



THE DARK KNIGHT™

Based on the Warner Bros.
Pictures Film



Novelization by DENNIS O'NEIL

Screenplay by
JONATHAN NOLAN AND CHRISTOPHER NOLAN

Story by
CHRISTOPHER NOLAN & DAVID S. GOYER



THE DARK KNIGHT

A light shines over Gotham, a light that projects the symbol of a bat. The citizens who embrace it have accepted a masked crusader as their protector, while the criminals and corrupt who shun it are prey for the Dark Knight.

The Batman continues to wage his war on crime, reigniting hope in the city and inspiring others, like the newly elected district attorney Harvey Dent. Regarded as the White Knight who will be at the center of the city's resurrection, Dent is ready to carry on Batman's fight. But before Batman steps aside, he sets his sights on dismantling all of Gotham's organized crime.

With the help of his trusted allies, Alfred, Lucius Fox, and Lieutenant Jim Gordon, Batman corners the mob, giving Dent the opportunity to convict them all. But in the mob's wake, a new class of criminal is on the rise, one that can't help but laugh as he drives Gotham's elected savior to the edge of insanity and forces the Dark Knight ever closer to crossing the fine line between hero and vigilante.

Behold the Joker



T H E D A R K K N I G H T .™

Novelization by Dennis O'Neil

Screenplay by
Jonathan Nolan and Christopher Nolan

Story by
Christopher Nolan & David S. Goyer

Batman created by Bob Kane



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To the memories of
Walter Gibson and Bill Finger
They got there first.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



He continues to evolve, this dark-cloaked avenger, this tragic lurker in shadows, as he has been evolving for decades now, and that constant, gradual change may be why the old gent is as healthy as he's ever been. The book you hold, and the movie it's adapted from, are the latest iterations of the ongoing Batman saga, and some acknowledgments are in order:

The story is by Christopher Nolan and David S. Goyer, and the screenplay is by Jonathan Nolan and Christopher Nolan. Their work speaks for itself. I merely followed their lead.

Again, I nod gratefully to Chris Cerasi, gentleman and editor.

Marifran, who was once named McFarland and has been an O'Neil for twenty years now, was, always, the cheerleader who alleviates what can be a lonely business.

Dennis O'Neil
Nyack, New York
February 2008



THE DARK KNIGHT

CHAPTER ONE



It was both a memory and a nightmare . . .

Batman reached the lead car, swayed for a moment as he considered his options, and decided that he could not afford to waste time strategizing. He had to operate in the moment, letting instinct guide him.

He might have only seconds left.

He sat on the edge of the car and swung his legs backward. His boots struck a shatterproof window and knocked it from its frame. As it dropped to one of the seats, Batman was already sliding and twisting through the empty frame and landing inside the car. He landed in a crouch on the floor facing the front of the train. A shadow on the floor alerted him that he was being attacked from behind and without taking time to turn, he drove his elbow backward. It connected with the face of one of Rā's al Ghūl's men, who stumbled toward the car's rear door.

The microwave transmitter blocked the aisle, humming and vibrating slightly. Behind it stood Rā al Ghūl.

"You're still not dead," Rā's said.

"Obviously not. We can end this now, Rā's. There's no need for further bloodshed."

"Oh, you are wrong, Bruce. There's an enormous need."

"I'll stop you."

"No, you won't. Because to stop me you would have to kill me, and you will not do that."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. You could not stand to see another father die." Rā's edged around the machine and slid his sword from the cane. "But I have seen many of my children die. Another one won't make much difference to me."

Rā's advanced, the sword in one hand, the cane in the other. He feinted with the sword and swung the cane at Batman's head. Batman trapped it in one of his scallops, twisted his arm, and the cane went spinning over his shoulder.

Rā's thrust the sword point at Batman's chest. Batman pivoted, and the steel slipped past his chest, grazing his costume. Rā's kicked. Batman sidestepped and Rā's kicked again, striking Batman's hip. As Batman stumbled, trying to regain his footing, Rā's arced the blade downward toward Batman's head, but he crossed his wrists and trapped the steel in the scallops of both gauntlets.

"Familiar," Rā's said. "Don't you have anything new?"

"How about this?" Batman yanked his arms in opposite directions and the blade snapped in two. Then Batman drove the palm of his right hand into Rā's al Ghūl's chest, and, as Rā's stumbled backward, Batman jumped onto a seat and past Rā's to the train controls.

He looked out the front window and saw Wayne Tower looming ahead. He grabbed the brake lever

but before he could pull it back, Rā's shoved his cane into the mechanism, jamming it. Before Batman could free it, Rā's swung his clenched fists at the back of Batman's head, bouncing it off the windshield. Rā's struck again, and Batman fell and rolled onto his back. Rā's was straddling him, his hands clenched around Batman's neck, his thumbs pressing into Batman's throat.

"Don't be afraid, Bruce . . . you hate this city as much as I do, but you're just an ordinary man in a cape. That's why you can't fight injustice in this city . . . and that's why you can't stop this train."

