



Nightwing #6
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Nightwing

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Robbie Malone created by Charlene Edwards. Used with permission.

*Yeah, they say your soul is growing, but
Sometimes I feel like throwing something*

*But oh, that's the way it is
You gotta roll with the punches
That's the way it goes
You gotta bend when the wind blows*

*You live you learn
You crash and burn
It's hit or miss*

Annie Roboff, Holly Lamar, "*That's the Way*"

Rolling with the Punches

Dick tried to tell himself that it wasn't any of his business. He and Barbara had been team-mates, friends, but never a couple. She was free to date anyone whom she pleased, and she certainly didn't owe him an explanation.

But she was dating one of my best friends.

Again, he tried to remind himself that it was none of his business. He and Babs were not, and never had been "an item".

But she said she was too old for me. And Roy is... what? Six months older than I am? Does it make that big a difference?

"Roy?" He repeated in disbelief.

Barbara cast a frantic glance at Ollie. She saw regret in his eyes, but not remorse. Was Dinah right? Had he planned this?

The whiff of chemical solvents assaulted her nostrils. Barbara turned to see a custodian, mop in hand, swabbing the tiled floors. Whether from the cleaner, her inner turmoil, or the crack she'd taken on her head yesterday, she felt the room start to spin. "I," she started, lunging for the exit, "I need some air."

Dick caught up with her in the parking lot. "Barbara," he took hold of her arm. "Babs, please. Wait."

She gently slid away from him. "Dick, no. Not now. I can't... "

"Look," he interrupted. "I just want to know why. It-" he hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "All this time, you were saying it was because I was too young, but... Roy... "

Barbara sighed. "It wasn't like that, Dick. It wasn't just... chronological age. I mean, on the one hand you were this super-competent kid who always knew exactly what to do, how to be precisely where Batman needed you to be, when he needed you there, but he kept you on a pretty short leash, you have to admit. Roy... well, he was always more independent. Ollie treated him more like an adult and he... "

"Babs," Dick winced, "please don't tell me you're about to use 'Harper' and 'maturity' in the same sentence."

Barbara was silent. Dick sighed. "How-" he began. "How long ago did you two go out?"

"The summer before last. You remember. I was taking those advanced programming courses at Wrightson College?"

Dick did. Bruce had almost reconsidered his decision to train her when she'd revealed that she was going to be spending eight weeks in Star City. But Babs had registered for the classes months earlier, before she had first donned Kevlar. In the end, Bruce had grudgingly agreed, even going so far as to arrange for her to get some additional training with...

"Bruce put you in touch with Ollie," he remembered. "And Ollie introduced you to Roy? And you two..."

Barbara looked away. "I didn't know a soul in Star City," she said. "Roy understood what I was going through. We hit it off. At first," she hesitated, "he seemed so... he was... spontaneous. I never knew what he was going to say or do next. Bruce always had everything planned out for us. I was used to that. But..."

"So, what?" Dick demanded. "I was too predictable? Roy was dangerous, I was safe?"

"NO!" Barbara nearly shouted as she spun back to face him. "G-d! You were perfect. I took silver in the women's state gymnastics finals two years ago, after practicing night and day, and having one of my major competitors tear a ligament four days before the event. You, on the other hand, could've walked into the arena the day of the competition and taken the gold in the men's without trying. I'd sit in the cave, going over those crime-scene investigation problems Bruce threw at us. My photographic memory let me retain the details, but I had to struggle to fit them all together... while you zipped through it all like... like Kid Flash on a sugar rush."

Dick frowned. "You were jealous? Of me? And *that's* why you..."

"No!" She hesitated. "Maybe. I don't know. I was starting to think maybe Bruce was right the first time. Maybe I didn't have what it took to be part of your little club. I couldn't tell him. He'd have told me I was right and dropped me from the team. You... at first I thought you'd just run and tell Bruce like a good soldier," she held up a hand to stave off his

automatic protest. "I barely knew you then, alright? Of course, now I know you wouldn't have done that. You would've worked with me when Bruce wasn't around. And all it would've shown me was just how far out of my league I really was. Or worse." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't know what would've been harder to take. You cartwheeling rings around me, or me knowing that you were holding back so I wouldn't feel intimidated." She looked away again. "A crush, I could handle. But not you feeling sorry for me."

"I never... could never..." Dick was sputtering. He drew another breath and willed himself to be calm. "Go on," he said.

Barbara flinched at the coldness stealing into his voice, but she obeyed. "Roy," she said slowly, "Roy didn't make me feel like I was constantly competing with him. And," she admitted, "even after I knew that... given that he was working through certain... issues back then, he and I weren't going to have anything lasting, I stayed around because I felt he needed me. Needed me, Dick! Not 'tolerated' me like Bruce did, because he thought I'd go out, with or without his guidance, and he didn't want to have to tell Dad I'd run into something I couldn't handle and gotten myself hurt or... or killed. Not 'wanted' me like... well... you never made any secret about how you felt. And I admit I was flattered. But you didn't need me. Roy did. And I, well, I guess I needed that."

