



**Nightwing #35**  
Batkid

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## **Nightwing: Volatile Villainy**

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The man sat up, startled. He glanced about, looking for whatever had awakened him. His heart thumped madly. He slid out of the bed and headed for the light switch. Hearing a slight sound behind him, he whirled and then screamed in sheer terror.

Nightwing glared at the man. Holding the flashlight under his face for effect, he was suddenly reminded of middle school.

“I hear you’ve been asking for me.”

“I—” The man reached behind him and switched the light on. The room suddenly brightened, temporarily blinding both men.

Nightwing trusted to his other senses to be sure that the other man wouldn’t try to turn the situation to his advantage. Blinking rapidly, the other man waited to regain his eyesight before speaking. “I need your help.”

“What makes you think I have the slightest inclination to help you?”

“Because you won’t be able to resist. Or shouldn’t, at least, if you really are as ‘all for justice’ as you claim.”

“Everyone draws the line somewhere. Besides,” Nightwing said darkly, “it’s going to take a lot to convince me that helping you could possibly serve justice. Unless it involves putting you in jail.”

The man held up his hand. "You will, you will."

"Take you to jail?" Nightwing blinked. "Why wait?"

"NO! I meant, be convinced!"

"I doubt it."

The other man opened the fridge and pulled out a can of soda. "Drink?"

Nightwing stared at the man for a second, then spun to leave.

"Wait!" The soda was forgotten as the man rushed toward Nightwing and grabbed his arm. Nightwing's expression changed rapidly from irritation to rage.

"Don't do that. Don't *ever* do that." Nightwing growled. The man stepped back fearfully, throwing his hands up.

"Okay, all right, fine! Go then. You know where the window is." The man shrugged. "I just thought I'd give you the chance to prevent an innocent child's death."

Nightwing paused at the window.

The man shrugged again. "Poor kid. Abandoned by his favorite hero, too. Well, it's a toss-up between you and Robin. He really likes Superman, too—cck!" His eyes widened.

Nightwing held his hand firmly at his opponent's throat, pinning him to the wall. The stench of the man's breath was sickening.

"You have exactly three seconds to elaborate."

"Let go of my neck?" The man asked hopefully.

"Two seconds," the teen warned.

The man grimaced. "Sure thing, kid, whatever you want. It's just that it's a long story, and I thought you'd like to get comfort—cck!"

Nightwing's gloved hand tightened its hold. "One second. I highly recommend you use it well."

"Okay, alright," the man said hoarsely. "The thing is, if you don't help me, a kid's gonna get hurt. Or worse."

The man hardly knew what happened next. One minute, he was staring at Nightwing's masked face, and the next, he was on the floor. Stunned, he put a hand under his eye.

"Wait!" He cried, as Nightwing again raised his fist. The fist hung ominously, a foot from the man's face. The man decided to do everything he could to keep it from connecting. Gingerly, he felt the spot under his eye, once more. It was already beginning to swell. "Well, at least I can breathe now." He stopped and glanced at Nightwing, then opted to hurry on with his explanation in order to *keep* breathing.

"I didn't mean that *I'd* kill the kid!" He said quickly. "It's just one of those cause-and-effect things—'cause if I get killed, he feels the effect." He chuckled at his wit before adding, "And vice-versa."

"Explain."

"Can I at least sit up? This is killing my back," the man complained. Seeing that Nightwing made no effort to remove his knee, or lower his fist, the man sighed. "Or not." Lying back on the floor, the man craned his neck. "Ah, where to begin...?" He mused. "I suppose I should start in the middle. That's always a good place to start." He glanced up at Nightwing. "After you put me away, I got a stiff prison sentence, as you can imagine. Must'a liked that, eh, kid? Bet Grayson did."

"Just get on with the story, Sloan."

The man's mouth twisted. "Okay, alright... anyway, so I was in jail, but I got out early—good behavior, y'know—and now I'm on parole. Thing is, it turns out I was better off in jail. See, kid, someone's trying to kill me. Only one reason I can figure—well, except my ex, haha (she's a cop). Word of advice, kid? Don't marry a cop. Having a woman tell ya, 'you have the right to remain silent' during dinner, or—"

“The point?”