"Who said anything about stopping it?"

The train car shook and Rā's al Ghūl's grasp relaxed for an instant. He looked through the windshield at the track, twisted and smoking.

"You'll never learn to mind your surroundings," Batman said, "as much as your opponent." He slammed his right gauntlet into Rā's al Ghūl's face. Rā's toppled sideways, and Batman scrambled to his feet. He grabbed his opponent's hair with his left hand and pulled a scalloped Batarang from under his cloak with his right. He raised the weapon over his head; a single downward swing would bury it in Rā's al Ghūl's skull.

Rā's smiled. "Have you finally learned to do what is necessary?"

Batman flung the weapon at the windshield. The glass cracked, then broke. "I won't kill you . . ."

Batman pulled a small grenade from his belt and threw it at the back door of the car. There was an explosion, and the door was gone.

"But I don't have to save you."

Batman moved to the other side of the microwave transmitter and thrust his hands into his cape. It stiffened and became a wing.

Batman caught a thermal, which lifted him a couple hundred feet into the air. He looked down. There was a fire gouting up the wall of the Tower, and in it, he could see the silhouette of the monorail car. To the south, he saw the flashing red lights of fire engines and heard the distant wail of sirens mingled with the sighing of the wind . . .

Bruce Wayne opened his eyes and, for a moment, let the nightmare that was a memory fade, then sat up in his bed, feeling the pleasant silkiness of the sheets against his bare skin. He swung his legs onto the floor, stood, walked to the window. In the glow of the eastern sky, he could see, on the street below, the burned remains of a large chunk of the monorail leading to Wayne Tower—the only remaining visible reminder of his battle with Rā's al Ghūl.

For him, it had been the end of a long journey.

He could not say what the real beginning of that journey was. The time, in early childhood, when he'd been playing in the yard with Rachel Dawes and fell into a well, breaking the wall and loosing thousands of bats that lived in the cave beyond?

The ordeal hadn't lasted long. Within a minute, two at most, Thomas Wayne had climbed down the rope, enfolded his son in strong arms, and taken him back to sunlight. But that short time alone, in the cold and dark, with the monstrosities flapping around him, was grim, would have left a scar on any child's memory.

But the worst was still ahead. The worst was the night when Bruce and his father and mother were walking on a side street after watching an opera performance and a mugger had murdered Bruce's parents.

*Two pulls of a trigger—*bang bang*—and Mother's pearls were spilling into the gutter, stained with her blood, Father lying sprawled next to her. Bruce listened to the sound of the mugger's running feet.*

on the pavement and knew, to an absolute certainty, that his life had changed forever.

Was *that* the real beginning? Yes. Surely, something else was born the instant his parents fell, and Bruce Wayne—whoever he was, whatever he might have become—was extinguished.

But there were other moments, ones that accelerated the process, the transformation that had begun with the death of the Waynes.

His impulsive decision to leave Gotham City: Bruised and bleeding from an encounter with Carmine Falcone, he ran across the rotting board of a dock, cold fog in his face and the smell of decaying fish in his nostrils, and leapt, grabbed a chain trailing from the stern of a rusty freighter and climbed aboard, beginning an odyssey that took him deep into the underbelly of civilization. He met and mingled with the angry and insane beings who preyed on their fellows, the thieves and sadists and murderers, trying to understand them, eventually becoming one of them . . .

The meeting with Rā's al Ghūl: It was in a prison cell. Bruce had been consigned to solitary confinement after he had severely injured several other prisoners in a mess-hall brawl. The tall, solemn man offered Bruce not only release, but redemption. Bruce accepted, and soon became an acolyte of the most dangerous man on Earth . . .

The years at the monastery: Rā's was his master, Rā's was his savior, and in the monastery, unknown to the world, high in the Himalayas, Bruce learned the mental discipline and physical skills that made him nearly invincible in combat. The training was harsh and merciless; mistakes were not tolerated and usually resulted in death. But those who survived were something just shy of supermen, and of them all, Bruce was the best. He imagined that he would live as Rā's al Ghūl's servant for quite some time until he learned that Rā's planned to save humanity by slaughtering tens of millions, beginning with the citizens of Gotham City . . .

He had help from others—from Rachel Dawes, childhood friend and sweetheart, whose quiet idealism inspired him, and Lucius Fox, who supplied him with the tools and technology he needed, and Alfred, his closest friend and constant advisor, and even his ancestors, the Wayne dynasty, who were kind enough to amass the vast fortune that financed his activities.

That money enabled young Bruce to give himself a first-rate education. Until he was twelve, he attended the best private schools in the area. Then, when a principal told Alfred that there was “nothing more we can give the lad,” he studied with a series of tutors. In science, he was always excellent. In languages, also excellent. In history, so-so. In social sciences, fair, and in liberal arts, mediocre, except in drama; he loved to read plays, and when he learned that Alfred had once been a child actor in Great Britain, he asked a lot of questions, especially how performers achieved their effects.