Dick waited for her to finish. "You needed that," he repeated. "But you didn't need *Roy*. Not as such." He realized that he was still holding on to her sleeve and released it. "I don't know who I should feel worse for," he sighed. "You, or Roy. Or me, for not seeing any of this. Of all the stupid..." he broke off angrily and stalked away. He thought he heard her call after him, but the rhythm of his stride never changed.

"What in the *hell* were you thinking, Ollie?" Dinah kept her voice low, which made its intensity all the more frightening. "If this is how you treat your friends..."

"I didn't know if Barbara realized that he's not the kid she's been thinking of," Green Arrow said defensively. "To hear her talk about it, this was all some sort of schoolboy crush. Dick's not a schoolboy anymore. I

wanted to be sure she knew what she was dealing with."

Dinah's expression hardened. "And this was your business, how, exactly?"

"Pretty Bird, she's a team-mate. And Dick's a friend. You think I want either of them hurt?"

Right then and there, Dinah Laurel Lance forgot that they were inside a hospital. "You did this because you didn't want them HURT?!?" she shouted. She clamped one hand around Ollie's neck in a vise-like grip and directed him to the floor-to-ceiling window that faced out on the parking lot. Neither could hear the conversation, but the facial expressions and gestures of the two youngsters spoke volumes. As Dick walked away, his expression mingling anger and pain with disgust, Dinah tightened her hold. "It's a GOOD thing you were on the ball," she said. "Otherwise, I might be worried that they'd be UPSET if the facts came out."

She released him with a shove that nearly sent him crashing into the window. "You know something, Ollie?" She asked with deceptive calm. "You can be a real idiot, sometimes. Like when you're breathing."

For the first time, she noticed the two security guards edging closer. "Sorry, guys," she said. "I didn't mean to cause a disturbance."

One of the guards found his voice. "Be that as it may, Ma'am, we're going to have to ask you to leave."

Dinah shrugged. "I think I'm just about finished, here anyway. Have a nice day, fellows."

With feigned nonchalance, she walked up to the double doors. They parted at her approach, and she exited to the parking lot.

Ollie watched her go.

Senator Gerard looked up as his aide entered.

"I think I have the information you asked for," the young man stated. He placed a dossier on the senator's desk.

Gerard sat motionless for a moment before opening the file. He glanced at the sketch on the top sheet. "This is the person Fiitawa described."

The other man nodded. "He's called Nightwing. His affiliation is with the Teen Titans, although our sources indicate that he might have left that team recently."

That caught the politician's interest. "For good?"

"Too early to tell, Sir."

Gerard absorbed that. "The information that he obtained," he said. "Presuming he has the resources at hand to decrypt it, could it be traced back to me?" At the other man's hesitation, he leaned forward. "Tell me the truth, Sewell."

The aide frowned. "Indirectly. According to Fiitawa, there's nothing on those discs that can finger you or the interests that you represent. However, it might lead back to Divakaruni and his earlier studies. And given that he turned you down... "

"If he sees the progress that's been made building on those initial studies, he may well realize that we've gone on without him," The senator shook his head. "If he goes public with that information, it could hurt us. What's the likelihood that this... Nightwing character will seek him out?"

"He was spotted in Las Vegas, last night," Sewell said. "That's less than 150 miles from Loma Linda. And he obtained those disks in Metropolis three days ago."

Gerard popped a Nicorette out of its blister pack. "Can our contacts deal with him?"

"Possibly," the younger man replied. "But there are other ramifications to consider." He reached over and lifted the first sheet from the stack in the dossier. The sketch beneath it showed another youth, one instantly

familiar to both parties.

"Robin." The senator stated, after a moment's glance. "Is he involved in this, too?"

"Senator," Sewell said, "Before Nightwing appeared, Robin led the Teen Titans. Since Nightwing assumed leadership of that team, Robin has not been seen. Not in New York, not in Gotham. Moreover, the two crime-fighters appear to be roughly the same age, and of identical height and build."

Gerard's eyes narrowed as he realized Sewell's implication. "So you think that... "

"I think we need to consider the possibility, yes. And, in that case, I think we would also need to recall that Robin spent years under the guidance of one reputed to be the 'world's greatest detective'. With his training, not only would Robin be likely to deduce our plans, but... were anything untoward to happen to him, assuming that he and Nightwing are one and the same, do we truly wish our activities to come to Batman's attention?"

"Good L-rd, no!" Gerard popped the gum into his mouth and sat back. "So then, our best plan is to prevent this... Nightwing... from speaking with Divakaruni. By any means possible."

"I concur, Senator. Although, of course, it would be preferable to avoid a... permanent solution."

