

ROBIN DYNAMIC DUO

ROBIN BOOK TWO

MADIGAN THOMPSON

I'm only laughing on the outside

My smile is only skin deep

If you could see inside, I am really crying

You might join me for a weep

—Anonymous

CHAPTER ONE

TYPICAL GOTHAM KNIGHT

You know that feeling of racing through the streets, the wind whipping through your cape, the howling of alleyways filtering through your helmet? Yeah, that's the one. That's when the world feels like home. I mean, who doesn't just love a casual ride through one of the most crime-ridden cities in the world? Honestly, I am so glad Lucius finally talked the B-Man into getting me my motorcycle— But I'm getting ahead of myself.

My name is Dick Grayson, and I'm Robin.

No, not the tiny North American bird. *Robin*, you know, Batman's partner? Teenage vigilante? Coolest job ever? Why is it the coolest job, you might ask? Well, as I said before, I get to do this.

The night nips at my bare arms as I push my motorcycle faster, the headlights cutting through the mist of the Gotham night, bouncing off the neon signs and surrounding cars. Beside me, the Batmobile roars, the lights strobing a bright blue. I pop a wheelie as I speed between two taxis, not to show off... well, okay, maybe just a little. Hey! I've been practicing over the summer! I can't let all that practice go to waste, can I?

“Robin.” The Bat growls through the comm in my helmet, stern and biting. He always has to be the stick in the mud, doesn’t he? **“Cut him off.”**

I grin, rolling my shoulders. So we’re going for the whole ‘box them in’ approach, huh? Nice. I keep my eyes trained on our prey as he barrels in and out of the streetlights and headlights, his footsteps thundering through the traffic. Horns blare, and tires screech as the poor pedestrians trying to get home and away from the crazy city we live in swerve and smash into each other, the crashing metal and shattering glass raking my ears. Heart pounding, I swerve to avoid getting my brains bashed out by an SUV, the honking horn ringing again and again in my ears as I regrip the handlebars, gloves flexing.

Smash! I wince as the SUV slams into a taxi, sending the black and yellow vehicle spinning into the curb, thankfully away from where cars are being pulled over and abandoned. I want to go and help them. I need to go and help them. But the lights flashing white, red, and blue behind me tell me that help is already coming.

I have something else I have to focus on: Stopping any more people from getting hurt. That’s my job. We need to catch this guy. But of

course, I don't let myself think about the crunch of metal or the screeching sirens.

I can't.

"You know, we're going to be late." My voice sounds weird in the cage that is my helmet. I know Batman already knows, but I can give him a hard time, can't I? Besides, you have no idea how embarrassing it is to be late all the time. And not fashionably late either, oh no, because we aren't that stylish. We have to be humiliatingly late, like when everyone's awkwardly waiting for the night to be over so everyone can go home.

Batman doesn't answer, so I keep talking. Anything to erase not only the silence between us but also the craziness of Gotham around us. It's my job, after all. "I mean, really, can't these people just take one night off? Just one? Was it like this when I was gone?"

Still nothing. I don't frown. I refuse to frown. Robin. Doesn't. Frown. But still, Batman used to answer me a little bit. You know, say at least a measly little word. Maybe that was because I was a tiny little tyke and amused him.

Maybe I still do.

Well, if the Bat won't talk, the Robin will sing, I guess. "Man, you all don't know how to party without me here. I mean, a high-speed chase through Gotham? So cliché." It's true, though.

I laugh, the eerie noise muffled through my helmet. Yes, eerie. I've been blessed with a cackle that creeps everyone out. Even myself sometimes. What? You haven't ever scared yourself? "What would you do without me, B?"

With that, I peel off, weaving through traffic, ignoring the blinding lights that flash in my eyes. I wonder what a student driver would think, learning to drive in a cesspool like this. What, do they add 'avoiding super villains and teenage vigilantes' to the defensive driving section? I mean, if they haven't, they probably should. Or maybe we should just move all pedestrian vehicles to underground roads. Gosh, that would be so much safer.

I'd prefer flying across the rooftops, you know, away from all these people and cars? Away from all this destruction and chaos? But our little runaway is too fast for that. Oh, and I use the term 'little' very lightly. Besides, there's nothing wrong with taking the ol' R-cycle out every now and then.

I blaze through side streets, stirring up the autumn leaves, wrappers, and other trash chilling on the road, my eyes darting down to the GPS screen flashing on the tiny dash of my R-cycle. A dot blinks red against the spidering streets, moving toward me. The tracker on our guy. That was me, thank you, thank you. I'll be here all night.

I let a smile crack my face as I whip around a corner and floor it—okay, so not really because this is a motorcycle, but you know what I mean. Back here, in the side streets and alleyways, everything's quiet. Calm. My motorcycle is the only thing disrupting the hard-won peace, the lights flashing off the sparkling windows and catching on the fluttering trees.

I cut back toward the main street, my eyes trained on where our guy should come barreling past any second now. Honestly, how does Blackgate stay in business if they lose their perps every other night? I mean, really, do some people just not know how to do their jobs?

Just asking.

My light catches on something green and glowing, then glittering sweat rolling over bulging muscles. The brute turns to the side just in time to see me. Is it wrong that I love how his eyes almost pop out of his mask? Yes? Oh well.

I lean to the side, letting my bike skid into a mad spin, leaping up just in time for it to crash into the hulking dude, sending him stumbling back. Yes, stumbling. The guy's built like a tank... or a titanium wall. Something like that, anyway.

I launch over his head as my bike spins away, yanking off my helmet and sending it hurtling through the air, battering him on the head with a satisfying *smack*.

Well, call that comeuppance for all the perfectly good cars he just messed up.

The wind rushes through my damp hair as I soar over his head, streaming along my smoking cheeks. Ah, sweet relief... that smells like garbage and pollution but hey, what else would you expect in Gotham? And who knew helmets could be so sweaty?

As I plummet to the ground, I slide my *bō* staff out of my utility belt, my feet touching down on the asphalt, knees absorbing the impact, my boots skidding to a stop.

Click. My *bō* staff extends, and I grin at the giant in front of me, not even bothering to look behind me at the screech of tires and the *whoosh* of something dark and caped flying out and landing behind me.

I'm cast in shadow, blocked from the glaring headlights of the Batmobile.

I can feel him behind me. It's an invitation.

Let's get this party started.

"Well, well, well, Baney-boo." I stand up slowly, grinning, my hands tightening around my staff. "Isn't it past your bedtime? What, did the guards forget to turn on your nightlight?"

"It seems that your absence did nothing for your manners, *Pájaro*." Bane's voice rumbles so deep I think it might just be an elephant in front of me instead of a man. His nose is sure big enough. Now, you might be wondering about the whole '*pájaro*' thing. Yes, well, that's Spanish for 'bird.' I know, right? Why couldn't he just call me '*petirrojo*,' which is actually what 'robin' is in Spanish—you know what? Not important.

"What was that?" I take a casual step forward, Batman still looming behind me, silent. Per the norm. "I don't speak *Español*."

Okay, so that's actually a lie. I do speak fluent Spanish, but why would I ever let Bane know that? Insults are so much easier to throw in plain ol' English, at least for me. Sometimes... I mean... *Tu nariz es muy grande*, anyone? Anyone?

“Ah, so the passing of time has not damaged your tongue.”

Bane’s accent isn’t thick, but enough to give that rolling, rumbling purr to his words. I know I said elephant before, but seriously, now I’m just seeing him as a humongous, hairless cat.

You’re welcome.

“I’d sure hope not.” I take another step forward, drawing Bane’s eyes away from Batman. I mean, I am a walking traffic light over here in this red, green, and yellow suit. And no, I’m not about to change that anytime soon. I mean, it’s part of my job, after all. “Then you’d just be left with the unsociable Bat.” Was that a jab? Maybe. Was that a complaint? Ummm...

Bane’s beady eyes narrow as he watches me, not turning his back to Batman but tracking me as I side-step around him, staff at the ready. Waiting. I try to read his facial expression under his thick black mask. It covers his mouth and nose, tracking up the side of his bald head. It honestly looks more like a muzzle than a mask, with thick, dangerous wire and all that, but everyone has their tastes, I guess.

You know, I always wanted to be buff when I was older, but this guy’s like a bodybuilder gone too far. I mean, he has muscles on muscles bulging under his leather tank top. His hands are as big as my head, not

kidding here, and his veins are way too out there. That being said, his head is a tiny little watermelon on a bulky statue.

“I much prefer the Batman's silence.” Bane cracks his knuckles, doing the smart thing and backing up, so both of us are in view, me standing parallel to the Bat. “You talk too much, *Pájaro*.”

“You're no fun.” There's a silent agreement between the Bat and me. I can't explain it, really, how we both know what the other one's thinking, but there it is. “Also, can we hurry this up? We are kinda late.”