By Bruce's fourteenth year, Alfred got used to looking out one of the big windows of the mansion and seeing young Bruce running around the grounds, climbing and swinging from trees, sometimes just throwing rocks, hard and far. Bruce heard of a local soccer league for young folks that had just formed in the neighborhood, and, although he was not enrolled in any of the local schools, he managed to join one of the teams. He quit after his second practice. “Guess I'm just not the locker-room type,” he told Alfred, and never mentioned the subject again.

But he didn't abandon sports, just teams. When he was sixteen he asked Alfred if they could go skiing. Alfred had never been near a ski slope, but he made some calls and learned of an excellent, though pricey, resort in Vermont and phoned for reservations there and went shopping for equipment.

They decided to drive, which was a mistake. A bad blizzard struck, and driving became both slow and hazardous. They didn't manage to check in until after ten. The pretty young woman at the desk

said that the ski lifts were closed for the night and wouldn't open again until six, but that the lounge was open, where there was a roaring fire going, and plenty of good company. Alfred thought that sounded pretty good, but Bruce begged off—too tired, he said. Alfred bade him good night and went into the lounge where, for an extremely pleasant hour, he drank hot cider and chatted with a retired schoolteacher whose hobby was growing begonias.

Alfred decided to look in on Bruce before retiring. He found Bruce's room empty, the bed unslept in.

"I should have known," he muttered. "Too tired indeed!"

Bruce bought a pair of snowshoes from a man in the parking lot, who was packing his car. He put them on, shouldered his skis, and began the trek to the top of the expert slope. It was slow, tedious going, filled with slipping, sliding, and snowdrifts that were waist high. A bit after midnight, Bruce finally stood atop the mountain. The sky was empty of clouds, and moonlight glowed on the snow: Christmas card, a breathtakingly beautiful night, which Bruce noted only in passing. He had a mission. He shed the snowshoes, put on the skis, and stood poised at the top of the trail. Someone shouted to him—a night watchman, probably. Bruce turned his head in the direction of the shout, saluted with two fingers, and pushed off.

Ice flecks stung his cheeks, and his skis hissed on the powder as the trail rushed up to meet him, and he was enjoying himself until the world turned upside down . . .

The watchman had called the police, the police called the rescue patrol, and the rescue patrol, two medics, found Bruce at the bottom of a shallow gorge, unconscious, a bloody gash across his forehead, one of his skis lying in two pieces nearby, the other one canting his leg at an unnatural angle.

An hour later, Alfred entered the lodge's sick bay and found Bruce propped up in bed, his left leg encased in a cast, a white bandage across his forehead.

"I trust you had a pleasant rest," Alfred said.

"I'm afraid I don't have a comeback," Bruce said. "Head's pounding just a bit. Rain check?"

Alfred conferred with a doctor, who had been summoned from a nearby town, and learned that Bruce's leg was broken, but cleanly, and he had a slight concussion, a bad gash above his eyes that had required eleven stitches, and a lot of contusions. But, the doctor concluded, if Alfred wanted to take Bruce to Gotham, and could guarantee proper transportation, there should be no problem.

The "proper transportation" was a big, twin-rotor Sikorsky helicopter, which set down in a field next to Wayne Manor. Bruce slept in his own bed that night.

The bandage and cast came off, the contusions healed, and the Wayne family physician pronounced Bruce intact again.

Bruce never skied recreationally again, though he did do some cross-country skiing when he was at Rā's al Ghūl's monastery—he once went three days across snow-covered mountains without sleeping—and on another occasion Rā's challenged him to ski down an almost vertical sheet of ice with jagged rocks at the bottom.

Bruce's interest eventually shifted to other athletics. He ordered a complete set of Olympic-grade gymnastics gear and spent most of a summer with an instructor learning how to use it. He had an Olympic-size pool dug behind the garden, and for several months swam laps before breakfast. He lifted weights. He ran. He cycled. But he wasn't good at everything. He was never able to get an arrow he loosed from a bow to go where it was aimed, and he was never better than a mediocre skater.

Rachel would sometimes join him at the manor to swim, or bounce around on the trampoline,

just hang out. Bruce seemed to enjoy these visits, but then, suddenly, he was seventeen and gone without so much as a phone call.

The comings and goings continued until Bruce failed in an attempt to kill the man who had murdered his parents, had a final, ugly argument with Rachel and jumped aboard a rust bucket of a ship leaving Gotham Harbor. He was gone for years and when he at last reappeared, he was a different man. But only Alfred and Rachel could see what had changed . . .

CHAPTER TWO



With Batman came baggage. Most of it Bruce carried deep within himself, in the form of regret, unanswered questions, and memories. During his pilgrimage from rich kid to vigilante, he'd gone to many places, done many things, a lot of them ugly, one or two perhaps unforgivable. But he succeeded in what he wanted to accomplish; he'd learned, and equipped himself. He had been considering returning to Gotham City when a betrayal and a few other unforeseen circumstances put him in a filthy hole of a prison. There, he'd been offered a chance at freedom, and when he took it he found himself in yet another prison—a monastery, high in the Himalayas, where he became the acolyte of the most dangerous, and perhaps the most charismatic, man he had ever known.