"Naturally," Gerard sniffed. "Deadly force is not something that I'll sanction lightly. However, we cannot allow Divakaruni and Nightwing to meet under any circumstances. Advise our... associates to act accordingly."

Back at Ollie's, Dick stood uncertainly in the middle of the guest bedroom. He wasn't angry anymore. Not at Green Arrow, not at Babs nor at Roy nor even at himself. But he didn't feel comfortable staying under Ollie's roof any longer. Since he'd barely unpacked, it didn't take him

long to gather his things together. He was nearly at the front door when he heard voices coming from the other room.

"It's like pulling teeth." The voice was vaguely familiar. It took him a moment to recognise it as belonging to the man he'd met the night before... 'Vigilante', Ollie had called him.

"But you got through to him, right, Chase?" Ollie.

"I tried," Vigilante said in a disgusted tone. "I told him that he had to talk to the feds. He said Scarapelli would kill him. I pointed out that his life was already on the line and he just started shaking and saying he didn't know what to do, over and over... I thought he was going to wet himself."

"Where is he, now?"

"Still at the house. Huntress is keeping an eye on things."

Dick caught the bewilderment in Ollie's tone. "The mob isn't going to try anything until those forty-eight hours are up. He doesn't need a body-guard."

"No," Vigilante agreed angrily. "He needs a keeper. He's got this crazy idea that if he goes to Scarapelli and apologises, Tony will be so impressed that he'll wipe out the debt or give him more time."

Dick shook his head in amazement as Ollie snorted derisively.

"Scarapelli'll shoot him the instant he shows his face. Is he serious?"

"He's scared. Anyway, I'm going to drive into LA and talk with some of my contacts at the FBI. I think we can both agree going to the police here in Vegas would be a mistake."

Dick was getting tired of eavesdropping. Shouldering his knapsack, he knocked on the wall by the doorway. Both men turned to look at him.

"I thought I should head off," he said. "Thanks for everything, Mr. Queen." *Well, maybe not quite everything.*

The formal address was not lost on Ollie. "What's with this 'Mr. Queen' garbage," he asked. "I told you, my friends call me 'Ollie'. Or 'GA', depending."

Dick chose not to answer the question. Right at the moment, he didn't know how he felt about Ollie. He supposed he should be grateful to him for clueing him in to the truth. *But then why do I feel like I'm going to take a swing at him if I stick around much longer?* "If I leave now, I can probably make Loma Linda before dark."

Ollie frowned. "I thought Barbara was going with you."

Dick shook his head. "After what happened earlier, I think it's best that I just—"

"What? Pull a disappearing act?" He sighed and turned back to the other man as he placed a restraining hand on Dick's arm.

"Good luck in LA, Chase," he said. "Fill me in once you get back."

He watched the other man go, and then turned back to Dick. "Have a seat."

Dick blinked. Any hint of flippancy was gone from Ollie's voice. His eyes were deadly serious. It wasn't quite the 'bat-glare', but it was close enough to impress the younger man, even if it didn't exactly intimidate him.

Automatically he lowered himself to one of the kitchen chairs and sat, waiting.

Ollie faced him, then spun about, walked several paces away, and then doubled back. He opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it and turned around again. He repeated this exercise several times before throwing up his hands and sitting down opposite Dick.

"Somehow," he said with some irritation, "I didn't think cutting and running would be your solution. That's something I would've expected of the Bat, not you."

Dick half-rose angrily. Ollie held up a hand. "You're hurting, kid. I get that. But somehow, I always took you for someone who worked through your pain." He smiled then, but there was no mirth in it. "Look, kid, to put it bluntly, you never had any say in who she—"

"Don't you think I know that?" Dick cut him off. "I don't care that she wasn't going out with me, it's... " He broke off, as he realised just whom he was talking to.

"It's that she was dating Roy," Ollie stated.

Dick was silent.

"Well, that's what you were going to say, wasn't it?" He snapped. He drew a deep breath and released it with a sigh. "Look. It's not quite what you're thinking between those two. Since, this technically isn't my business, let's just say that, at the time that they were... together, Roy was going through a rough patch. Barbara tried to help, but it didn't take long for her to know that she was in over her head." He smiled mockingly. "So, she talked him into coming to me for help. Made perfect sense, wouldn't you agree? I was, after all, the only father figure he had. And, well... "

He got up abruptly and resumed his pacing. "I always thought Bruce was too tough on you, kid, ya know? He never let you have a minute to yourself, was always on your case; G-d forbid you let your grades slip... I was sure you were going to... " he caught himself. "Well. Never mind that. I always told Roy he could come to me if he got into trouble. What'd the Bat tell you? 'Get into trouble and I'll use my connections to make sure the judge throws the book at you?'"

Dick opened his mouth to protest. Ollie waved him to silence.