I lunge forward, catapulting up at Bane's head while Batman charges low, batarangs clenched in his fist. My eyes snap onto my target, locking onto the tiny beady little eyes of the big bad Bane. I draw back my *bō* staff but don't hit my mark. A fist that'll break me in half swings at my face, too fast, too powerful. I twist midair, my blow landing on his beefy arm instead, the shock jolting up my body and down my spine.

Ouch.

I don't get time to recover, though. Bane's attention is on Batman now, the two fighting fist to batarang, Batman keeping a safe distance. Smart. This guy could break his back with one flick of his pinky finger. But whoever said *I* was smart?

“Over here, Bane!” I land a hit behind his knees, eyeing the tube snaking from the back of his skull to a glove on his arm. The thing pulses with a green goop called venom. No, not snake venom. *‘Venom’* venom is an addictive strength-enhancing super-steroid. Yeah, say that ten times fast. Case and point, that’s why Bane here’s so jacked. A perfect strength and a perfect weakness.

Bane turns too fast. Batman leaps forward, his mask’s white eyes narrowing in warning, but he’s smacked away. I wince at the sound of the impact. That probably hurt. I duck behind a blow, flip away, leap forward and smack into Bane’s chest, which is honestly like smacking into a ton of bricks. As soon as my feet touch down a fist comes at me, knuckles ready to knock me into next week. I whip my arms up and brace myself.

CRUNCH! My bō staff bends under the blow, my feet skidding back, but only a couple of feet. I grunt, my arms straining against the power, muscles burning, screaming at me. My eyes lock onto Bane’s. His beady little eyes grow just the tiniest bit, his head cocking to the side.

“You are stronger, *Pájaro.*”

“Aw, thanks!” I launch myself back, tossing my bowed bō staff to the side with a *clang*. “I’m so glad you noticed!” At least someone

noticed. Of course, it had to be a jacked supervillain but oh well. Beggars can't be choosers.

Bane charges. And, let's be honest, if you just added a pointy horn he would be a full-blown rhino. I leap into a string of backflips, skirting around him, ducking in close. As my world spins and warps as I fly through the air, I notice one glaring fact. Batman is nowhere to be seen.

I can't hide my grin. It's *really* time to get this party started.

"You are faster too." Bane's meaty hand makes a grab for my arm but I'm already gone, dancing away, pulling two fistfuls of birdarangs from my utility belt, clutching them between my fingers at the ready.

"Taller. *El Pajarito* has grown up—"

I let the birdarangs fly. Each one hits its mark— and bursts in the most amazingly epic fireworks display I've ever seen. Ah, the beauty of exploding metal.

I wrap myself in my cape, letting the rush of hot air pass me by, though the force does leave me skidding, though not stumbling. I'm not that much of a pushover.

"—Even still you cannot save yourself?" The voice booms above me even before I drop my cape, Bane on top of me, his fists getting ready to bash my brains out, his eyes glittering madly.

I smile at him and point up, my head cocking to the side.
“Baney-boo,” I love that shock and horror expression. It never gets old,
“I was just the distraction.”

Smack! Batman kicks Bane squarely in the back of the head. *Rip!*
But just as the big bad brute falls, the Bat also snatches the tube holding
the venom— and rips it out. I casually step to the side as a howling Bane
crashes into the pavement with the most satisfying *crack* I think I’ve ever
heard in my life. Batman lands next to me, his cape draping over him like
a bat’s wings, fluttering in the moist night air.

Before our very eyes, Bane shrivels from a human tank to a
normal-sized guy, almost like a deflating balloon, but sadly without the
glorious noise. I guess I’ll just insert it myself. “Well, that really took the
wind out of his sails.” I know, I know! It’s bad. But sadly not every one
of them is golden. When you do hero work every night you kinda just go
for it. So I laugh, the sound echoing through the streets of Gotham.
Everything else, even the commotion from down the street seems to have
stopped. I wouldn’t call it calm or normal, but how it should be.

A normal night at last.

“**Well done, Robin.**” Batman finally speaks, moving forward to
secure Bane, completely removing his venom pack and his mask. You

know, I always forget how these guys are just normal people under all that pomp and show. It's almost sad to see them like that, withered and defeated.

“Not bad yourself, B.” I pick up my bō staff, frowning at the wonky pole. “Ugh... not another one.”

“**You have plenty.**” Bats starts walking back to the Batmobile, leaving Bane for the police, as always. I follow him. What about my bike, you might ask? Well, where I'm going I won't need my R-cycle—okay, I mean I'd love to take it but the whole secret identity thing, you know? Besides, if people saw Dick Grayson riding up on a motorcycle, well, let's just say I still want to get my license eventually. “**You can get another one from the Cave.**”

I leap into the passenger seat of the Batmobile, tossing my bō into the back and strapping myself in, rolling my sore shoulders. Wow, I'm going to be feeling that punch tomorrow. “Okay, okay, fine. But... we're going to be late.”

Batman slides into his seat, his feet revving the engine as he pushes a few of the billions of buttons on the dash. “**I am sure the Commissioner will forgive us.**”

I wince, taking off my mask as Batman accelerates back through the city, leaving the crime scene behind. “He might, but Babs’ll kill me. It’s not every day you have a Five-Year Anniversary in Gotham.”

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT'S THAT FEELING I'M FEELING?

As we speed through the streets, ducking in and out of our private tunnel system, I change out of my suit. And let me tell you, changing in the car with Batman driving? Not an easy task. I can't count how many times my head smacked into the side window. I think there's a permanent mark of my face there and on the dash too. I hold my nose carefully for the umpteenth time, trying to tie my bowtie with one hand. If I get blood on my newly pressed suit, Alfred'll kill me. Okay, so he won't *kill* me. He'll probably just give me 'the look' and lecture me about the lengthy and delicate process of removing blood stains from Cashmere.

Yeah... never bring up laundry around Alfred.

"Tissue, please." I hold out a hand, and something soft and papery presses into my palm. I twist one end and quickly stick it up a nostril. Yeah, okay, this would totally gross a lot of people out, but let's be real here, bloody noses happen to everyone. "Thanks, B."

"Not a problem." Bruce, yes, Bruce, not Batman, sits in the driver's seat, autopilot on. Okay, so he's not actually driving, but the A.I.

is *based* on his driving, so... take that as you will. "Pass me the hair gel?"

My fingers finish the last loop of my silk bowtie, my toes slipping under a small round, black container chilling on the car floor. With a flick of my foot, the tiny thing is in my hand. I toss it to Bruce and turn my attention to my loafers, their polished black leather winking at me.

"Thanks, Chum." My shoulders relax when Bruce drops my nickname. I didn't even know I'd tensed them. I can't explain it. There's just something about Bruce using that name, as ridiculous as it is if you really look into it, you know, fish bait and all that, but it just calms the nerves I didn't even know I had.

I'm not nervous. I'm not; it's just after the cold Bat, a warm and welcoming Bruce Wayne is the best thing.

"No problem, B." I pull on the shoes, wiggling my toes and brushing away some dust. Might's well get it all off now before Alfred sees. "When you're done, can I use it?"

That's the only thing making Dick Grayson look more like Robin now. My hair. The black locks fall into my eyes, longer than ever, though trimmed more on the back and sides. I almost miss the middle part I had

when I was younger; at least then, it fell to the side of my face and not right into my eyes.

Oh well. Nothing a bucket of hair gel can't fix.

"Sure, Chum." I glance over at Bruce. And yes, he is officially Bruce Wayne, the billionaire, the showboat, the socialite. No more mused hat hair or cowl hair, whichever you'd want to call it, and no more leather, titanium, and kevlar.

His hard, steel gray eyes are softer when he turns to me, a small smile curling his lips. I catch the gel container and unscrew the cap, letting my hand stick into the cold goop. "You know, I'd love to be early to a party for once."

Bruce lets out a short laugh. It fills the Batmobile as he reasserts control, driving us toward our rendezvous with Alfred. "I know. But Gotham never sleeps, even on the Commissioner's Anniversary."

"You'd think the criminals would give him the professional courtesy of the night off." I run the gel through my hair, slicking it back, taming it down into the classic 'rich boy' 'do. "I mean, really, of all the nights Bane could go on a rampage."

"I'm sure he didn't even know, Chum." I pull out my tissue as Bruce guides the Batmobile back out of the tunnels and into Gotham,

pulling us into a dark alley filled to the brim with trash and graffiti. Yeah, this is normal, and no, don't try this at home, kids.

“Well, at least it wasn't one of the A-listers.” I climb out of the Batmobile, no way I'd leap out in this suit. A) Alfred would kill me for ruining it, and B) No one can ever move in these things. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, these things might's well be straight jackets. “Could you imagine if Joker, Penguin, or Riddler decided to dance tonight?”