Rā's al Ghūl. A man who hid both his brilliance and his malevolence behind another's identity until it pleased him to reveal himself. Bruce sometimes wondered if Rā's concealing himself behind another identity somehow lodged in his subconscious and, when the time came, prompted him to adopt a similar strategy.

Even now, Bruce could not decide whether Rā's was truly insane. Bruce knew that, by his own reckoning, Rā's was an altruist, a savior who would restore social and, more importantly, environmental order to a stricken planet. He would do this by means that would make Vlad the Impaler seem like a Sunday school teacher. He would eliminate most of the human beings on the Earth, and force the rest to live according to strict rules.

Rā's tolerated no disobedience, as Bruce learned when he ordered Bruce to execute a farmer who was guilty of theft. Bruce had refused, and in fleeing had set the monastery ablaze.

But before he had made his way down the mountain, he had stopped to rescue his mentor. That had been a mistake. Rā's had followed him to Gotham City and initiated a scheme to drive everyone there into hallucinating madness, and had partly succeeded.

You sometimes see them around town, Bruce thought. The ones I couldn't save. The ones the doctors gave up on. Hollow-eyed, unaware of their surroundings . . . And those are the fortunate ones. The others . . . they're behind walls. They're fed, and sheltered, and clothed, and they scream and scream . . .

It all came to an end on a train speeding toward the center of the city, when student and mentor confronted each other a final time.

Some Gothamites, confused by conflicting reports, thought that the bat-man had caused the crash; others regarded him as a hero, and still others, perhaps the majority, doubted his existence.

When Alfred Pennyworth carried a tray of toast and coffee into Bruce Wayne's bedroom area, he found it empty, though the bed had been slept in—not always the case where Alfred's employer was concerned. He went down a long, empty corridor. Twice he had to flatten himself against a wall an inch past cartons that were still unpacked and were in the way. They had occupied this penthouse for

less than a month and there was still work to do before Alfred could pronounce it livable.

Bruce Wayne was in an empty area performing one of the strange, dancelike routines Alfred knew was called a *kata*, and whose purpose was to train in Asian martial arts.

“Something Rā’s al Ghūl taught you?” Alfred asked.

Bruce finished his exercise before answering: leapt and kicked simultaneously, and landed lightly on the balls of his feet. “Nope,” he said. “Korean master. Last I heard, he was living in the Changans mountains.”

“Does this resumption of martial-arts practice indicate that you plan further nocturnal forays?”

“Not necessarily. I’m used to being in shape. Makes me feel good. I tried just sitting around yesterday, and it gave me the crawlies.” Bruce looked at the tray. “That for me?”

Alfred nodded and put the tray on a windowsill. Bruce poured himself a cup of coffee.

“May I assume,” Alfred asked, “that you’re done with . . . busting heads?”

Bruce sipped his coffee. “I prefer to use the term ‘vigorous persuasion.’ What you’re really asking is, am I done with Batman? I’ve given it a lot of thought these past few days and . . . no, I’m not.”

“Rā’s al Ghūl is dead.”

“But there are others, close to home, who are just as dangerous. The job isn’t done. For openers there’s the Maroni thing, the Rossi thing . . . I’m far from done . . .”

Alfred sighed. “I suppose I should begin to shop for some new equipment.”

“For here? No, this room isn’t nearly big enough. No room in the penthouse is.”

“May I remind you that the cave beneath the mansion is . . .”

“. . . Temporarily inaccessible, yes,” finished Bruce. “That’s something that has a high priority. What I have in mind will take a lot of hard work. You can expect a whopping Christmas bonus this year.”

“Splendid. In the meantime, if you insist on continuing your nocturnal exploits, what will you do for a headquarters? You can hardly wear the cape and mask and pass the doorman downstairs without being noticed.”

“I think I’ve got that covered. I’ll show you the place this afternoon. With a little elbow grease, we should be able to transform it into a bunker of sorts.”

“My life,” Alfred said, “becomes fuller and fuller.”

Bruce finished his coffee as Alfred carried the empty tray to the kitchen.

CHAPTER THREE



It was what most of Gotham's citizens thought was a typical afternoon in the life of Bruce Wayne: a playboy. A quick stop at a gallery opening, where he ignored the photographs on display but managed to get the phone number of the pretty receptionist. Lunch at a hip downtown bistro. A dash out to the country club, where he decided *not* to play golf but instead chased the female employees around with his clubs.

A trip back to central Gotham, waving at passersby from the window of his steel gray Lamborghini Murcielago.

Bruce drove the Lamborghini into the basement garage of the tall building he currently lived in. He managed to knock over a Vespa scooter on the way to his parking slot, paid the Vespa's owner twice what it would cost to replace it, stashed the Lamborghini next to the other Wayne vehicle, a Rolls Royce, and rode the private elevator to his penthouse. There, he found that Alfred had company. Harvey and Rachel Dawes were perched on stools in the kitchen, facing each other across a marble countertop, clutching mugs of what Bruce was sure was tea, deep in conversation. Both looked at him when he entered, and he called out a greeting.