“Sure, kid. Anyway, like I was saying, there’s only one person I can figure who would want to kill me, and that’s Marty. You remember him, right? The man I was dealing for? Well, when you busted his operation—not to mention put him in prison—he became angry. ‘Course, he hates *your* guts, as you can probably figure. But there’s someone else he hates, too—well, two someone else’s, but the one I’m worried about is me.”

“Who’re the other ones?”

“Oh, I’ll get to that, I’ll get to that. I just gotta be sure your priorities are straight. Anyway, about me? Marty’s probably the one out to off me, since you traced him through—”

*Jacob*, Nightwing realized. *He’s the ‘someone else’.* *And maybe Tiffany.* He wondered if any threats had been made on *Jacob’s* or *Tiffany’s* lives.

“So, there’s been numerous attempts, all kinda scary. Marty’s men are normally pretty good, but he probably had to get someone else this time, since most of his usual guys are in prison. I dunno, maybe since I’m not dead yet, the other times were just to scare me? The only one I *know* was a real attempt was in my car.” He shuddered.

“Your car...” Nightwing prompted.

“I parked my car, and went into the store. I was in there a good while. Me ‘n my old man used to play ball in the yard, and I know a thing or two about the game, so I was looking for a quality glove. That kinda thing takes awhile, y’know, so I was in there for at least an hour. So then, I came out, looked in the back of my car, and dumped the baseball glove in the shopping bag—”

“You put the glove in the bag *after* getting to the car?”

Sloan glared at Nightwing. “You want me to finish my story, or what?”

“You want my help?”

“R-right, kid. I wasn’t serious. I wouldn’t leave you hanging like that in the middle of a good story. So... I put the baseball glove—that I had just bought in the store,” he clarified, “in a shopping bag. I had bought the stuff in that bag just the day before.” He paused for effect. “Play-dough.”

Nightwing shifted his weight slightly. “You bought Play-dough? Seriously?” He raised his eyebrow with a smirk.

“Hey, it wasn’t for me,” Sloan defended himself. “It was a gift, just like the baseball glove.”

“Okay, moving on from the...” He snickered. “...the Play-dough?”

Sloan looked insulted. “Laugh all you want, kid. You’ll see in a minute that this ain’t no laughing matter.” He frowned. “So anyway, I been in the store awhile, looking for the perfect glove. I finally find one—it’s hardly perfect, but it’ll work—and go to put it in the other shopping bag in my car. When I see the Play-dough I figure I’ll make sure it’s still okay—after that stuff gets to a certain temperature it messes up, at least, it says so on the box. Since it’s been sitting in there since the day before, I check it.” He paused again. “It wasn’t Play-dough in that container. I’m just lucky I opened the color I did.”

Nightwing frowned, serious now. “You mean—”

Sloan nodded solemnly. “It was plastique. Enough to blow me halfway to Timbuktu. There were some other explosives in there, too, but the plastique was what caught *my* eye.”

Nightwing didn’t even want to know how it was that Sloan would recognize the plastique. “And you left it in the car all night?” He thought quickly. “Someone *could* have placed it in there at any time since you left the car after shopping the day before, but I doubt it.” He drew his attention back to Sloan. “Did you turn on the heater the day you bought the... Play-dough?”

The man looked surprised. “Of course, kid. We’ve had some deep snow here... The cold makes my arthritis start up—”

Nightwing cut him off. "How high? Was the Play-dough next to the heater?"

"I cranked the heat all the way up. The Play-dough was on the seat, right above the vent." He still looked taken aback. "Does that help?"

"It might," Nightwing said. "If the heater got hot quickly it *might* have set the explosives off. Whoever placed the explosives in there, probably put them in that night after you came home, hoping that after you'd had the heat on awhile in the car it would trigger the bomb. If *that* didn't do it, then a good jolt in the car might've."

"See?" Sloan asked. "*That* was one of those serious attempts I told you about."

"What were the others?"

"Ah, there were a few. Someone on the street sprayed a few bullets through my window." He twisted his neck, trying to locate the spot. Nightwing lessened the pressure on his chest slightly. "Right there," he nodded. Nightwing looked at the holes in the wall.

"Are the bullets still in there?"