"Doesn't matter. When Roy did come to me, like he should have, *I* reacted that way. I shut him out of my life, NOT the way Bruce did with you—yes, I know about that. Barbara told me about why she left Gotham. I don't blame her. I can imagine he pulled the same thing with you or close enough. Anyway, I threw Roy out because I couldn't cope with his problems. Barbara stuck with him because the person who *should* have

had faith in him... didn't. They did date. Briefly. But her... relationship with him wasn't as... romantic as you probably thought it was, based on what you overheard." He took his seat again, not meeting Dick's eyes.

"Look," he said abruptly. "Stick around for now. Huntress needs some relief. You can fill in for her at Morton's. I wasn't lying to Chase, before. I really don't think the family has anything to worry about until Scarapelli's 48 hours are up. But, I believe that we've just established that I can mess up now and again."

For one instant, Ollie's trademark devil-may-care grin lit up his face. "And when I do, I do royally. In case this is one of those times, I'm sending Barbara out with you." He waved a hand to cut off Dick's protest. "You two have trained together, fought together... My people, we're still working on that level of cohesiveness. I'm going to tell Barbara the same thing. Bottom line, I promised Morton protection. Whatever you think of me, right now, however you feel about Barbara... "

Dick held up a hand. "Stop, Ollie," he said. "Right now, I don't want to hear it. You think I don't know what you're going to say next? Morton and his family have nothing to do with how I feel about you or Barbara right now. She and I do work well together, or at least we did the last time we went out as a team. And yes, Morton does need protection, so count me in. If Barbara is also willing, fine. But the instant Vigilante gets back, I'm gone."

Ollie smiled. "Wouldn't expect anything different from you, kid," he said as calmly as though the previous conversation hadn't taken place. It wasn't until he held out his hand for Dick to shake, and Dick took it, that the younger man realized how sweaty GA's palm was.

"Are you sure I can't offer you two anything?" Claire Morton held out the wicker tray with its assortment of fresh fruit and cookies for the sixth time that hour.

Nightwing shook his head. "We're good, thanks," he said. She smiled and withdrew. When she proffered the tray again, fifteen minutes later, he gave in and accepted a wooden skewer on which Mrs. Morton had

threaded pineapple, strawberry, honeydew, and cantaloupe. She rewarded him with a relieved smile, and returned the tray to the Formica countertop. Taking a clean tea towel, she wet one corner mechanically and walked over to the highchair. The toddler gurgled happily as his mother wiped his face clean.

"Mom," ten-year-old Tyler called from the dining room, "how come a quarter divided by two isn't a half?"

Nightwing pushed open the swinging door between kitchen and dining room. The boy had the book open to the answers at the back, one hand clenching the intervening pages.

"It doesn't make sense," he protested. "Four divided by two is two!"

"You have to multiply by the reciprocal," Batgirl called. She walked to the table and sat down next to the boy. "See? One over four times one over two gives you how much?"

Tyler brightened. "Hey, yeah!" He glanced toward the living room, and sobered. "I think I got it, now," he said dully. "Thanks."

Nightwing smiled wistfully. When freshman algebra had been giving him more headaches than one of Nigma's crime-clues, Babs had helped him, too.

He walked into the living room. Morton was still sitting in the recliner, his head in his hands. He looked desperate. Unbidden, a phrase he had heard Bruce utter on more than one occasion floated into his mind. *Desperate people do desperate things*. Based on what Vigilante had said earlier, Nightwing couldn't afford to discount that particular truism. Palming a small tracer, he stole up behind the casino owner. "How are you holding up?" He asked, as he clapped the man on the shoulder.

Morton jumped. Nightwing withdrew his hand quickly, leaving the tracer on his cotton shirt. "Sorry," he lied. "I didn't mean to startle you." He'd meant to get some sort of reaction, any reaction from the man. His near-catatonia was unnerving. Only the baby seemed immune to it, thus far. He sighed. "Nothing's going to happen to you as long as we're here," he said reassuringly.

Morton exhaled. "I shoulda known better. I pay him, he makes sure the cops leave me alone, the rowdy customers wise up, Bertinelli's boys stay away. Instead, he's gonna kill me, he's... "

Nightwing laid a hand on Morton's forearm. Nobody had told him... "This was a protection scam?" He demanded.

"N-no scam," Morton stammered. "He *did* protect me. And now that I've crossed him, no one else will."

Nightwing barely heard him. He was back in the past.

"Oh, Dick?" Mary Grayson waited for her son to land solidly on the mat before calling out to him. "How comfortable do you feel doing the quadruple somersault?"

Dick considered. "I'm okay, I guess," he said carefully. Actually he'd nailed the move cold the last twenty times he'd attempted it, but his mother always told him not to brag.

"Confidence is fine," she'd say. "Cockiness will cost you." Now she smiled.

"Your father and I've been watching you practice," she said finally. "Do you think you're ready to work it into the act?"

Dick's heart leaped. "You mean as part of the show?" He exclaimed. At his mother's nod, the boy let out a whoop. "OBOY! I gotta tell Pop!" he shouted. He sprinted for the tent flap.