"What brings you uptown?" he asked Rachel. "Or do you come *downtown* . . . I can never remember where that office of yours is."

"Uptown, as you well know."

"I thought you'd be busy . . . middle of a weekday and all."

"The case I was trying was plea bargained. No court time needed."

"Tell me . . . is that good or bad? This law stuff . . . so confusing."

"You don't have to do your act with me, Bruce. In fact, I wish you wouldn't. It annoys me."

"Sorry," Bruce said.

"I hope so."

"What are you and Alfred up to?"

"I came to see *you*."

"Okay. Shall we go into the living room?"

"Here is fine."

"More tea?" Alfred asked.

"That would be nice," Rachel said. Alfred refilled Rachel's cup and poured one for Bruce, then excused himself.

Bruce looked at Rachel across the counter. She had aged, but no one could complain about that. She had always been *cute*; now she was, by any reasonable criterion, *beautiful*. Beautiful and strong, and ferocious, compassionate, and brave.

“What you’re doing is wrong,” she said.

“Wrecking sports cars? Dating debutantes? What exactly . . .”

“Please, Bruce. No masquerade, not with me.”

“Fair enough.”

“There’s something else. I’d like you to abandon your *other* masquerade.”

“Which one would that be?”

“The Batman.”

Bruce hesitated and sipped tea, then set down the mug. “Okay. What’s your objection to . . . my new life?”

“I think you’ve begun to enjoy it. Too much. Oh, I’m sure you’ve constructed an elaborate rationalization—you’re saving Gotham, et cetera et cetera et cetera . . . I’m afraid that sooner or later you’ll become addicted to it, and that will cause you to cross the line.”

“You’re afraid I’ll kill someone.”

“Or cause someone to die . . . what you’d call ‘collateral damage.’ And you’ll rationalize, tell yourself that it was necessary, it couldn’t be helped, you were only following the dictates of the moment . . . Does that sound familiar to you?”

“No. Should it?”

“You should read history books. Then you might recognize some of the excuses war criminals offer.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You’ll *try* to be careful, at least at first. But you’ll be creating situations that you won’t be able to control, situations in which people panic. I deal with cops and crooks all day, every day. I know what can happen to a person.”

“With all due humility . . . I’m not just any *person*.”

“You’re richer than most. You’re also incredibly intelligent, athletic, handsome, determined, and motivated. But you swim in the same gene pool as we lesser mortals. You’re fallible, and you’re going to fail and someone *will* die. Then you’ll either destroy yourself with remorse or become a homicidal sociopath. I don’t know which would be worse.”

“Sometimes violence is necessary.”

“Yes. To save your life or someone else’s life. But not as policy—you’re proposing to use violence to solve enormously complex problems, and when has that ever worked? And it’s been tried, oh, has it been tried! Remember the old definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.”

“Rachel, I promise you . . . I won’t go off the deep end.”

“I think you will.”

“You know how much I respect your opinion, but this time, you’re wrong.”

“We’ll see, then won’t we?”

“I guess we will.”

Alfred was feeling a bit guilty. He shouldn’t have been listening to the private conversation, but

information passed between those two . . . he had to know what it was. And now he did, and now he was disturbed because he shared Rachel's misgivings. He wasn't as alarmed as she obviously was, but . . . he tended Bruce Wayne's wounds, always trying to joke about them to lighten the moment, and he'd observed the subtle changes in Bruce since his return from his adventures abroad and his time with Rā's al Ghūl. Of course, Bruce was no longer the bright, charming child he'd been when he and Alfred met and, people did change as they age; perhaps the traits Alfred was observing were simply the result of Bruce getting older. But he still couldn't help being bothered.

When she got up to leave, he escorted Rachel to the door, told her that he would see her soon, and then went to see how Bruce was enjoying his tea.

The Joker saw the bus, about a block away, and—was this great or what?—an old lady waiting near the curb. It would be a matter of perfect timing, but the Joker loved that kind of challenge. He stood directly behind the old lady. The bus came closer, closer, just a few feet away . . .

The Joker let it pass.

Then he tapped the old lady on the shoulder and handed her a hundred-dollar bill.

CHAPTER FOUR



Mid-afternoon, Friday, downtown Gotham City. North Julius Street, on the edge of the financial district. Noise and confusion. Blaring horns and rumbling engines and sunlight glaring on thousands of panes of glass. A thin blue haze of exhaust fumes hanging in the air.