Sloan shrugged. "The cops were here and took a look around. I don't know if they got all of the bullets or not."

"What about the other attempts?"

"Well, the Play—the plastique and the bullets were the most serious. The other things weren't really attempts, they were warnings. In fact, the bullets were across the room from where I was watching TV, so I'd bet you ten bucks that they were just a warning, too."

Nightwing was inclined to agree. "The rest?" He prompted again.

"Yeah, the rest were mostly little things, if it was even Marty's men doing 'em. Someone sideswiped my car—twice. Hang-up phone calls. That kinda stuff."

“Did one of those phone calls come before someone sprayed the bullets in your window?”

“Yeah, it did, now that I think about it. After I came in the house from shopping that first day, too.”

Nightwing nodded. “Someone was making sure you were home.” He raised an eyebrow. “You still haven’t told me how this ties in with a kid possibly getting killed?”

“Right, right. I was gettin’ there.” Sloan took a deep breath. “Well, kid, you remember how I said I was starting in the middle of my story? Yeah? OK. The beginning of it is more than you need to know,” he stated, “or at least, most of it. What you do need to know is that my ex and I have a son. He’s six now, turns seven next month. That’s why I was getting the Play-dough and baseball glove—for his birthday. The thing is, apparently whoever’s trying to murder me knows I have a son. Not all of the phone calls I’ve received have been hang-ups. One or two of ‘em were threats against me ‘n Joey. Said that they’re gonna get him.”

“Does your wife know?”

“Ex-wife. And yeah, she knows. She says she’s got the situation under control, though. Has a cop watching her house at night.” He rolled his eyes. “Probably just herself.”

“You don’t think she’d call in for another cop to watch the place while she’s asleep?”

Sloan shrugged. “I don’t think she takes me seriously.” He was quiet for a moment, a rare thing for him. “Howzabout that soda, now?”

Nightwing quietly relented, removed his knee from Sloan’s chest and stood up, crossing his arms as he leaned against the wall.

“Anything else?” He asked Sloan.

“Not that I can think of.” He bent over to grab a cold soda from the fridge; the soda he had left on the counter was warm by now, and he put it back. As he grabbed the soda, the room suddenly went dark. Startled,

Sloan jumped up, and banged his head on the top of the fridge.

“Hello?” No response. “Hello?” He felt along the wall, found the light switch in the ‘off’ position, and flipped it up, glancing around.

The room was empty.

“Did your interrogation turn up anything of note, B?”

“Lots of stuff. I’ll tell you about it when I get home. I’m going to have to go back to New York before that, though,” he finished tiredly. “An attempted-murder case.”

“Delightful,” Alfred muttered. “What time do you expect to return home?”

“It’ll be dawn in another hour. My... meeting with Sloan took longer than I expected. By the time Kid Flash ran me back here, it was almost five.”

“I’ll expect you home around six thirty, then,” Alfred responded. “Alfred out.”

Dick yawned as he headed up the stairs. Tim raced down past him, then stopped. “Hey, Dick!”

“Hey,” Dick mumbled.

“Boy, you look awful...” Tim himself looked fresh and awake—since Batman had been gone for most of the night, he’d had the night off.

“Do you realize that this is the third identity I’ve used in the last seven hours?” He was exhausted.

Tim thought about that for a moment. Then he grinned. “People with MPD must always be tired.” He glanced at his watch. “I gotta go, the bus

will be at the end of the lane in five minutes.”

Dick looked at him. “Want me to drive you down to the bus stop? It’s a long walk.”

Tim was already shaking his head. “I’ll run. You get some sleep.” He thumped down the rest of the stairs. “Bye, Alfred!”

Dick entered his room and collapsed on the bed. He didn’t even remember closing his eyes before Alfred was at his side, waking him up.

Dick barely heard a word that Alfred was saying; he was running on autopilot now. He sat up, headed for the adjoining bathroom and took a quick shower. Drying off, he rubbed the towel over his hair, giving it a crazy spiked appearance. He pulled on his jeans, then rinsed his face with cold water, hoping it would wake him up. Dressing quickly, he ran downstairs and gobbled up the bacon, eggs and toast Alfred had placed on the table.