Bruce's smile flatlines, and his eyes harden. My grin falters, too, even as we walk back into habitable Gotham, nearing the limo waiting for us. “Let's hope they still don't. For Jim's sake.” Bruce's hand finds my shoulder, tugging me to a stop. A small smile twitches, but it doesn't reach his eyes. “I want him to have a good time.”

Not for the first time, I realize that Bruce is tired. And it's my fault, or at least partly my fault. I wonder if he missed me while I was gone. Did he get so used to fighting with a partner that he struggled to keep up without me? Or am I reading the room wrong?

I guess I'll never know because nothing like “*I missed you, Chum,*” or “*Welcome back, Robin,*” has ever passed the B-man's lips. Then again, he isn't one for speaking his mind. But still, leaving me to

guess is so rude. After two years, you'd think I'd understand him by now, but oh no. Bruce Wayne and Batman are still as much of a mystery as they ever were.

I grin, punching Bruce before dancing away toward Alfred, who waits for us beside the limo. "Oh, he'll have a good time!" I plant my hands on my hips and stick out my chest. "Sir Grayson is the *king* of having a good time. I'll bring the party."

"I am sure you will, Master Dick." Alfred stands behind me, opening the back door of the limo. "Now in you go. We are already late as it is."

"Thanks, Alf." I slide into the limo, taking my usual place on the plush leather seats right by the window to the driver's cabby.

Alfred hasn't changed at all. Okay, so he is a little more slender if you squint a certain way, and he does have more wrinkles around his smokey eyes. Oh, and his hair's more white than gray now— and thinner. I'd never say he was balding on the top, but there it is. He's old. Honestly, though, I don't really know how old he actually is. I don't think anyone does. But let me be very clear, he's still as dangerous in the sparing arena as ever. I should know. All this time, and he can still land surprise attacks on me. Sometimes.

“Of course, Master Dick.” Alfred lets Bruce into the car, then closes the door behind us, walking around to slip into the driver’s seat. Bruce sits beside me, pulling out his phone to work on something.

Typical.

I try to pull out my phone and check my inbox but no such luck. Alfred slides the window to the side, the rearview mirror tilted just right, enough that I can see him and he can see me. “How was the mission, Master Dick?”

I let out a sigh. That’s not the worst thing he could ask. You’d be surprised what awkward conversations we’ve had in this limo. Things like *‘that young woman was quite taken with you, Master Dick,’* or *‘How are you and Master Bruce getting along, Master Dick,’* and things like that.

I know, right? But Butlers are apparently very interested in the detailed ins and outs of your personal life, and Alfred’s basically my grandfather, so... take that as you will.

“It went well. Some civilian casualties but nothing fatal, I hope.” I glance over at Bruce, but his eyes are scanning something. Either a message or a news article. Or maybe some business at Wayne Enterprises. You really never know with him. “The fight itself was pretty

quick, though. Honestly, Bane's kinda a joke now. I mean, just pop the venom, and he's not a threat." I lean over into the driver's cabby, smiling at Alfred. "You know what I mean, Alf?"

"Yes, Sir." Alfred's lips twitch the tiniest bit, but his eyes dart to Bruce. You know, sometimes I think it's a never-ending war between those two. Alfred fighting for Bruce to pay more attention to me, being the go-between I really don't deserve. Honestly, what would I do without him? "Quite a sorry man, that Bane. Shameful. I am glad you are safe, however."

"Thanks, Alf." I drum my hands on the seat, peering out the front, taking in the glittering lights and the cleaner streets of New Gotham, all under the careful watch of the Wayne Enterprises Tower. It leans over all of Gotham like a sentinel that no one knows about. I wonder if they ever will. "But seriously, why doesn't everyone just move from East End? Bristol's nice this time of year."

"Most of these people can't afford to move to Bristol, Dick." Bruce finally speaks, glancing up from his phone to look at me with those hard, steely eyes. "Most people are stuck here. That is why we help."

I can't help the burning that stains my cheeks like cherry juice. I know that. I know I'm better off now than anyone else in Gotham. I

know I'm not a spoiled rich kid. Because I've been there, on the streets, in the poorest parts of Gotham, I've seen the Narrows and Crime Alley firsthand. How could I not? These are the people I fight for.

Still, I can't help but sometimes forget that this is no joking matter. Bruce takes this seriously... and to be honest, so do I. You can't go to galas and charity events without getting fed up with the snobbish rich fat pigeons with all their money. And you can't walk the Gotham streets without seeing how much help these people need.

I always say people are crazy to live and stay here, but Bruce's right. A lot of the time, it isn't even their choice.

"I know, Bruce." My voice is soft for once. Serious. Quiet. A whisper. Three words, only three, but I know that Bruce can tell exactly what I mean.

Still, I can't help but feel stony eyes on me, even as we pull in front of Gotham Hall, the banners all proclaiming Gordon's Fifth Anniversary, the media, both newspaper and network alike, clambering around the red carpet, cameras snapping and flashing like mad fireflies, mikes being shoved in faces, and shouts and bullet questions ringing so loud I think I just lost my ears.

Ah, home sweet home. Gotta love a party on a Sunday night. But really, people say the circus is crazy? Well, this is like a zoo gone wrong.

My eyes take in stock. The Gotham Broadcasting Company, also known as the GBC is here, the Gotham Gazette and the Gotham Herald are here, and the Gotham News Network or GNN is here too. That's normal, but I also spot some media and paparazzi that aren't from Gotham.

That makes sense, I guess. As horrible as it sounds, it's not very often someone lasts this long in Gotham, especially as Commissioner. And a good, moral one like Mr. Gordon especially. Even still, wait... is that a *Daily Planet* news van?

Alfred opens the door for us, and the noise slams into me, smacking me down more than Bane ever could. Bruce steps out first, his phone and hard look gone, replaced by a wide, charming smile and suave wave. The media lunge for him, launching microphones into his face, pounding him with questions, and chattering like monkeys. One of the paparazzi, a young lady with red hair, a white silk dress, and determined eyes slips past the metal rails separating the media from the rich fat cats, her delicate stilettos touching down on the plush red carpet. Howls of laughter bounce back and forth as the woman slips her arm through

Bruce's and plants a kiss on his cheek, even with her camera hanging around her neck.

I roll my eyes. I don't hate Vicki, but I'm not too fond of her either. But I guess when it comes down to a cat burglar or a photojournalist, I'll go with the nosey reporter over the thief any day.

Now it's my turn, though. I step out of the limo, my loafers touching down on the carpet. I let all my worries about Bruce, Batman, school, and everything else slide off and be replaced by a beaming smile that causes the women to swoon and the men to chuckle. I wave too, not like Bruce's carefully timed wave that shows up on pictures, no. Mine is a flapping wave, too vigorous to show anything more than a blurry blob on camera. It's kinda my thing by now.

Two steps in, and I'm already drowning in questions. Things like, *"How was Summer School in Jump City?"* or *"Do you have a girlfriend?"* or *"What is it like living with Bruce Wayne?"* or *"What do you think about the Commissioner's five years?"* and so on and so forth and into eternity batter me around like bull running wild.

Honestly, how do they keep shouting all night long? I'd probably lose my voice halfway through. Or spontaneously combust from all the shoving bodies and B.O. stewing in the mob.

I try to answer questions as best I can, laughing, grinning, posing for pictures, and being overall my amazingly charming self. I tease the reporters about Bruce and Vicki, crack jokes, and even pull out my phone to take a few self-indulged selfies. I mean, I'm basically a pro at this by now.

Of course, I do. I mean, I'm a rich teenage boy with a booming social media account. No one will ever really know the truth of what I really do all the time, of course, but it's kinda fun to play it up for the public. I keep to my promise, though. Dick Grayson will not split into two people like Bruce Wayne did. The Dick Grayson I show now is who I am, at least when I'm having a good time.

I have to say, though, that it's like taking in a deep breath after holding it underwater when I finally step into the more subdued atmosphere of the party, the doors shutting out the hullabaloo from outside. Here there's mostly the clink of crystal, light chatter of snobbish conversations, and the drone of the live orchestra. The halls glow and dance with delicate sconces and the massive chandelier, the banners from outside carrying on in here, fluttering in the gentle flow of AC.

I quickly take in the windows, exits, and all possible sites for a sniper to hide. Bruce and I checked it earlier today, but you can never be too careful.

To be honest, the only difference between this and the typical hoity-toity parties I'm subjected to is the tables and tables lined with food. And not just any old food, oh no. This is a fancier version of 'ordinary people' food, like pizza, hotdogs, and fruit punch. I let out a sigh of relief. I've gotten pretty used to eating caviar and all that other gross stuff, but let me tell you, a guy just needs a hot dog every now and then.

And it's buffet style, so you don't have to worry about waiters or awkward conversations like, 'no, Mrs. Starr, I don't like escargot' or 'Do you have any ketchup for that?'

Not only that, but this party isn't just for the high end of society, either. Police officers, friends and family of the Gordons, and even some people off the street that Gordon has helped mingle with the rich and mighty.