"Dick!"

He froze, almost in mid-stride. Mary grinned. "You're dripping," she laughed as she tossed him a towel. Dick grinned back as he draped the towel over his shoulders and ran for Pop Haly's trailer. The breeze lifted the towel so that it flapped behind him like a white fuzzy cape.

The door to the circus owner's trailer was shut. Dick knew that he wasn't

supposed to go inside if the door was closed-it meant that someone was in there with Pop. He sighed. He'd just have to wait outside until whoever it was came out. He shifted impatiently from one foot to the other. It wasn't fair. This was the best news he'd had in... in... well in a really long time, and he couldn't share it with Pop. But he knew the rules. If the door was closed, he had to wait. And wait. And... how long was Pop going to be, anyway? Dick cautiously edged closer to the door, trying to determine whether whoever was inside with Pop sounded at all ready to leave.

"And if you pay us, we protect you, get it, Haly?"

Dick froze. He wasn't sure why, but something about that voice terrified him.

The next voice he heard made him jump. It was Pop, but he was shouting. Pop NEVER shouted. Except, he was now.

"Yes! I get it. You're gangsters! It's a protection racket! I'll call the police!"

The first man spoke again, his even tone in direct contrast to Pop Haly's bluster. "You don't want to die, do you?" He intoned without inflection. "Be sensible. Pay us and protect the show from 'accidents'."

"Get out! Get out!"

Dick saw the door handle turn and hastened around the corner of the trailer. A third voice piped up: "Okay, Buddy. It's your funeral. Remember... 'accidents' will happen."

The next time the Flying Graysons performed, one did. Of course, it wasn't really an accident. It only looked like one. And Dick's life was never the same after that performance.

"Don't worry about Scarapelli," Dick said. "He's not your problem any longer."

Morton raised disbelieving eyes. "You've gotta be on something," he exclaimed. "You heard them last night. If I don't get him his money he'll... "

"Not on *my* watch," Nightwing gritted. "Trust me on that one."

Morton blinked. Then, almost imperceptibly he nodded.

The phone on the end table rang. Dick reached for it, but Morton was faster.

"Hello?"

Nightwing watched him as he held the receiver to his ear for about thirty seconds. At the end of that time, he returned the receiver to its cradle. "Wrong number," he said. He got up from the chair carefully, wincing as he put weight on his knee "I'd like to talk to my wife in private for a moment," he added, a note of authority creeping into his voice for the first time since Dick had met him.

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, he brushed past Dick and walked toward the kitchen, limping slightly. Dick watched him go. A minute passed. Two... Three... Then, from outside came the unmistakable sound of a car engine firing.

Biting back a curse, Nightwing ran for the front door, Batgirl behind him. Claire Morton threw herself in their path. "Let him go," she protested. "It's the only chance we've got!"

Nightwing was in no mood to argue. He took her firmly by the shoulders and moved her aside. It was too late. The car was gone. Dick fought down a surge of anger. The face he turned to Mrs. Morton a moment later spoke more of sorrow than anything else.

"He might have just sealed your fate," Nightwing said. "Scarapelli gave you forty-eight hours. In forty-eight hours, you would have been out of his reach. Right now, your husband is on his way to tell him that he's not going to be able to get the money together. You really think Scarapelli's going to stick to that deadline, then?"

The colour drained from Claire Morton's face. Her lips formed a perfect 'O' as a hand flew to her mouth.

Nightwing knew that he should offer some words of reassurance, but

there wasn't time. "Batgirl," he said, "take them. Get them out of here. Head for the California border. Can you contact Vigilante?"

Batgirl nodded.

"Do that. Arrange for him to meet you. I'm going after Morton." He looked at Claire. "I'll bring him back safe," he stated. "You can bank on it."

He hoped.

By the time Claire had managed to pack a suitcase with the essentials for one adult and two children, and filled a large grocery bag with ready-to-eat food, Barbara had managed to remove the child's car seat from Claire's car and secure it within Zatanna's red Chevrolet Malibu. She looked wistfully around the garage, her eye falling on her bike. She loved that motorcycle. But there was no way that she could take another adult and two children—one still a baby—on the thing. And if she were to try, it would only attract too much attention from other motorists. The car was a loan, and one she had hoped not to have to use. Batgirl tested the car seat straps a final time to ensure that they were secure.

The door that connected the garage to the rest of the house opened. Tyler walked forward, carefully holding his brother, Gavin. Claire followed behind with the suitcase. Once it was stowed in the trunk, she took Gavin and settled him into the car seat.

"We... " she looked at Batgirl nervously. "We're not coming back here. Ever." It was not a question.

Batgirl shook her head slightly. "I doubt it."