Weaving his way through traffic, he hurried to work, put in his hours and left gladly. Tim was home, telling Alfred about a killer math test, when Dick walked in.

“I’m going to New York tonight,” Dick interrupted.

Tim looked surprised. “What about the Gotham patrol?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Do you want me to do anything? I could—” He stopped. Dick was already shaking his head.

“No. I need to check out Sloan’s apartment tonight, then come back here and patrol Gotham for a couple of hours. You can’t go out on the streets alone.”

“That’s not what I was going to suggest. I thought that maybe I could go to New York and help you.”

“I hate to ask Wally to make two trips,” Dick argued. “I’ll just take care

of it myself.”

Tim nodded, disappointed. “Alright.”

Dick turned to Alfred. “Wake me up at 8:30?”

“Of course, Master Dick,” Alfred assured him. “Your new costume, which replaces the one you destroyed battling the Gray Ghost, is laid out in the cave.”

“Thanks, Alfred,” Dick yawned.

Nightwing examined the holes in Sloan’s apartment wall, then crossed the room and looked down onto the street thoughtfully. Sloan sat in a chair in front of the television, watching. He stood up as Nightwing swung out the window.

“Hey! Kid...?” He scanned the street and saw the vigilante below, already across the road, kneeling beside something. He returned a few minutes later.

“I’ve found the spot the shooter was firing from,” he informed Sloan. “There were too many footprints around the area for me to isolate one of his. I did find some evidence, though.”

“What?” Sloan asked eagerly.

“I’d rather not say right now. I need to see if I can extract a bullet from the wall.”

A few minutes later, he was the satisfied owner of a bullet coated with a thin layer of plaster dust. He put that in an evidence container. Before he left the apartment, he attached a recording device to Sloan’s telephone.

Back in Gotham, he dutifully completed his patrol as The Dark Knight, finally returning to the manor at dawn. Rather than head straight to bed, he stayed in the cave until Alfred came looking for him.

"I suppose you found a clue, sir?"

"A bullet," Batman responded.

Alfred shook his head. While Dick didn't completely become Batman, as Bruce had, when in the suit he did stay in the role somewhat; even now his voice was rougher, raspier, than normal.

"Did you find a marking?"

"Yes," Batman replied. "From the firing pin. I need to trace it to the gun it was fired from. The man who shot it was probably a hired thug, but I'll find out who his employer was."

*Not 'I hope to find', Alfred noted. 'I will find'.*

"Very good, sir," was all he said. He set down the tray he was carrying. "Coffee or tea?"

"Thanks," Batman said, without looking up from his microscope. Alfred smiled.

"Coffee it is, then," he said, pouring the steaming liquid into a mug. He set it on the table before he headed upstairs.

"Coffee it is, then," he said, pouring the steaming liquid into a mug. He set it on the table before he headed upstairs.

Batman continued to study the bullet for quite some time. Eventually, he straightened and gulped down the now-cool beverage. He pulled off the cowl, set it on the table, and continued stripping off his costume. As he took off the thickly armored chest piece, he again marveled at the ease with which Gray Ghost had destroyed his last one.

He had just enough time to take a quick shower and dress before he left. He combed his hair in the car on his way. Somehow, he managed to stay awake through the meeting, listening to endless figures and throwing in his two bits when prompted. As he downed his third cup of coffee, depending on the caffeine to keep him going, Lucius Fox gave him a knowing smile. After the meeting was over, he approached Dick.

“You look tired,” he commented as the teen headed for the elevator. “Up late?”

Dick didn’t even look at the smiling Lucius, as he replied, “couldn’t sleep. I was up all night.” The elevator doors closed after he punched the ground-floor button. The last thing he saw before the doors closed was Lucius’ grin.

He lay in his bed, in an uneasy sleep. Suddenly, he sat up, drenched in sweat.

“It was only a dream,” he muttered to himself. He had another hour, yet, before he had to don the spandex again, but knew that, tired as he was, he wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep.

*Only* a dream didn’t seem to quite fit, however. A nightmare, perhaps, or a series of nightmares. He resolved to check on Tiffany and Jake as soon as he was on patrol to try to keep those nightmares from coming true.

**To be continued!**

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