And while a lot of the snobs are dressed to the ninth and have those huge, fake smiles on, everyone else seems to be actually having a good time. I let out a deep sigh. Finally, a party where I might actually

enjoy myself. Well, more than usual. Hey, mocking everyone's over-the-top outfits is always a blast!

I'm about to turn to Bruce and Vicki to let them know I'm going to go socialize when it happens. And I mean, something incredible, something— well, okay, so someone screams my name. And when I say scream, I mean the shout completely shatters the delicate atmosphere, and everyone stops to stare right at me.

Oh gosh.

Someone grab the fire extinguisher because my face is heating up so much I think it's on fire. Older women chuckle, and twitter and men give me amused smiles as something, no, *someone*, comes barreling across the floor, purple dress flapping like a flag, mac'n'cheese hair bouncing in a fancy updo.

One, two, three— aaand... The girl slams into me at full force, sending her legs kicking up into the air, her arms wrapped around my neck.

I wheeze, the wind completely knocked clean out of me. Well, then. “B-Babs!” I gasp as she lands on her feet, smelling for all the world like a lavender-flavored pizza, as weird as that sounds. “I think you just broke all my ribs!”

“Oh, be quiet!” She punches me, and we both ignore the laughter of the adults, who go back to their gossip and small talk.

Before Barbara Gordon or Babs, as I call her, can say anything else, though, Bruce and Vicki stroll over, both giving us that “aren't you two so adorable” look that grownups give. Ugh, why do they have to make it weird?

“You two have a good time.” Bruce pats me on my shoulder, his eyes twinkling for once. Oh, he just loves this, doesn't he? He would. “But don't forget to shake a few hands, Dick.”

“Don't worry, Mr. Wayne.” Babs punches my shoulder. Again. In the same spot. Okay, so I'd like to say she hits like a girl, and it didn't hurt, but man, does that girl have a fantastic left hook. I mean, really, what are her knuckles made of, steel? “I'll keep him out of trouble.”

“As if!” I scoff, shoving her away, rubbing my bruised shoulder and pride. When did it get so hot in here? I turn back to Bruce, waving the hand that isn't nursing my assaulted shoulder. “I won't forget. And I'll make sure to keep Babs out of—hey!”

I flap my hand at Babs, who just punched me *again*. Seriously! What's been up with her lately? She didn't use to; this is kinda a new thing. A bad habit if you ask me, and it doesn't make any sense. Then

again, girls never make sense. “Have a good time, kids!” Bruce and Vicki’s laughter leaves us standing in a sea of shifting bodies, suddenly alone. Well, alone as you can be somewhere that’s chock full of people in both fancy and not-so-fancy suits and way too strong cologne and perfume.

I mean, really, who wants to smell like a flower garden all the time?

“Erm, why that tackle, Babs?” I turn to her, rubbing my neck. Another new habit. Seriously, what’s happening to us? “I mean, you saw me yesterday.”

“That was yesterday.” Babs frowns, her emerald eyes snapping under glittering eyeshadow. Wait... When did she start wearing makeup? I was only gone for the summer! Is this new, or am I just blind? “This is today. Besides, you haven’t answered my texts yet.”

I roll my eyes. Okay, you guys have no idea. This girl, this lunatic, literally blew up my phone the entire summer and ever since I got back from Jump. I mean, I know she loves to talk, but four hundred texts in an hour? That has to be a new record somewhere.

“I saw them, but Babs, really, why can't we just talk in person?” I lead us toward the food table, not only because fighting crime works up a serious appetite but because pizza calms her down.

“But if I ask if you're doing okay,” Babs snatches a plate and moves down the table, making a beeline toward the pizza. I grab my own plate and scramble after her. Seriously, Babs and Alfred both move way too fast, “Then you say you're okay. Or at least send a thumbs up. I never know with you.”

I slap a hand over my heart, feigning an insulted expression, even as I pile pigs-in-a-blanket onto my plate. “If you're talking about the kidnapping—”

“Which one?” Babs points an accusatory mozzarella stick at me, her lips pursed. You know, sometimes she really reminds me of Raya, my childhood friend. It's honestly kinda terrifying. “You are the poster boy—”

“For kidnapping. I know, I know.” And yeah, I do know. I mean, how could I not? How can someone not know they get kidnapped all the time when they're the ones getting duck-taped to chairs and shoved into trunks?

No, no. Don't call Child Services. I'm fine. Besides, the last time I dealt with Child Services, or who we thought was Child Services, it did not go too well. Okay, that's an understatement.

“Well, apparently, you don't know how many times you've given me a heart attack.” Babs takes an angry bite out of her pizza. “Really, Dick. A thumbs up would be fine.”

“Alright, alright!” I duck away from her, dancing back into the crowd. Really, when did she start giving me a hard time all the time? I mean, she was never one to nag— at least not much. “A thumbs up. But don't kill me if I forget, okay?”

Babs visibly relaxes, her glossy pink lips twitching. Oh no, no, no— Babs starts to giggle. And when I say giggle, I mean that crazy girly giggle she developed over the last year.

I want to be annoyed. I want to shove my hands in my pockets and sulk. But honestly, she's so cute when she giggles that I— erm... Ahem... Nope.

Anyway, so I let her do it. Get it out of her system, you know? Might as well, I mean, so what if people stare? Still... I won't ever understand girls. I mean, really. “Seriously, Babs?” I finally manage to

get a word in when she comes up for air, her freckles sparkling like golden glitter under the chandelier light.

“Sorry, sorry. You're just so defensive!” Babs nudges my shoulder, her eyes suddenly calm, concerned. “Honestly, Dick, it's not a big deal. I was just teasing.”

Her? Teasing? That's my job. “Since when do you tease?” I raise my eyebrows at her, trying not to think how much I probably look like Alfred. “I thought I was the funny one in this relationship.”

Babs gives me the look. Ah, there she is. That's the Babs I know. “What? Are you saying I'm the stick in the mud? That I can't be funny?”

“No,” I point a half-eaten pigs-in-a-blanket at her, “I'm just saying that you are the geeky, Batman-obsessed one. I'm the goofy doof.”

It's true. I mean, I'm not saying that I don't... Ahem, geek out every now and then, but I'm the comic relief over here. The guy who keeps morale up.

“Oh my word, though, did you hear about the Teen Titans in Jump?” Aaand there she goes. I let out a sigh. Ah, things are back to normal. “I can't believe Robin went there for the summer. I got all the

articles and reports. Did you see that one about that crazy British supervillain?”

I have to choke down a laugh, which really just leaves me hacking into the crook of my elbow. Mad Mod was such a joke. I mean, a serious threat at the time, but such a joke.

Babs keeps going. Seriously, why do you think we call her Babs? “What do you think, Dick? Personally, I like the Dynamic Duo best together. They can get a lot more done. Plus, Robin’s older now, so—”

“Dynamic Duo?” I brave the look when I interrupt. Yes, yes, I know. I’m such a frowny face— you know? Someone who interrupts? I mean, in my defense, I haven’t heard that nickname for us yet. I kind of like it— although...

“Don’t you read the papers or watch the news?” Babs might as well have been scandalized. Oh boy, I’m in for it now. “Batman and Robin! First hero and sidekick—”

“Partner.”

“Yes, well, they are the first and the best. I mean, Robin’s why there’s been such a surge of younger heroes lately.” Babs pulls out her Batjournal, which has quadrupled in size since I first saw it. It’s bulging

with news articles, photos, and stray papers, and honestly, if Babs opens it, I think everything might just explode all over the party.

Now that really would liven things up.

“And... look... this here—” Babs shoves an article into my hands. Hmm... déjà vu. I blink at the article, the picture embarrassingly of me as Robin, perched on a rooftop grinning like an imp, Batman looming over me like a dark shadow. The title reads, “Batman and Robin: Gotham’s Dynamic Duo.”

I blink some more. How did I never see this? I mean, I’m not one to read the paper or watch the news. To be honest, the only way I keep up with things is through everything that passes in the current events in the Batcave. And gossip at school. But let’s be real when you’re a superhero, and a celebrity, reading the paper can either be super encouraging or super depressing. Or frustrating. Or all three at once.

“Wow. Point taken.” I hand the page back to Babs, biting back my grin as she stuffs it importantly back into her Batjournal. She never let me read that book. She only ever told me about what she’s been working on in it. But I always wonder.

What does she say about Robin? What does she say about me?
Does she really like Robin? Or does she secretly think that he— that I am
a joke?

“Hey, Dick.” The voice is deep but soft. Not at all like Bane’s, no.
This voice is full of... something. I don’t know how to describe it. I
suppose the only way would be to say it’s like a warm, fuzzy blanket. It
wraps around you and makes you feel safe.