Above it all, on the fourteenth floor of a skyscraper still under construction, two men wearing clown masks, with weapons and tools strapped to their bodies, were standing in a vacant loft facing a ten-foot-tall window. The first of the men, whose code name was Dopey, aimed upward, fired a silenced automatic pistol at the glass, and watched shards of it fall to the floor. The second man, code name Happy, stepped to the now empty window frame and lifted what looked like a spear gun to his shoulder, aimed, squeezed the trigger, and a hook trailing a length of cable, hissed across the street and buried itself in the wall of another building. Dopey secured his end of the cable to a naked I-beam and nodded to his partner. Happy hooked a bag to the cable and sent it across the emptiness. A moment later, Happy and Dopey followed the bag, dangling from wheeled devices that fit over the line. If anyone happened to look up and see them . . . *Hey, this is Gotham City, whack-job central. Just another pair of loonies doing something loony, and if it's interesting, maybe it'll be on the eleven o'clock news . . .*

Below, and three blocks away, a black SUV with dark-tinted windows and out-of-state license plates sped between two school buses and jerked to a stop at an intersection. The front passenger door opened, and a tall man wearing coveralls dashed from a doorway and climbed into the vehicle. Once inside, he pulled a clown mask from his pocket, pulled it on, and turned in his seat to face another clown, code named Bozo, in the driver's seat. "Three of a kind. Let's do this," he said, now going by the name Grumpy.

The man in the backseat, code named Chuckles, looked up from loading a compact submachine gun and said, "That's it? Three guys?"

Grumpy said, "There are two on the roof. Every guy is an extra share. Five shares is plenty."

Chuckles said, "Six shares. Don't forget the guy who planned the job."

Grumpy said, "Yeah? If he thinks he can sit it out and still take a slice then I get why they call him the Joker."

On the rooftop, Dopey and Happy pried open an access panel. Happy paused and stared at Dopey. "Why do they call him the Joker?"

"I heard it's 'cause he wears makeup," Chuckles said, pulling out a thick bundle of blue CAT cables. "To scare people. War paint."

Back on the street, Bozo guided the SUV to a metered parking spot in front of the bank. He switched off the engine and, without bothering to feed the meter, went into the bank. Grumpy, Bozo, and

Chuckles carried assault rifles; they carried several empty duffel bags as well. Once inside, Grumpy fired a burst into the ceiling as Chuckles hit the security guard on the head with the butt of his weapon and Bozo closed the door and lowered the blinds.

Grumpy fired another burst, and yelled, "Everybody down on the floor—now!" Customers and employees alike dropped to their hands and knees, then to their bellies. One of the senior tellers managed to press a silent-alarm button as she went down. Fifteen floors above her, on the roof, Dopey stared down at a palm-sized electronic device and heard a faint *ping*.

"What's that?" Happy asked.

"Here comes the silent alarm, just like we figured," Dopey said. "And there it goes. Funny thing is it didn't dial out to the cops. It was trying to reach a private number."

Behind him, Happy raised his gun and fired his silenced automatic into the back of Dopey's head. As Dopey slumped to the roof dead, Happy picked up his bag. He took from it an old-fashioned crowbar and went to work on the roof access door. In less than a minute, he had it wrenched open and was running down a steep flight of steps, lit only by red bulbs on each landing. When he reached the bottom, he opened a door marked EXIT and was standing in front of a shiny steel vault.

In the bank proper, Bozo and Grumpy were moving down a line of customers and tellers, who stood along one wall. Bozo handed each a hand grenade and Grumpy followed, pulling the pins. The hostages gripped the grenades in both hands, holding the tops to prevent the grenades from exploding.

"We don't want you doing anything with your hands other than holding on for dear life," Grumpy told the hostages.

Then there was a loud *bang* and the third robber, Chuckles, fell backward, his mask and the front of his jacket shredded, dead.

The bank manager, wearing an impeccably tailored brown suit and holding a shotgun, stepped from his office and fired again. The hostages, clutching their grenades, scurried along the floor seeking cover. Grumpy and Bozo both fired blindly in the general direction of the manager with the shotgun and they dived behind a desk.

"What's he got, a five-shot?" Grumpy asked.

Bozo nodded.

"He's got three left?"

Bozo raised two fingers.

Grumpy edged his gun around the corner of the desk and squeezed off a single shot. The bank manager fired twice. Grumpy looked at Bozo, who nodded.

Grumpy stood and aimed his gun over the desktop. The bank manager fired again and a hail of buckshot clipped Grumpy's shoulder. He fell behind the desk and the manager moved forward, pulling fresh shells from his pocket. Bozo stood from behind the desk and shot the manager in the chest.

Grumpy had pulled aside the flaps of his shirt and jacket over the place where the buckshot had struck him and was peering down at his wound. He rubbed some blood away with the palm of his hand and looked more closely. The damage was only superficial.

Leaning on the desk, he stood and turned to Bozo. "Where'd you learn to count?"

Bozo ignored him and started loading fresh shells into his shotgun.

"You have any idea who you're stealing from?" the bank manager whispered. "You and your friend"

are *dead*.”

Happy clamped a drill to the vault and pressed a button. With a high whine, the drill blade bit into the metal and—

He found himself on the floor, dazed and shaking. It took him a few moments to realize that he had been hit by electricity, a *lot* of electricity. They wired the *vault*?

