SHE IS A GIRL BOSS. SHE JUST DOESN'T WANT TO BE.

There are two acceptable ways to talk about Harley Quinn right now, and both of them are lies.

The first is the abuse arc. Harley was a smart, capable woman, the Joker got his hooks in her, twisted her up, and the story we're supposed to root for is the one where she finally walks away from her abuser and reclaims herself. The second is the empowerment arc. Harley breaks free, puts on the roller skates, assembles the girl gang, and becomes the chaotic-good icon she was always meant to be. Both get told like they're respecting her. Both are stealing something from her and calling it a gift.

What they leave out is the same thing, and it's the thing the people who built her put there on purpose: they wrote her as someone the Joker couldn't stand.

So here's the version that fits the title card instead of the cope. Harley Quinn is not a girl boss. Not the one they keep shoving at you, the recovered icon with the girl gang and the healed inner child and the best life. The real answer is funnier and a lot worse. She already was all of that. Brains, spine, control, the whole resume. She looked at it and walked. She is a girl boss. She just doesn't want to be. And nobody, not the writers, not the fans, not you, gets a vote on that.

GOING BACK TO THE SOURCE: BTAS

Paul Dini and Bruce Timm built Harley for *Batman: The Animated Series*, and she was almost a throwaway. A henchwoman with a couple of lines, in once and gone. She stuck because the thing underneath the gag was meaner than the gag. It's all asymmetry. She'd die for him. He can barely stand to look at her.

Arleen Sorkin, who did the original voice, is one of the few people who ever got that balance, which tracks, she helped build it. Hand the character to anybody else and the nuance falls straight out the bottom.

Mad Love is the purest cut of it. Harley finally bags Batman. Perfect deathtrap, even cracks the piranha-smile bit the Joker himself never could, pulls off the one thing he's whiffed on for years, and stands there waiting for him to be proud of her. He's not. He's pissed, because she doesn't get the joke. He backhands her and throws her out a window. That's not a love story. That's a woman running face-first into a wall that doesn't know she's there, and the wall pitching her out a window now and then just to remind her she doesn't belong and never understood what he was doing in the first place.

Then the knife turns. Batman wants to needle the Joker, and the button he mashes is Harley. He tells him she got closer to killing him than the Joker ever has. Batman is the one who says it

out loud: she's good at this. The guy she built her whole life around can't see what she is. His worst enemy can.

That contempt was the point, not a bug. Everything after it, the romance edits, the empowerment edits, all of it, is the culture sanding her down into something easier to hold. Make it a toxic-but-real love story. Make it a survivor story with a clean exit. Anything so nobody has to sit with what's actually on the page.

THE MOVIES, AND THE PART THEY SKIP

The 2016 *Suicide Squad* gave a lot of people their favorite Harley, and fine, it's not a bad performance. What I won't forgive is the cheat. The movie wants the payoff of a Harley who's out the other side of the Joker without showing you the side she crawled out of. It hands you the ending and skips the whole middle, which is the exact thing the source won't do. *Mad Love* makes you watch the window.

Birds of Prey at least tried to do the work, put the breakup on screen, let it hurt. It flopped, and the industry took the dumbest possible lesson from that: audiences don't want Harley off the leash. Wrong. The problem was the tone, not the leash.

Then James Gunn's *The Suicide Squad* just gets her, and not by dragging the Joker back in. He's not there. This is a Harley who's made peace with what she is and isn't doing a bit about it for anybody. The tell is tiny: she breaks herself out before the team can even show up to rescue her, because she was done being there, then offers to walk back in because she feels bad they wasted the trip. That's the whole woman in one move. Sharp enough to escape on her own, soft enough to feel guilty over a favor nobody asked her to repay. She made herself smaller on purpose, for somebody else's sake. Nobody made her. Nobody could.