With a grin as wide as Texas, I whip my head up and meet two
gentle blue eyes. It’s ironic because those eyes could literally fry me with
a look. You wouldn’t know it to look at him now, with glasses that
sparkle in the light, a less-than-fancy suit that might just be a rental, and
the cheesy notepad and recorder he’s holding, but Uncle Clark is the most
dangerous person here by a long shot.

“Hey, Uncle Clark!” I chirp, shooting out a hand for him to shake.
So, you all have probably figured it out by now, but this guy isn’t actually
my uncle— orphan over here— and he is not, in fact, an average person.

He isn’t even human.

“What’s up, Kiddo?” Uncle Clark accepts my handshake, his
hands covering my own completely, his fingers rough and calloused from
years on a farm. “How’s living the high life?”

“Oh, you know, I survive.” I wink at him, resting a hand on Babs’ shoulder. I don’t know what it is, because it didn’t use to be like this, but now every time I touch her, my fingers get all numb and tingly. “Uncle Clark, this is my best friend, Barbra Gordon. Babs, this is my Uncle Clark.”

“Not really his uncle, I presume.” Babs shakes Uncle Clark’s hand, her emerald eyes sparkling like stars. “And you are actually—”

“Clark Kent of the Daily Planet, Metropolis.” Clark nods firmly, his smile contagious. “And no, I am not actually his uncle. It’s kind of... a joke, I suppose. I’m an old friend of Bruce’s.”

Well, that's kinda hilarious.

“Ah.” Babs’ hand slips down to mine. Her fingers lace between my own, and I freeze. Oh... oh boy. I don’t know what’s going on with me. Am I sick? How can I be cold and hot at the same time? Sweaty and dry all at once? Ack! Where’s the air conditioner in here? “Well, that’s cool!”

“H-how’s everything in Metropolis, Uncle Clark?” I swallow hard. Do they notice? Is there something on my face? Babs is holding my hand... we’re friends, but she’s holding my hand... friends! What’s *wrong* with me lately?

“Swimmingly.” Uncle Clark shoves his hands out and waves his notepad, nearly knocking into a lady whose boa is so poofy I thought it was actually a cat lying across her shoulders. Really, how can some people stand to dress like that? “Sorry, ma’am— anyway, the Big Blue makes quite the headlines.”

I’m the only one who catches that sly twinkle in his eyes, but I don’t care. Inside jokes are fun, sometimes. Still, every time I have to bite my tongue to keep from spilling the beans to Babs leaves my stomach churning.

“How is ol’ Superman?” Babs taps her Batjournal against her hip, and not even a blind person could miss that skeptical look in her eyes. I have to choke back a laugh, which leaves me coughing and hacking into my napkin. Oooh... never get Babs started on superheroes and their ranking. Never, ever.

“Well, super, I guess.” Ouch. That was painful. I wince at Clark. A look that says, ‘and you call yourself a journalist?’ Clark laughs, shaking his head. “Eh, same old same old. Catching planes, stopping robberies, crashing through buildings— you know, typical Superman things.”

“Ah.” Babs couldn’t have looked smugger if you had just handed her the Nobel Prize. “And what brings you to the home of the Bat?”

“Babs.” I nod at the bustling ballroom around us. Really, I appreciate that she loves us so much. I really do. But sometimes wonder— how can she be so protective over a superhero that she hasn’t really met? And I use ‘hasn’t really’ because Bruce is literally standing a few yards away talking to the Powers. And, ahem, Robin’s right here? “The party? Your *dad*?”

“It’s big news when a Commissioner lasts this long in Gotham, as horrible as that sounds.” Clark gives Babs an apologetic smile, even though it’s true. I mean, we all know it’s true. Honestly, it’s a miracle I’ve lasted two years in this place.

“Well, then.” Babs relaxes, grinning at Uncle Clark and swinging our hands a little. Really, since when was holding hands with her so awkward? “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course.” Clark turns to me and gives me a knowing look. “Do you mind if I catch up with my pseudo-nephew for a moment before your father’s address? It’s been a while.”

“Sure!” Babs’ hand is gone, and she gives me a little nudge. I meet her eyes and can’t help but smile when they sparkle. I know I

complain about her, but to be honest? What would I do without her?

“Don’t forget to shake more hands. I’m going to socialize. Don’t leave without saying goodbye, okay?”

“Okay. Goodbye! See you tomorrow, Babs!” I laugh as she shoves me, sticks out her tongue, and disappears into the crowd. I really missed her over the summer.

I turn to Uncle Clark, sticking my hands into my pockets and cocking my head at the bulky man. “So, I’m guessing you want to talk about—?”

“Yeah. You can whisper.” Clark turns a finger in a circle and gestures to the room with his eyes.

I nod. So, I guess you guys have got it all figured out by now. And to be honest, it’s not that hard. I mean, Clark Kent looks just like Superman. Just remove the glasses and pull one tiny curl down from his thick raven hair. Still, I guess people don’t suppose an overpolite Kansas boy could be Earth’s mightiest man. Or Kryptonian, for that matter.

I still remember when I first met him. I may or may not have screamed like a little girl. I mean, take a twelve-year-old to meet the Justice League, and some involuntary fangirling is going to happen.

Okay, moving on. So yes. I know Superman. Coolest thing ever, right? At least when he and Bruce actually get along well.

‘Old friend’ is kinda stretching it, but who am I to judge? Let ol’ Supes think whatever he wants.

“Jump City was amazing,” I whisper quietly enough that no one else can hear in the already echoing room. Anyone except the guy who can hear heartbeats across cities. “And the team was great. They really grew throughout our time together.”

“I saw all the papers,” Clark whispers too, not as quietly, because sadly, yours truly doesn’t have superhearing, but quiet enough. “You did incredible, Kid. Impeccable leadership and training of the next generation. Someday soon, you might just take over the League.”

My heart swells in my chest. Last year, unbeknownst to me at the time, the Justice League had a meeting about the appearance of more and more young heroes. I guess I, or Robin, started a revolution or something? Anyway, I almost lost my gourd when Batman and the League came to me with the proposal. One summer on our own. Four members with me as their leader. In our own city. No outside help unless things got to more than we could handle.

And let me tell you... it was amazing.

“Thanks, Uncle Clark.” I open my mouth to say more, but the words catch in my chest. Is it wrong that Superman is the first one to congratulate me on a job well done? Shouldn’t Bruce’ve... never mind.

“Well done, Kid.” Uncle Clark pats me on the shoulder. “Make sure to keep the old curmudgeon in line, alright?”

I laugh, but it hurts that I have to force it out. I shouldn’t have to force out a laugh, ever. Because laughing makes it better. But...Bruce hasn’t said anything about it yet. Did I do something wrong? Did he think I screwed up somehow? What if—

“Clark.” A pretty dark haired woman slides into the conversation, dressed simply in a sleek suit and skirt combo. All business. A curly haired boy with way too many freckles jumbled up on his nose hangs right at her elbow, camera in hand and recording. He smiles at me and gives a small wave, and I grin at him and the woman.

I recognize her immediately. Louis Lane, the media legend and the noisest reporter I think I’ll ever meet. Seriously, her milk chocolate eyes just scream, ‘Let me sniff out everything there is to know about you, your life, your family, your eating habits, and so on and so forth into eternity.’ She puts Vicki to shame. Honestly, what’s it with superheroes and dates that would love nothing more than to sniff out all their secrets?

Really, I don't know how she hasn't realized there's an alien looking her straight in the face. Like, seriously, lady, how can someone so intuitive be so stinkn' blind?

"Coming, Louis." Uncle Clark gives me one last wink and pat on the shoulder before walking away, his attention turning onto the stage where the Commish stands at the mike, ready to give his speech.

I stuff my hands back in my pockets and smile. Mr. Gordon deserves all the pomp and celebration ever. Not only has he kept this city safe— me safe— but he works freely and openly with Batman and could care less what anyone else says. When he begins his address, I close my eyes and listen. His voice fills the room, the deep, rumbling but soft tones taking me back to when he saved me. To when he took me somewhere safe, away from the darkness and death of that night... that night when... it happened.

I don't really hear what he says. Something about it being an honor to serve and how he will continue working alongside our police force— which, honestly, aside from Yin and Bennett and sometimes Bullock, are a bunch of jerks— to make Gotham a better, safer place for kids like me and Babs to grow up in.

I cheer with everyone else, finding myself back with Babs, who shakes me like a ragdoll in her excitement, and back with Bruce and Vicki, who hug and laugh.

Ah... it's good to be home.

CHAPTER THREE

SOMEONE MADE A SHRINE OF ME

After a night of laughing and eating, and talking to people about the intricacies of the private summer school I did not, in fact, go to over the summer— lying through my teeth over here, guys— can I just say that coming home is the best thing ever?

I don't think I'll ever not love the sound of that buzzer and the quiet woosh of the iron gates swinging open, the stylized W welcoming me back after a long day of patrol and parties.