He pulled his sneakers off, put them on his hands and, bracing himself on a wall, approached the vault once more. With a lot of fumbling and repositioning, he was able to operate the drill, the sneakers protecting him from the high voltage.

Grumpy entered the chamber from a side door. Happy glanced at him, and said, “They wired the vault with—*I dunno*, maybe five thousand volts. What kind of bank does that?”

“A mob bank,” Grumpy said. “I guess the Joker’s as crazy as they say.”

Happy shrugged. The noise of the drill changed from a whine to a grinding sound. “We’re almost home,” Happy said.

He grabbed the large wheel and spun it.

“Where’s the alarm guy?” Grumpy asked.

The wheel stopped spinning. Happy pulled on it, and the vault swung open. “Boss told me that when the alarm guy was done I should take him out. One less share.”

“Funny,” Grumpy said. “He told me something similar.”

Happy grabbed for the pistol shoved into his belt at the small of his back as he whirled to face Grumpy, but he was too late. Grumpy fired a burst from his assault rifle and, after a moment, stepped over Happy’s body and into the vault.

He stopped and stared at the mountain of cash at least eight feet tall.

Ten minutes later, he emerged into the bank burdened by several bulging duffel bags. He dropped them at Bozo’s feet and laughed.

“C’mon,” he said. “There’s a lot to carry.”

The hostages, clutching their grenades, watched as the robbers disappeared into the vault. Some of them glanced nervously at their neighbors, others stared at nothing in particular, while still others had their eyes squeezed shut, their lips moving silently.

Grumpy and Bozo reappeared, each burdened with several stuffed duffel bags. Grumpy dropped his bags onto the floor next to the first batch and said, “If this guy was so smart, he would have had a car to bring a bigger car.”

Then he jammed his pistol into Bozo’s back and took his weapon. “I’m betting the Joker told you to kill me soon as we loaded the cash.”

Bozo shook his head. “No. I kill the bus driver.”

“Bus driver? What bus—”

Bozo glanced at the nearest window and jumped back. The rear end of a yellow school bus smashed through the window, sending a shower of glass into the room and slamming Grumpy into the teller’s cage. Bozo snatched up Grumpy’s fallen weapon and turned to face the bus. Another clown opened the bus’s rear door, and Bozo shot him dead.

Sirens began to wail in the distance.

Bozo began loading the duffel bags into the bus.

The bank manager still lay where he'd fallen, his right hand splayed over his wound, his head raised to stare at Bozo. "Think you're smart, huh?" he wheezed. "Well, the guy who hired you'll just do the same to you. Sure he will. Criminals in this town used to believe in things."

Bozo stepped over to where the man lay and crouched beside him.

The man stared up at Bozo. "Honor. Respect. What do you believe—"

Bozo jammed a grenade with a purple thread knotted around the pin into the man's mouth.

"I believe," Bozo said, "that what doesn't kill you—"

Bozo yanked off his mask. The manager's eyes widened. He was looking at another clown face, one far more disturbing than any of the masks: white skin, green hair, a mouth horribly scarred beneath a red slash of makeup.

"—simply makes you *stranger*," the Joker concluded.

The scarred clown rose and strolled toward the bus, the thread attached to the grenade unraveling from the purple lining of his jacket. He climbed into the bus and shut the rear door, trapping the purple thread.

A moment later, the bus engine grumbled, and the bus jerked over the sidewalk and into the street.

The purple thread yanked the pin from the grenade in the bank manager's mouth.

Hostages screamed.

The grenade hissed and began spewing red smoke, but it did not explode.

A block away, a line of school buses left the curb in front of the Ferguson Middle School and edged into the traffic stream. A final bus, which came from the direction of the bank, joined them as five police cars, sirens screaming, sped past them on the opposite side of the street.

CHAPTER FIVE



The Chechen sipped fine wine, looked across the dance floor at a fine woman, and listened to music which was not fine, but popular here in his new country, the United States of America.

Some said he was lucky, this native of Chechnya, very lucky indeed not to be dead or eating moldy bread in some godforsaken prison cell. The Chechen knew luck had nothing to do with it. He was tough, he was as smart as he had to be, and he did not care about anyone or anything except his own well-being, and that made him invulnerable.

He was just a boy when Chechnya broke away from Russia in the early 90s, nothing but fuzz on his cheeks, but already he knew opportunity when he saw it, already he was realizing that the chaos that gripped his small nation could be turned to his advantage. So he got some guns, a lot of guns abandoned by fleeing Russian troops, and the guns enabled him to get followers, and the followers and the guns together enabled him to get more guns and more followers . . . For a while, he was one of the most feared and powerful men in his region, and by then he had something more than fuzz on his cheeks, but not *much* more. In the United States, he would not have been able to vote yet; in his country, he was a dominator. He was sure that nothing could stop him. But something did. The damned Russian army—*that* stopped him. The Communists were gone, or temporarily in hiding, but the politicians and generals—were they about to let tiny Chechnya make a mockery of the mother country? No. And so tiny Chechnya was reinvaded, and this time, the Russians were victorious.