"Get in, Tyler," Claire said automatically. She turned back to Barbara. "It's only things," she said. "I know that. We'll start over fresh somewhere. The children will adjust. Of course they will. I just... I just... "

No! Don't break down on me now! I can face the Royal Flush gang. I can face Joker. Please don't make me face a woman on the verge of hysteria when we've

got to leave right this second! "Ma'am?"

"Mommy?" Tyler leaned forward anxiously. "You okay?"

Claire turned back, startled. When she spoke, though, her voice was almost normal again. "Put your seatbelt on, Tyler. Attaboy. I'm coming in on the other side."

Batgirl shut the door behind her. Then she took up her seat behind the wheel and turned on the ignition. The power locks engaged automatically. In the rear-view mirror, she saw mother and son hold hands across the car seat. She couldn't tell who was reassuring whom.

"Okay," she said as she turned on the ignition. "Once we get on the highway, I'm going to go as fast as I can without getting a ticket." She looked back and grinned. "So just pretend this is the bumper-cars at Adventure-dome, only we're going to try not to hit the other drivers, alright?"

Tyler goggled at her. "Superheroes go to Adventuredome?"

Superhero? Batgirl felt her face flushing. *Me? Oh, come on.* She laughed as they pulled out of the driveway. *I hope he's right. The good guys are always supposed to win, aren't they?*

Not on my watch, Nightwing thought to himself disgustedly as he kept one eye on the road and the other on his onboard computer. *Idiot!* The tracer he'd stuck on Morton showed as a blip on the screen, nearly fourteen blocks east and twenty-two blocks south of his position. He followed, doing his best to maintain his distance. He didn't know his way around the city well enough to risk an intercept course. Chances were, that when he needed to turn left, a traffic sign would advise him that such a move was forbidden. The next intersection would be one-way-the wrong way. The one after that would give him a choice between continuing straight or turning onto the highway back to Arizona. And by the time he got himself turned around... Oldtown in Gotham was like that, apart from the highway pointing toward Massachusetts instead of Arizona. He'd heard that downtown Boston was similar. Rather than take that chance in Vegas, he kept his eyes on Morton's route, following

precisely.

Morton was heading back to the Strip, it seemed. It figured. He saw the tracer hold steady for a moment. Then it began moving forward, but at a far slower rate. He must have parked the car. Nightwing looked around at the traffic and cursed. He didn't dare go any faster than he was already going.

Frowning, he enabled the microphone on the tracer. True, it would reduce the life of the power-cell on the device to roughly forty-five minutes, but he had to know what was going on.

"This way, Sir." The petite Asian girl ushered Morton into a windowless office with red plush carpeting. Heavy tapestries adorned the walls from ceiling to floor, making the room feel stuffy and confining. Morton fought claustrophobia as he wondered why Scarapelli had things set up that way.

The mobster laced his fingers together and sat, resting his wrists on the edge of his desk. "Alright, Lionel," he said. "I'm listening."

Morton froze.

"Do you have my money, Lionel?" Scarapelli asked, after a moment. He didn't sound angry. To anyone else in earshot, it would have sounded like a polite inquiry.

Morton slowly shook his head. "I can get it," he whispered. "But I need more time."

Scarapelli nodded sagely. "Of course you do, Lionel. After all," he added, "it took you more than forty-eight hours to steal it from me. I suppose it might have been unfair for me to have set such an unreasonable deadline." His tone hardened. "Wouldn't you say?"

Morton gulped. "You... you're a fair man, Mr. Scarapelli. Always."

"And honorable?"

"Yessir."

"Meaning that if I give my word, you know that you can rely on it. So, if I were to tell you that you could have another month, you'd know that you'd be safe until then, correct?"

Morton nodded eagerly, but he felt his shoulders tense. Something seemed to be wrong, something he couldn't quite pinpoint. "That's right."

"Because I'm a man of my word."

"Right!"

"And if I were to break my word, I'd lose face."

"Exactly!"

Scarapelli shook his head soberly. "And you see, Lionel, that's the crux of the problem." His tone hardened. "Because I've given you forty-eight hours. And I've outlined the consequences if you didn't meet my conditions. And I'm a man of my word."

Morton staggered. "My... my family," he began feebly.

Scarapelli shook his head. "That's a bad business," he said sympathetically. "You messed up. It shouldn't have gotten them involved."

"Jade," he called to the girl standing behind Morton, "Would you call Nick Miglione in here?"

She withdrew without a word. A moment later she returned, with Miglione in tow.

Scarapelli regarded the newcomer with some dismay. "Buckwheat, Nicky? For the whole family? How old's your youngest, Lionel?"

Morton swallowed. "Eigh-eighteen months."

The mobster's face wrinkled in disgust. "Eighteen months," he repeated.

"What kind of monster are you trying to turn me into, Nicky? You think I'd want to do that to a baby?"

"That other kid of yours... he's ten now, right? Plays soccer with my nephew? What's his name... Tyrone?"

"Tyler."