Not caring about the look Alfred gives me, I get out of the car while it's still moving, don't do this at home, kids, and walk the rest of the way down the long lane toward the front door. Ace greets me, his thundering woof hurting my ears and sending warm fuzzies through my chest. He's to my hip, which is better for me because I'm taller and won't get knocked over by him now.

I run my hand through his thick black fur and whisper to him as he trots along with me, tail wagging, tongue panting over deadly teeth. It's nice to have a guard dog who loves you to death. Especially when strangers or reporters try to get past the gate and into the grounds.

While Bruce and I head in through the front door, the arching carved wood glowing in the light of the warm porch lights, Ace peels off to follow Alfred in the limo back to the hundred-car garage. Okay, so it's not actually a hundred-car garage. But there are a lot of cars in there.

The Manor hasn't changed since I first drove up here that one surprising day when I found out that Bruce Wayne had taken me in as his ward.

The windows still glisten in the winking stars, the victorian style manor still stretching out on the rolling green, gargoyles leering down at me. I know, they don't really fit the whole victorian-thing, but hey, I didn't build this place.

Bruce opens the front door, letting the silence of the Manor swallow us. I used to hate it. I still don't really like it; I mean, who wants to live in a morgue? But after the craziness of tonight? It's like a safety blanket, warm and fuzzy and squishy. You know, something familiar to hold on to.

The banisters still glide up perfectly polished, the floors shining glossy and glinting under the crystal chandelier. Every noise echoes, but they're familiar noises. Bruce's breaths as he whips off his tie and runs a

hand through his perfectly gelled hair, the crackle of fires in the many hearths, the whirl of air conditioning as it blows through the hidden vents.

I let out a long, deep sigh. There's no place like home.

I pull off my bowtie, letting it rest around my shoulders, and hop around on the hardwood as I yank off my loafers. Why do dressy shoes have to pinch your toes so much? Or have I just grown recently?

The Batmobile and my R-cycle are back in the Batcave by now, waiting for tomorrow night's patrol. Another helpful feature of the Batwave and our autopilot system. Lucius should get a raise. How does that even work? I'm going to have to ask Bruce.

Anyway, the cave is secure for the night, but more importantly, up the stairs and down a few halls, my room's waiting for me. The words 'bedtime' and 'curfew' have never sounded so good. Okay, well, I don't have a bedtime or a curfew, vigilante of the night, over here, but still, maybe I should.

"Goodnight, Chum." Bruce shrugs off his suit coat, letting it drape over his arm. I wonder if he will go to bed or stay up later to work on things in the Cave. You never know with him. "See you tomorrow afternoon."

“G’night, B.” I try to stifle a yawn but it doesn’t work. So I stroll past him and up the stairs, only pausing to smile at him when he pats my shoulder. No hugs, nothing more than that. But by now, what would you expect? Bruce Wayne is not a hugger. In fact, I still hold to the belief that shoulder pats are his version of hugs. And hair ruffles. Those too.

I stumble my way through the halls to my room. Really, how can the need to sleep crash into you so fast and so hard all of a sudden? It’s like getting hit by a truck. I should know! Well, um, yeah, that was an embarrassing night of patrol.

Moving on.

But really, I felt so awake and alive in the streets and at the party that I completely forgot I didn’t get any sleep last night. Or the night before that. Early school and back on patrol jitters, I guess.

Oh well.

When I get to my room, I pause at the door. Maybe it was the summer-long vacation, but ever since I got back, I’ve had a renewed appreciation for the desk, personal library, TV, basketball hoop, and even the department store-sized closet.

Without bothering to flip on the light, I slip out of my suit and clamber into plaid pajama pants and a plain white T-shirt. I know I have

silk PJs with my initials just waiting for me on their little hanger in the pajama section of my closet—don't ask— but to be honest, I was never really comfortable in those.

With another yawn so big everyone downtown probably heard me, I slip into my covers and let myself sink into the soft, cozy mattress, letting out another yawn as I snuggle into the nest of blankets. I manage to close my eyes for two seconds, two measly seconds before something vibrates my pillow. I really need to stop keeping my phone under there. It's beginning to be a problem.

I pull the guilty little thing out and squint as the bright light beams into my face. The tiny message box winks at me, the name **KoryAnders** seeming to wave at me. My eyes scan the text: *U gt my othur the texts?*

Oh boy, she's still not good at English, even after all this time, I guess. Then again, who is? I sigh and open my phone and my eyes nearly pop out of my head. And I thought Babs was bad. Kory Anders, also known as Koriand'r, also known as the Tamaranean heroine Starfire was on my team over the summer.

She's nice, and her English is hilarious. She puts 'the' in front of the funniest things. Like 'the friend Robin' or 'the watching of the

movies.’ Not that anyone, even me, would ever make fun of her for that. No one makes fun of Kory. Not because she would pound you, no. She’s just too nice. And I don’t mean that in a bad way, really!

When I gave all of them my number before I left, careful to have them think it was Robin’s number because of that whole stupid secret identity thing, I never thought that she would go to town on the whole ‘the texting’ thing, as she put it. At least she’s a little more on subject with the rest of the group.

I sigh and pop over to the group chat, scanning over the general conversation. All of them stayed in Jump City at the tower, except Kid Flash and me. Who, if the name doesn’t give it away, is the Flash’s partner. Of course, everyone else did. The other three don’t have homes anymore. Well, I mean, they do now, I guess.

I turn over my pillow as my eyes scan through the conversation, resting my chin on the soft linen. It seems they’re all doing well. I guess Kory just misses me. Or thinks this whole conversation is way too important for me not to chime in on. That, or she just doesn’t realize it’s one o’clock over here on the east coast.

I quickly give Kory a thumbs up, you’re welcome, Babs, and turn my attention back to the chat. I want them to grow without me. I don’t

want to micro-manage them, especially since I know they can handle it. Besides, most of them know where to find Robin if they need me. So I type *Good job, guys! Keep up the good work! Let me know if you need anything!*

Yes, I do full, complete sentences whenever I text. I mean, really, it's just easier to read. With a click, my phone is off and back under my pillow, leaving me to stare at the ceiling, tracing the patterns in the plaster by the soft light of the moon squeezing through my curtains.

I have another full day tomorrow. The same old, same old, really. Wake up, get ready, train, shower, go to school, come home, study, train, patrol— then repeat. It's a lot, and I enjoy it, don't get me wrong, but just like the last two years, summer vacation really threw me for a loop. I mean, how do kids stand it? You work all year, get a couple weeks of fun, then *boom*, everyone tosses you back into school and expects you to remember everything?

Well, okay, so it's only been a couple weeks, but still. You try to go to a 'summer school' and come back for the year and see how it is. Really. I mean, no mercy.

Still, I'll get to spend more time with Babs. And life is back to normal if you could call being a full-time student and vigilante 'normal.'

I close my eyes and let myself slip into a dream. I never really know what to expect when I close my eyes. Either I'll wake up sweating from a nightmare, or I'll have what I call a 'regular' dream. You know, one that's so bizarre but makes perfect sense at the time? Then when you wake up, you don't even really remember what it was about. Yeah, those ones.

Tonight, I don't even really know what I dream about. I mean, it's not weird; it's just... well, weird, I guess. I'm standing across from a dark, spooky old factory, the bricks worn, the windows broken in and shattered, the doors swinging limply on their hinges.

This is sadly not that weird. I mean, the amount of run-down factories, warehouses, and apartment buildings that are in Gotham is kinda strange. I mean, they're the most cliché hiding places for bad guys, but they hide there anyway, so... take that as you will.

This one looks familiar, though. Like I should recognize it but can't put my finger on where I've seen it before. And again, no, that's not what's weird. What's weird is someone's singing. The voice echoes around me like it's coming from everywhere, ringing in my head, pounding in my brain. It creeps along with the fog that trickles over the ground, sending shivers racing up and down my spine.

And it's not just one song, either. '*Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques*' one voice sings. 'Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetops,' the other one answers.

'*Dormez vous? Dormez vous?*' I try to cover my ears, but my arms won't move. My heart pounds, and my breathes hitch, but nothing's there. Why am I afraid? They're just lullabies. Common ones at that. And this is just a dream. 'When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,'

The voices are everywhere, wiggling around, doubling back. Something sneaks behind me, but I can't turn. Who is it? Does it even matter? This is a dream. This isn't real. '*Sonnez les matines. Sonnez les matines*' What does the French part mean again? Something about sleeping? I should know this. I speak fluent French. Why can't I remember? 'When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,'

Oh... now I remember why 'Rock-a-bye-baby is a horrible song. It's a literal death wish on the baby. Yikes. '*Ding dang dong, Ding dang dong*'

The doors to the warehouse are slowly pushed open, squealing like pigs on rusty hinges. My heart stops beating in my chest. I can't breathe; I can't move. Okay, can I wake up now, please? Someone's

coming out, someone wrapped in darkness. Is it Zucco? Penguin? Two Face? Batman? Honestly, you never know with dreams.