That was fine with him. Russians the bosses? Deal with them. Not selling them guns and rockets perhaps—they seemed to have plenty of guns and rockets. But there were other things. Drugs? Yes, people always wanted drugs, and as long as the authorities were so stupid as to outlaw drugs, money could be made from them.

By now, he despised the name he was born with because it reminded him of his parents, a pair of weaklings, a pair of fools who deserved the squalor they lived in, but he was not good at things requiring imagination, things such as thinking of a new name. Boris? Too Russian. Peter? Too Christian. In the end, he told people to call him “the Chechen.”

He went into the business of supplying drugs to Russian troops, both officers and enlisted men but mostly officers because they had more money. Then something happened. He never learned exactly what it was, but one night, sitting in the rear seat of his car as one of his hirelings delivered cocaine to a major general, he saw police emerge from a van and storm into the major general’s quarters. There were shots. Police cars blocked both ends of the street. The windshield of the Chechen’s car shattered and his driver’s head fell back, a widening splotch of blood on his forehead. The Chechen got his machine pistol from under the seat, rolled out the car door and, bent over, staying low, ran for a narrow passageway between two houses. He heard yelling and footfalls behind him. When he reached the end of the passageway, he turned around and sprayed bullets at the policemen who were chasing him. There were four of them and they all fell, and he ran again. He found a culvert beneath a roadway and squeezed into it, gasping, spit running down his chin.

He waited and listened. There was the distant rumble of traffic, but no footfalls, no sirens. He stayed in the culvert for an hour, waiting, listening. Finally, he climbed out and hiked to a place he knew near an airfield. He used the cash in his pockets to obtain use of a computer and the computer access bank accounts in the Bahamas. He used that cash to bribe and obtain a private aircraft, and within a week he was comfortably ensconced in a luxury hotel in Mexico City. The Russians, he was pretty sure, would not seek him in Mexico, and by the time they realized that he might have gone there, he would have vanished again.

What next? He liked the drug trade, liked feeling superior to the weaklings who were his customers, liked the money. And he was close to the United States. But where in the United States? New York, Chicago, Miami, both ends of California, St. Louis—it would be difficult to establish himself in places like those because businessmen such as he already had both monopolies and small armies of enforcers, and his own army was gone, its members either dead or behind bars. But this Gotham City he had heard of? From what he already knew and was able to learn through telephone calls, Gotham City had been a paradise of corruption and a marketplace for his kind of goods. The rumor was, the situation in Gotham was even worse than usual. Something big had happened, something nobody could quite explain: escaped maniacs, exploding manholes, a commuter train that crashed into a street and burst into flames, ordinary citizens rampaging, insane . . . and a giant bat that was part human. That last, the bat—it had to be something made up, perhaps to sell newspapers. The Chechen did not believe in human bats. But the rest was true, at least most of it. There were pictures and eyewitness accounts. The whole story could be a hoax, perpetrated by the government, but the Chechen did not think so, because there was no profit to be made from such lies.

If the television reporters were to be believed, the situation in Gotham City had improved, but it was still largely chaos. Perhaps it was like his country after the Russians had fled? That would be made to order for him. That would be perfect.

The man to see, the boss of bosses, was named Salvatore Maroni. The Chechen would have to deal with him. But first, he would have to prove himself. He found an enclave of refugees from his part of the world in a small city near Gotham, called Blüdhaven, armed them and led them in a successful raid on the biggest local dealer. News media called the event a “massacre,” and for once, the label was accurate. No survivors, and a row of storefronts in downtown Blüdhaven in flames. The Chechen now owned the Blüdhaven drug trade. Maroni did what he would have done, and got in touch. Discussions were held, deals made, and in the end, Sal Maroni and the Chechen were co-operators, and virtually every junkie in both Blüdhaven and Gotham City were clients.

The Chechen had always planned to kill Maroni as soon as it was convenient, but he found that the informal partnership was useful. As the Americans would say, they had each other’s back. Perhaps later, when he understood America better, the Chechen would kill Maroni, but for the time being, and for the foreseeable future, they were allies. Maroni introduced him to others of what the press called “the underworld” and, again, deals were made and everyone profited.

The Chechen bought himself a nice house in a Gotham suburb, one with a high fence and living quarters for his bodyguards and large, luxurious kennels for his dogs. The rottweilers were the animals he favored, big and nasty and ferocious, like himself. Next, he sought recreation. None of the nightspots were to his liking, nothing like the clubs he’d seen in old Hollywood movies, except for the one owned by Maroni, and the Chechen didn’t want to get *too* close to his partner because . . . well, perhaps Maroni planned to kill *him*—it was surely possible—and if he allowed himself to be distracted by the pleasures of a nightclub, the killing would be easy, and that was to say nothing of poison in the food and drink. The Chechen’s solution was the obvious one, a nightclub of his own, and it proved to be an *excellent* solution.

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