Scarapelli nodded. "That's right." His voice lowered an octave. "Nicky... *I don't like killing KIDS!*" He crooked a finger at Jade, who stood unobtrusively by the door. An instant later, a shot rang out and Nick fell heavily to the floor, red blood almost a precise match for the shade of the carpet.

Morton realized a moment later why Scarapelli had the wall-hangings: they made the small room virtually soundproof. He looked at Nick lying there and felt like he was going to be sick.

Scarapelli took no notice. "Regrettably, Lionel, Nick was representing me when he made that statement. I can't go back on it, even though I didn't actually say it. It would hurt my reputation, you understand me?"

Lionel sank to his knees. "Then... it's over. My coming here... did nothing." He raised his eyes. "Did it?"

Scarapelli sighed. "I'm sorry. Truly. But since you saved us the trouble of tracking you down..."

"I'll spare you having to watch it being done to your wife and kids. We'll do you first. Jade. Deal with him. Don't drag it out any longer than you have to," he added. "And get him out of here before you start... "

That was as far as he got before someone kicked open the door behind the tapestry, hurtling into the hanging rug with enough force to dislodge it from its moorings.

Jade didn't hesitate. She raised her gun and began firing.

Nightwing listened to the conversation with a sense of mounting horror.

Scarapelli sounded too calm, too reasonable, considering what Morton had done. *He's up to something*, he realized as he waited impatiently for the traffic light to change. It did, finally, right as Scarapelli mentioned that his nephew and Morton's son played soccer together.

Nightwing was parking the 'cycle when the gunshot rang out. He cursed, jumped off the bike, and started running toward the building. He didn't bother removing his helmet. The guard at the door held up a hand to stop him. Nightwing slammed him into the brick wall of the building and was through the door before the man slumped, unconscious, to the ground. He raised the visor of his helmet to switch on the full-spectrum lenses in the mask. Then he sped down the hallway using the infra-red vision to scan for other people. As he ran past one part of the wall, he detected three warm bodies and a figure on the ground losing body-heat fast on the other side. *Bingo*. He looked for, and located, the door. There was no time for anything fancy. He backed up against the opposite wall. Not much of a running start but it would have to do. Then, with a flying kick, he launched himself at the door. It gave way, and his momentum carried him forward into the hanging tapestry. As the carpet collapsed before him, he felt something reverberate against his helmet. Somebody was firing at him...

He was a dead man. He'd already taken two shots to the helmet, and his ears were ringing as the metal reverberated...

... as the metal reverberated

... reverberated

As in... the bullets were bouncing off. Kevlar suit, bullet-proof helmet... Nightwing didn't have time to sigh his relief, or thank Bruce for *that* unexpected surprise, but he permitted himself a smile as he cast a nightarang in the direction of the shooter. She dodged the first but stepped into the path of the second and third. She dropped the gun with a cry and clapped a hand to her bleeding wrist. Nightwing's eyes narrowed.

What kind of shooter wears green press-on nails?

The young woman dropped to a fighting stance, one arm back, the other extended before her. With a snarl, she launched herself at him.

With reflexes honed by years of practice, Nightwing crouched, and leaped forward, causing his assailant to overreach herself. She landed in a forward roll and sprang up, eyes flashing.

She's good. My luck.

Nightwing rose to his feet, and stood poised, waiting. She fainted, he dodged, and she delivered a high kick to his solar plexus.

Really good.

He fell, rolled onto his elbows and kicked behind him. He was rewarded by a grunt as his boot connected. Nightwing regained his footing, in time to sidestep as she came toward him again.

He grabbed her arm, and she slashed the fingernails of her free hand against his chest. The upper layer of the fabric gave way, but the layers of weave below still held together.

Razor-sharp nails, meet shank-resistant Keolar.

He pinned her other wrist, and hoisted her several inches off the ground. She kicked ineffectively, but continued to struggle.

Finally, she managed to plow an elbow into his ribcage. As he gasped for breath, she broke free, and swiped again at the costume. Another slash appeared in the pectoral region. Like the first, it did not penetrate clear through to the skin beneath.

Nightwing had had enough. Whoever this young woman was, she was clearly no amateur, and in that case... the kid gloves were off. He launched himself spinning into the air, and delivered two rapid kicks to the side of her head. She reeled, half stunned. He abandoned the capoeira-style fighting, shifting instead to the punches, throws, and undercuts of agni kempo.

The blend of Brazilian and Russian martial arts seemed to stymie the young woman. She continued her attack, but now she was on the defensive. Her countermoves became more desperate, her techniques more erratic, until finally, Nightwing was able to get in past her guard to apply a suffocation hold. The woman went limp in his arms, but he maintained his grip a moment longer. From what he'd seen, she wasn't above playing possum. When he released her, however, she slumped to the ground, breathing shallowly. He secured her wrists and ankles with plastic ties.