I'm not scared, I'm not. Not scared. It's just a dream. They're always just dreams.

The person's in my face, eyes bloodshot and red, but I still can't see their face. "And down will come baby, cradle and all!"

Beep, beep, *BEEP!*

Something wraps around my legs, my arms, keeping me back. I scramble and fight, trying to claw at whatever it is to get out. My eyes shoot open, and I tumble out of my bed like a bullet from a barrel, smacking my chin on my floor, my feet bent over my head, touching my nose. It doesn't hurt. I mean, I could keep on turning and touch the floor if I wanted to, not to brag, but can I just say— no one wants to wake up like this.

I blink my eyes against the sunlight streaming in from my windows, the warm light reminding me that this is the real world where creepers only come out at night. I try to stand up, to roll into a more ideal position, because let's be honest, even being bent like a pretzel isn't that uncomfortable, but find that I've been mummified by my sheets.

Of course.

I groan, pushing up from the floor and untangling myself from the massive nest of blankets. The guilty little phone keeps on screaming from under my pillow. Oh ho, how I'd just love to chuck that thing across the room. I snatch my pillow away and slam the silence button, letting out a long, deep sigh as everything goes quiet.

Accept for Ace chasing a squirrel outside. Oh well, nothing's perfect.

I stumble into the bathroom zombie style, resting my palms on the counter and blinking blearily at myself in the mirror. Well, now. My hair sticks straight up like someone just rubbed it against a balloon. I blow one longer strand out of my eyes, frowning. Maybe I should get a trim. Or maybe I should go back to my old style. I'm not sure. Why does hair have to be such a pain?

With a huff, I squirt toothpaste onto my toothbrush and stick it between my teeth, turning my attention to fishing through my drawers. You know, kids always want to grow up. They look forward to it, and plan all the great things they're going to do.

Then puberty hits. And let me tell you, kids, bad breath, B.O., and acne? Not worth it. Nope. It just adds more time to your early morning routines.

I quickly wash my face, slap on deodorant, and drag hair gel through my hedgehog hair before I enter the shopping mall that is my closet. You know, I don't even wear over half of these clothes. I mean, I wear suits, school uniforms, and workout clothes, but that's it. Why do I need all these polos and fedoras?

I slip into my tank and gym shorts and head out of my room, my bare feet hopping across the cold floors towards the gym. Lately, Alfred hasn't been meeting me for training. Part of me wonders if he just puts more time into making breakfast and trusts me to do it by myself, but the other part of me wonders if he's just too old to wake up this early anymore.

Okay, so that second one is probably a lie. Alfred will never be too old, at least in his mind, to do anything. And you better not tell him so. Trust me on this.

I launch myself into my daily routine. Arms, then legs, then gymnastics, then martial arts, and finally trapeze. Of course, I still do trapeze. It's the only thing connecting me to Them.

When I finish, I'm slick with sweat and so hot you could fry an egg on my forehead. I've actually tried it once. Don't do it. It doesn't work as well as it does in cartoons.

Draping my towel over my shoulders, I head for the banquet hall and slide into my seat on the end, sinking into the plush velvet. The table's already set and waiting, just a simple plate, fork, and knife, as it should be. No, I'm still not used to using a bajillion forks, and yes, I still think the whole thing's stupid.

“Good morning, Master Dick.” Alfred's voice greets me as he appears from the door leading to the kitchen, carrying a tray of pancakes, what he calls a ‘pat’ of butter, and a small syrup pitcher. Honestly, where would I be without Alfred? Breakfast pancakes are just what I need right now after that freaky dream. “And how did we sleep?”

“Eh, alright.” I let Alfred set the tray on the table next to me and place a stack of pancakes onto my plate. Am I used to having a butler? No. Is it still weird? Yes.

“Just ‘alright,’ Master Dick?” Alfred's eyebrows twitch as he fills up a crystal glass of orange juice sitting at my elbow. “No nightmares, I hope.”

“Eh... Not really.” That's not exactly a lie. I mean, what classifies a nightmare? I've always wondered. I quickly pick up my fork and douse my pancakes in the butter and syrupy goodness, the thick concoction rolling over the sides and drowning the plate.

“Ah. I see.” Alfred steps to the side of my chair. I think he knows. No, scratch that; I *know* he knows I’m skimming over the truth, but he doesn’t pry. That’s what I like about Alfred. He doesn’t rush you or push you. He lets you open up in your own time. “And how are your friends in Jump City faring?”

I take a bite and chew. Of course, I don't start talking before I'm done because no one wants to get chewed out by their Butler this early in the morning. Proper etiquette is expected of everyone who sits at this table, especially in his presence. So I wait. But I don't mind. Somehow Alfred makes everything just right.

I mean, pancakes from scratch, fluffy and thick, butter fresh from the market, creamy and melting, and maple syrup fresh from the forests of New York, rich and sugary? Alfred gets only the best for us.

And the smell, oh boy. Heavenly.

“They're doing great!” I finally open my mouth, stabbing my fork back into my pancakes as soon as I’m done. I let my mind drift to the group chat and all of Kory’s texts, a small smile teasing my lips. “They are very enthusiastic. Still green, though. I'm going to give them some space so they can grow on their own.”

“A wise decision, Master Dick.” I dive into my pancakes, savoring each bite that melts on my tongue. Ah, something I definitely missed over the summer. Alfred's cooking. “And I must say again, it is good to have you home. Master Bruce and I quite missed you while you were away. The silence was quite... strange.”

See, Alfred's said that every week since I got back. Bruce still hasn't said boo. Not that I'm surprised. He's not really one for sharing his feelings. But if Alfred said he missed me, then Bruce missed me. Plain and simple.

So my heart still surges, my smile stretching my face.

“I missed you both too!” I chirp as I drag a finger across the rim of my plate, gathering all the sticky goodness. What? You can't eat pancakes without moping up all the syrup! What kind of crazy person would leave syrup wasted on a plate? “It's good to be home!” Again, not the first time I've said that, but then it's never enough, is it?

I mean, without them, I would have never even had a home.

“Alright, chop, chop, Master Dick. We mustn't be late for school.” Alfred whisks my plate away, which is such a horrible thing to do. I mean, I still had some syrup left on there! But I head back to my room anyway. After a quick shower and change, I'm in the limo, clutching my

school bag and leaning into the front to chat with Alfred. Always more to know about what happened while I was away, apparently.

When we pull up in front of the ivy-covered iron and stonework of Gotham Academy, I can't help but notice how many more kids are mingling— and how many clusters of girls are lurking in corners and laughing under trees. I bite back a groan.

I completely forgot this is Homecoming week.

“Have a wonderful day, Master Dick.” Alfred opens the door for me, his smokey eyes warm, his lip twitching. “Perhaps you shall even catch your first date.”

Oh gosh, oh no... He knew? And he didn't remind me? “Ha, ha.” I scoff, ducking out of the limo and stepping onto the sidewalk, my knees suddenly jelly. My stomach swims.

I never really thought about the whole thing, even when they first announced it. I mean, it's just another party, right? But everyone's made such a big fuss over it. Who will take out who, and so on and forth into all kinds of really boring gossip.

Besides, who would I even ask? It's not like I've been looking for a girlfriend. I'm only fourteen, for goodness sake! But... what do I say if someone asks me? Where's Bruce— I need Bruce!

“See you tonight, Alfred.” I can’t keep the small hiccup out of my words, so I ignore the amused eyebrow quirk Alfred sends my way. I shouldn't be this nervous. I've been around girls all my life. My best friend's a girl! Both of them were, actually. Besides, I face supervillains every night. I kick butt on the Gotham streets. I lead a team of young superheroes. How can I be afraid of girls?

Then again, they're like giggly pack animals that gossip and wink and wave and bat their eyelashes and—

I cautiously step through the gates and into the courtyard, my hand strangling the strap of my bag. Poor inanimate objects. We torture them so much.

“Hey, Dick!” Thank goodness the first girl to ambush me is Babs. She emerges from behind a tree, materializing from the shadows. Huh, maybe she role plays Batman sometimes. I wouldn't put it past her. Actually, now I've got to see that. I can just picture her in the cape and cowl. “How'd you sleep?”

I laugh. How did I sleep? Ha! That's a good question. “Fine, Babs. Do I look like a zombie to you today?” Yes, I have to be inspected every morning, ever since I first started late-night patrols. Of course, I can

never tell her why I don't get enough sleep, but then, I don't blame her for caring. She's just awesome like that.

"I mean—" Babs' eyes dance as she looks me over and over again and again. Really, I think I might have lint on my shoulders or something for how much she inspects. Is my tie crooked? No, Alfred would've said something. "With those bags under your eyes and that dumb smile— you might just be."

I roll my eyes. "If I was a zombie, I wouldn't want your brain."