THE ARKHAMVERSE

Arkham Asylum is where the games finally get it right. Harley's competent, methodical, actually load-bearing for the Joker's plan instead of standing next to it looking cute. This was one of the first times I felt like she could hold her own next to Batman's heavy hitters and not get laughed off the roster. She builds problems Batman has to actually solve: rig the whole asylum so that the second anyone clocks him, Gordon dies. That isn't a henchman's idea. That's a hostage play a real villain would sign off on.

And she goes off-script. She springs Poison Ivy, who isn't even on the Joker's list, partly because they're friends and partly, I'd bet money, because she knows exactly what she's doing. Harley knows Ivy cold, and she knows the Joker's got a secret lab buried in the gardens. Turning Ivy loose in there is dropping a guard dog in the one yard you can't afford to lose. A woman who improvises like that, who makes the plan better than she was handed it, is not a lovesick bimbo. She's the most dangerous thing in the building that isn't wearing face paint.

The game even lets you feel it. They lock Harley up halfway through and it reads as actual progress, because she's been a real problem the whole time. A smart woman pointing good tools at something she gives a damn about.

Arkham City chucks all of that. She's a punchline now: a backflip, a knockout, one cringe exposition dump, gone. The DLC drags some of it back. Joker's dead, and Harley takes the whole gang and turns into something the GCPD can't deal with. Here's the part that matters: the gang is scared of her. They don't want out. They follow her not because she's next in line by default, but because she grabbed the wheel and did the thing the Joker never pulled off, she put Batman himself on the ropes. They keep praying that once she's done with her revenge she'll go back to being the joke they assumed she was. She doesn't. She wanted the revenge plot, she ran it herself, and she ran it clean.

Then *Arkham Knight* drops her on her head. This is the start of the "Harley as Deadpool" era, where the flanderization kicks in. Bad writing plus a Tara Strong read that can't find a center, and she gets mashed into a loud, shrieking woman whose entire life is her ex. That isn't the Harley two games taught us. It isn't even the Harley grieving the Joker. Everything she does is reactive, and reactive is the one thing Harley is never supposed to be.

Here's what the flanderization gets backwards. Take the Joker out of the picture and Harley shouldn't crumple into a widow. She should keep doing what she wants, which is unhinged chaos, because chaos is the one thing she was never allowed in the life she walked out on. People grab for big words for it. Nihilism. Anarchy. Empowerment. None of them fit. It's smaller and weirder than that: a woman being exactly herself, no permission, nothing to prove. That's why she comes off unhinged. She's the only one in the room who genuinely does not give a damn what you think of her, and she'll still turn around and make herself smaller, take a step BACK, for somebody else's sake. Like a therapist. Best characters are just two opposite wants grinding against each other, and Harley's are her need for chaos and her need to take care of people. The cruel part, for her, is that the empathy is the one that costs her. It's the leash she never managed to cut. That tension is exactly what makes her so hard to write, and it's how you end up with the gutted version waiting at the bottom of the slide.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

By the time you hit *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*, made by the same studio that built the Arkham Harley, there's nothing of her left. What's in the costume is the storyline they decided she should haul around. Makeup's right, voice is right, none of it is her. That's why she feels so wrong in it. It's a photo of somebody doing an impression.

Look at the mileage on this woman. Years of out-thinking and out-hitting Batman, eating every shot he's got and getting back up, surviving a relationship with the most dangerous man alive, then losing all of it. Somebody with that history should be visibly wrecked by it. She'd be one of three things: somebody who doesn't much want to be alive, somebody picking up where

the Joker left off, or somebody who has decided she is never living under anyone's boot again. The one thing she would never be is a chipper little asset taking orders for the cause.

Because that's the center of her, the thing every decent version guards and every bad one paves flat. Harley needs to point at any kind of order and blow it to hell, because order is the exact thing she refuses to be. The competent woman running her own life, the one with the plan and the title and the future, is what she ran screaming from. Hand her that as a reward and you've handed her the cage she chewed her own leg off to get out of.

SHE WAS NEVER THE VICTIM OF THE STORY. SHE WAS THE AUTHOR.