For the first time, Nightwing realized that Scarapelli must have left during the fight. He thought for a moment. Then he took a nighntarang in hand and used its sharp edge to scratch: '**They are under *my* protection, now. Do not attempt to find them**' into the teakwood desk. He hesitated. Then he shrugged his shoulders and carved a stylized emblem, similar to the symbol he wore on his uniform, directly below the message.

He looked behind him. Morton was sitting against the wall, a dumbfounded expression on his face. "You okay?"

Morton nodded shakily.

Nightwing extended a hand. "Then let's go meet up with your family."

Claire Morton tweaked the window curtains for the fifth time. The room at the Motel Wills Fargo in Baker, California was clean and adequately furnished, but she barely noticed. She'd put Gavin down for a nap, and turned on the TV to a Family Ties rerun for Tyler. Now, with nothing left to do, panic was setting in.

"Where is he?"

"He's coming," Batgirl repeated the mantra for what felt like the millionth time. Adrian was outside, keeping an eye on the perimeter. He'd joined them two hours ago. "Nightwing has the situation under control." *She hoped.*

What if Scarapelli shot him? He's strong, fast, and smart. That doesn't mean

invulnerable. And if he dies, his last thought of me will be how I hurt—

"Batgirl," Claire asked, eerily calm, "if this... this arrangement that your... friend has brokered with the FBI is based on my husband testifying against the mob, and my husband is d-dead," her voice wavered on the word, but steadied, "what does that mean for my children and myself?"

Good question. Barbara started to tell the older woman not to worry about things like that, and then reconsidered.

"You'll have protection," she said firmly. "If not from the feds, then from us. I can promise that." She saw Tyler lying on the double bed, pretending to be engrossed in Mallory Keaton's school woes, while Alex provided snarky rejoinders to her every word. *If I have to quit the team and become a full-time bodyguard, I can promise that.*

Claire nodded, unconvinced. "I think I'll put some hot water in the kettle," she announced.

The show broke for a commercial, just then. Tyler got up without a word and took his mother's place at the window. An instant later, he dropped the curtain excitedly. "They're here, they're here! And Daddy's riding on a motorcycle!"

Adrian Chase pushed open the front door to admit the two men. Claire collapsed into her husband's arms. He staggered as his injured knee buckled. Claire guided him to a chair. "I thought... " she started to say, "I thought... "

Morton didn't let go of her. "I know, baby. Me too. We're going to be okay."

Barbara glanced at Nightwing as he followed Adrian and Lionel into the motel room. She realized that she had been worried about him, and that right at that moment, if he had hugged her, she wouldn't have hesitated to hug him back. But he made no move, and the moment passed.

Adrian and the Mortons left for Los Angeles before sunrise the next morning.

After a hasty breakfast, Dick and Barbara prepared to leave for Loma Linda. He'd told her that it wasn't necessary for her to come along unless she wanted to. Her reply had been that she would only turn back if he didn't want her company.

"You're going like that?" She asked incredulously, as she took in the frayed jeans, dingy white t-shirt, and tacky sports jacket. "C'mon, Matches wouldn't be caught dead in that coat!"

"All part of the disguise, Doll," Dick said. The New Jersey accent felt more natural this time. "Nightwing and daylight don't exactly mix, see? And I don't really want my real name getting out."

"So you're... " Barbara tried not to laugh. "Robbie Malone?"

"S'right, Doll. What's so funny?" He smirked. There was another advantage to this persona: 'Robbie' didn't have any past relationship with Barbara. Somehow, slipping into this role made it easier for him to work with her: if there was no reason for Robbie Malone to feel hurt or uncomfortable in her presence, then, in the interest of maintaining his cover, he could banish those emotions.

Barbara grinned back. "You. We'd better get a move on."

He nodded and sauntered to the door.

"Oh, *Robbie*?" She called.

He turned to face her.

"Call me 'Doll' again," she said seriously, although her smile never wavered, "and you'll be the one crying 'mama!'."

Two-and-a-half hours later, a blue motorcycle and a red Chevy arrived

at the University of Loma Linda. They pulled into the parking lot adjoining the LLU Medical Centre at Anderson Street and Barton Road.

"What's going on?" Barbara asked suddenly, noting the police car parked outside the building.

Dick shrugged. "Campus security, maybe?"

"No. They've got their own officers for that, not local constabulary," she replied.

Dick absorbed that. "Could be trouble." He looked down at his own attire. "Find out what's going on, Barb." It was a compromise. Robbie wouldn't say 'Barbara' and Dick couldn't call her 'Babs'. "A mug like mine, they wouldn't give the time of day to."

Barbara went and returned a few minutes later, expression serious. "That geneticist we came here to meet?" she asked. "You said his name was Ram Prasad Divakaruni?"

"That's right."

Her expression was sober. "Well, that's why they're here. According to the officer I just spoke with, he's been kidnapped."

To Be Concluded!

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