grown on me as an actress. If only it had been Christian Bale and not Matthew McConaughey playing Cooper; seriously, the thought of Bruce and Selina in space… but I digress.

3.

As Roundandround mentioned, the events of this entire plot take place in less than three weeks, or just under a month counting from the moment of theft. Here is the actual sequence.

**Timeline**

[t-5...t-7] CIA database stolen

t+0 Friday first CIA call

t+3 Monday Bruce and Selina talk to Theo and have dinner

t+4 Tuesday they fly to Gotham, walk around the city and see Lucius, Gordon and Blake

t+5 Wednesday Selina goes to Wayne Manor; they meet with the CIA, then leave for Rio

t+6 Thursday they arrive in Rio, see Armando, talk on top of Pedra Bonita at night

t+7 Friday they do the hang-glider flights, pick up cameras etc, and fly to Buenos Aires
t+8 early hours Saturday in Buenos Aires (mentioned in passing)

t+9 Sunday they arrive in Sydney

t+10 Monday Selina meets with Jamie

t+11 Tuesday mid-afternoon they fly to Bangkok, Theo joins them

t+12 Wednesday Theo and Selina walk around Bangkok, Wednesday evening Selina meets Mitchum

t+13 Thursday they fly to Singapore, Theo goes via Kuala Lumpur, Bruce meets Kitty, Selina has jealousy fit

t+14 Friday Theo gets arrested (very early morning) and Bruce bails him out (late morning); Bruce has date with Kitty; Bruce and Selina have night zoo date

t+15 Saturday morning – Selina meets with Mitchum at Suntec; “shitstorm” plan

t+15 Saturday night Bruce and Selina get into Mitchum’s office; Jamie finds them at the Swissotel

t+16 Sunday Selina breaks into Mitchum’s Raffles suite, they meet with Jamie, discover the Kitty/Newell link; Bruce proposes the final plan

t+17 Monday Bruce meets with Mitchum and Newell; final showdown

t+17 Monday afternoon/evening – conference call and drinks at the Swissotel

t+18/19 Tuesday/Wednesday ending

4.

This is not a platform for political declarations, but I cannot help thinking that the closest real-life, modern-day equivalent of Bruce Wayne is currently found not in New York but, ironically, in Switzerland; and in another Wayne throwback, was until recently in prison for crimes he had not committed: [http://www.khodorkovsky.com/biography/post-release/](http://www.khodorkovsky.com/biography/post-release/) Made billions for the company he owned? Check. Had the money taken away when he was thrown into prison by an evil regime? Check. Got out to concentrate on charity work and civil rights? Check. If only real-life dictators were as easy to get rid of as Bane :/ 

5.

This is the final list of links that did not get mentioned elsewhere, that have some relevance to the plot.

a.

Bruce’s mention of flying cars reflects reality, though the company that made it is Slovenian. The articles below have a good deal of overlap, but I stick them all here because some of the graphics and specs only show up in separate versions. By way of a general comment, apologies for the numerous links from the Daily Fail. It is a shitty paper but it has a very good technical editor who keeps an eye on things.
The ultimate fly drive package: SkyCruiser merges an aeroplane, quadcopter and a car


Flying car approaches liftoff as most advanced prototype yet is unveiled


Flying cars get ready to take off: Scientists unveil prototype roadster with groundspeed of 124mph and flight range of 430miles


Finally! The flying car that really could be coming to a road (and sky) near you

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2784298/Finally-The-flying-car-really-coming-road-sky-near-you.html

Never get stuck in a traffic jam again! Flying car switches between land and sky - and can reach a top speed of 124mph and flight range of 430miles


AeroMobil flying car: ready for take-off

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/motoring/motoringvideo/10488514/AeroMobil-flying-car-ready-for-take-off.html

And another development mentioned in Bruce’s speech:

Large-scale trial of driverless cars to begin on public roads


…and a couple that weren’t but might have been:

Could these tiny flying robots spell the end of housework? Mini 'bumble bee' cleaners :
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2470144/Electrolux-Design-Lab-competition-winner-The-Mab--Mini-robot-cleaner.html

Developers selling ‘dragonfly’ robotic drone for about $100

…and something he may be doing in his spare time.

**On a wingsuit and a prayer! World’s top flying daredevils compete in China to prove they are the fastest on the planet**


b.

On a more sinister note, below is a bunch of articles on hacking, spying, and the like. What can I say, I wish the stuff I put into the plot were farther away from reality…

**Exclusive: UK’s secret Mid-East internet surveillance base is revealed in Edward Snowden leaks**


Britain’s secret listening post based in the Middle East is revealed in Snowden leaks


GCHQ views data without a warrant, government admits


NSA director modeled top secret war room to look like the bridge of Star Trek's Enterprise


Private firms selling mass surveillance systems around world, documents show

http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/18/private-firms-mass-surveillance-technologies

An Eavesdropping Lamp That Livetweets Private Conversations

http://www.wired.com/2014/04/coversnitch-eavesdropping-lightbulb/

Laser spying: is it really practical?


Computers Can Be Hacked Using High-Frequency Sound

http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/computers-can-be-hacked-using-high-frequency-sound/

New computer virus 'secretly leaks data' through air

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/internet-security/10490846/New-computer-virus-secretly-
Hackers could steal personal data from computers using SOUNDWAVES - and even the most secure PCs may be at risk


How hackers took over my computer


The bunny boiler app: Spy software lets you track a partner's movements, listen in on calls and even lock their phone

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2514892/mSpy-app-lets-people-spy-partners-calls-texts-track-them.html

Surge in 'number spoofing' fraud: Fraudsters trick bank customers into handing over cash with new phone trick


…but there are devices and software that are aimed at fighting all that.

Mozilla’s Lightbeam Firefox tool shows who's tracking your online movements


The 'spy' phone that's impossible to track: Mobile encrypts everything from calls to texts - but could it become the criminal's gadget of choice?


Paranoid you’re being spied on? Then get this ANTI-ROUTER: Tech stops drones and cameras connecting to your Wi-Fi network

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2748136/Paranoid-spied-Then-ANTI-ROUTER-Tech-stops-drones-cameras-connecting-Wi-Fi-network.html

And for the very, very last bit, here is something that cropped up about three months after I’d finished Chinese Boxes but is an odd reminder of that plot: http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/sideshow/google-earth-chinese-desert-mystery-155557314.html
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!