The abuse narrative has a condescension problem it never owns up to. To make Harley a victim, you have to quietly erase the part where she chose this. You have to write her as a thing that got done-to, somebody rewired by an outside force with no hand in her own life. Weird move to pull on a character whose entire premise is a brilliant woman making a call.

Because that's what Harleen Quinzel was. Smart. In control. Powerful. A doctor. Exactly the kind of woman the empowerment crowd swears it's fighting for. The mistake everybody makes is assuming she wanted to stay that.

She didn't. I think she hated it. The good girl, the credentials, the responsibility, the constant low hum of being who everyone expected. She didn't want to run things. She didn't want to be a superstar. She heard the Joker's story, looked at a man who answered to nobody and apologized for nothing, and something cracked open: *I want to be that free.*

Watch the end of *Mad Love* with that in your head. She's just gone out a window courtesy of the love of her life, and she's lying in the wreckage telling herself she's done. He's manipulative, he's abusive, she's better than this, and she says it in the old voice, the doctor's voice, reality-testing herself the way she was trained to. She can leave. She's literally doing the work of leaving, right there on the page. Then the Joker mails her one flower and she drops the doctor and snaps back to Harley in a heartbeat. That's the tell. The thing she can't survive isn't him. It's going back to who she was before him. The flower isn't love. It's a door out of her old life, and she takes it every single time.

And to be dead clear: I'm not against a redemption arc for her. A Harley who grows out of the Joker could be the best version there is. But it only counts if she grows *through* him, if the story earns the distance instead of skipping the ugly part nobody wants to watch. Most of what we got skipped it. And what's under the skip is more interesting than either rewrite.

THE JOKER IS AN ALIBI

Here's the move the character actually makes, and it's the part I think is dead true to her.

Walking away from your whole life because you want to is terrifying. It means owning it. It means standing in the rubble and saying "I did this, on purpose, because I wanted to." Almost nobody can say that clean. So you find a story that does the owning for you.

Getting brainwashed by a psycho clown is a way easier story than "I just didn't want to be good anymore." The Joker didn't ruin her life. He's the permission slip. He's the alibi she pins the impulse on so she never has to look dead at the fact that the impulse was always hers. Being his creation is less scary than being her own.

That's why she's obsessed with him and he can't stand her. She needs him to mean something, to be her reason, her origin, her excuse. And the entire point of the Joker is that he means nothing. He won't be anyone's reason. He's got no use for a disciple, because being a disciple is the one thing that misses him completely. She keeps trying to make him the source of her freedom. He keeps being a void that hands her nothing to hold. The contempt isn't cruelty for kicks. It's just what happens when a nihilist watches somebody build a shrine to him.

SO SHE IS A GIRL BOSS

She is. That's the joke. She's competent, she's in control, she's powerful, she makes her own decisions and lives with them. Every box the empowerment version wants to check, the real character already checks.

She just doesn't want to be. She had the whole thing, the intelligence and the standing and the future, and she looked at it and decided she'd rather be free than be impressive. She didn't fail her way out of being a girl boss. She walked.

And here's the part that makes people itch, the part I actually came here to say. She chose down. She had every tool to be more and she spent them being less. Less respectable, less safe, less impressive, less. On purpose, eyes open, no gun to her head.

That has to be allowed. Or the whole "her choices are her own" line was always bullshit you only meant while she was choosing things you approve of. You don't get to hand a woman her agency and then snatch it back the second she spends it on chaos instead of a corner office. Letting her be less than she could be, because she said so, IS the respect. Forcing the girl boss on her is just the disrespect in a nicer outfit.

That's why the modern versions can't leave her alone, can't stop dressing her up as a survivor or a superstar. They cannot stand the actual answer. They can't sit with a smart, capable woman who had every reason to stay good and decided, eyes open, to torch it instead. A woman who wanted bad things and went and got them.

That's not a girl who needs rescuing from the Joker. And it's not a girl waiting on her empowerment montage.

It's just a girl who finally quit pretending she wanted the life everyone built for her. The clown was never the cage.

He was the excuse to leave it.