"Yours would be more terrifying." Babs shoots back, swinging her scribbled and bedazzled backpack as she moves toward the school building, right across the no man's land. "Besides, you actually don't look as bad as you have in the past. I'm proud of you, Dick."

My chest swells, even though it's a stupid compliment. I mean, I got more sleep over the summer. Obviously, because the Teen Titans just go on the job when they're needed, which is mostly daytime. But now? Not really. It just depends. Give it a week, and Babs will be chewing me out for looking like a vampire.

"Soo... Homecoming." Oh no. Of course, of course. Babs nudges my shoulder, her lips twitching, her eyes sparkling like twin emeralds.

"Have you asked anyone yet?"

“No.” I can't help but scoff. Really, if I'd asked someone already trust me, she'd know. She just has this way of finding things out. Besides, I'm not sure if I ever will. I mean, Homecoming is just another party. What difference will it make? “Have you?”

“No.” Babs' face falls for a split second before she shakes her head, and laughs. “All the couples asked each other last week. And I mean, I've had people ask me, but can you see me going with Matt?”

I think I just lost my eyes. And my eyebrows. Yup, my eyebrows just shot up into space, and my eyeballs are probably rolling around on the pavement. Plus I think my heart just stopped. What? *Matt*? “He asked you?” I don't know what this burning feeling is in my chest, but I think I'm turning green. I don't like it. “That—” I bite my tongue hard. Honestly, I don't hate the guy. I don't hate anyone— mostly. He's just not the nicest person in the world.

Babs smirks, her fingers flying over her locker's padlock, clicking the numbers into place so fast you can't even see her fingers move before she swings the door open. “I said no, obviously. Anyone ask you yet?”

I open my mouth to say no. I mean, really, what girl would ask—

“Hey, Dick!” Marie Phillips, one of the girls in my calculus class, walks up to me. She's wearing the school uniform like Babs and the other

girls, a navy jacket, a striped tie, pleated skirt, and argyle socks, but she has a huge red bow stuck in her glossy, nut brown ponytail and makeup caked on her face like paint. Really, how can girls stand slathering the stuff on their faces?

I smile. Of course, I do. I'm the cheery one, the easy-going guy. I have a reputation to uphold over here. "What's up, Marie? How was soccer practice?" How do I know this? Well, I am the friendly one. What else are you supposed to talk to other people about? Crimefighting?

Babs huffs behind me, and I almost wet myself at the muffled nuclear bomb; well, okay, her locker slamming shut. I jump, only a little, trying to ignore the look burning through the back of my head.

Marie lights up, though, her warm hazel eyes glinting eagerly, like a fox ready to pounce. She doesn't care about Babs. Her eyes lock on mine. Oh no— is she—? "Oh, it was amazing!" She starts going like a record player, and suddenly, I appreciate Babs' rants more and more. I don't listen as Marie tells me all about soccer, who said what about who, how amazing she did, and so on and so forth. I know it's rude, but I tune her out as I open my locker and pull out the books I need. *Let's see, Calc, Martian History, Physics—*

“So, will you?” As soon as my locker door shuts, Marie’s in my face, grinning like a Cheshire cat. She’s so close, I think I can count her nose hairs. Babs fumes behind me. How do I know? Well, there’s just this feeling in the air, like it’s charged with electricity— or a timer ticking. Really, I think smoke’s probably streaming out of her ears.

“Uh, what?” I blink at Marie, sandwiched between the two girls. Oh no. I think I actually know what she means. This can’t be happening. Oh, why me? My cheeks burn like red peppers, my hands gripping my books so hard and tight my knuckles turn ghost white.

Why me?

“Homecoming, you doof. Will you go with me?” Marie bats her eyes, which is a gesture I’ve never understood but oh well. There it is. Plain and simple. Spelled out right in front of me. I knew it. Okay, so I didn’t really, but I guessed.

Suddenly the fluorescent lights are way too bright and the sound of students clambering through the hall ring like gongs, echoing over and over off the brick walls. Maybe I can hide in my locker. Maybe I can hide behind Babs.

But really, what do you say to a girl who looks at you like a little puppy? And here I was, thinking I had the best puppy face ever. In all

honesty, though? I don't want to go with Marie. She's nice, don't get me wrong— but I don't know her well, and she's... I don't know— where's Bruce when I need him? He's so suave and charming and good with women. He always knows what to say, and they don't hate him, even when he flakes. The only women I'm charming to are older, and that's only because I'm so young I'm automatically cute. Just what a fourteen-year-old boy wants to hear.

I open my mouth, then close it. I might's well be a goldfish in a bowl for how Babs and Marie and all the other girls gather around staring at me. My palms slick with sweat. Did it just get really stuffy in here, or is it just me?

I don't want to do this.

“No, sorry, Marie.” The words just tumble out of my mouth without warning, without so much as a thought. Well, that just happened. Problem solved. But from the way Marie looks at me, that forced smile, that subdued fury in her eyes, I might's well have just slapped her.

Ooof... now what? Someone help!

“Sorry.” I don't know if ‘sorry’ will ever cut it for anything, but boy am I glad when Marie just sniffs, turns up her tiny nose, and walks

away, leaving me to try my best to not slump against the wall of lockers. My hands slide around my books, and I readjust, finally turning to Babs.

I'm usually good at reading expressions, I mean, it's one of my extracurriculars, but I can't for the life of me tell what Babs is thinking. Her face is a jumbled mess between relief, amusement, anger, jealousy, and— wow. Alright, then.

“Well,” Babs gives a small ‘hmm’ and loops arms with me, staying close, “that was one.”

“Did I do alright?” I whisper, trying to avoid the looks the girls are giving me. Something between respect, vengeful fury, and cunning mischief. I don't know how they pull it off, but there it is. I will never understand girls. But Babs will because she's a girl.

“Well, you didn't sugarcoat it or make excuses, so points to that.” Babs stops in front of Mr. Lawrence's class, her books tucked smartly under one arm. “And really, there isn't any beating around the bush with rejection, so—”

“I didn't reject her.” Is that what girls think? Did I just shatter Marie? Are all girls that sensitive? What should I've said? Ugh, maybe I should have asked Bruce about the whole thing before I entered this warzone. “I just... Respectfully declined.”

“There you go.” Babs’ lips twitch so much I think she’s laughing at me. What’s so funny? I don’t think this is funny. “Say that.”

“Babs—” The bell rings, and she’s gone, swept away in the shifting sea of adolescent humanity. Gosh, I could be a poet.

I shrug and walk into the classroom, trading the bustling mass evacuation for the tiny subdued chatter of the room. Students sit either behind or on top of their desks, chatting, some looking through their books, others jotting down notes. I turn to go down the aisle, only I stop halfway to my desk. Or what used to be my desk. Because where the polished wood was, once upon a time, sits something buried in a pile of papers, some folded, some in envelopes, others sticky notes stuck to the sides or even on my chair.

“Woah.” I almost drop my bag. “What happened? Did the paper shredder blow up?” Laughter circulates the room, but it also draws attention from our teacher. Well, if you can call him that. I mean, I learn things, but really most kids fall asleep.

“Mr. Grayson?” Mr. Lawrence stands up from behind his desk, his droning voice something other than monotone for once. “Can I help you?”

Everyone looks right at me as if someone just beamed me with a spotlight. Oh, I can just feel their eyes all over me, laughing. Ha, ha, very funny, guys. “Yes, sir, can I take a moment to check my inbox, please?”

The class breaks into another round of laughter as I point to the paper factory that is my desk. Mr. Lawrence doesn’t join in, though... is it just the lights, or was that a tiny, amused twinkle in his eye? “You are ahead in this class, Mr. Grayson, so I don’t see why not. As long as your work is completed and all your chapters have been read.”

“Of course, sir.” See? I’m not just the class clown. I’m a good student too. Take notes, kids. “I appreciate it.”

The class roars with laughter as I gather all the notes into my arms, the crackling paper crunching against my chest as I make a huge show of sitting in the back corner, letting everything skid into my lap and flutter to the ground around me like enormous snowflakes.

Really, this is worse than Valentine’s Day. At least then you have an official inbox and not some explosion all over your desk. As Mr. Lawrence starts his lesson, I start to open notes and read. And boy, oh boy, I was not expecting this. Note after note is from some girl, most of whom I haven’t even ever spoken to, asking me to Homecoming. And I’m not saying this to brag, oh no, no, gosh no. But really, there are so

many other guys in school! You know, guys who have actually talked to them? Why ask me?

'You are such a sweet, funny guy,' one note begins, *'I would love for you to be my date to Homecoming.'* Well, at least that's straightforward and to the point, unlike most of them. But really, honestly, why would they ask me? I don't go to school parties. I don't go to sports games or events, or am part of any clubs. I even gave up gymnastics. All they know about me is who I am at school... and that I'm the ward of a Billionaire. Oh... that makes sense.

Am I thinking about this too much? Eh, maybe. But if I did pick someone, I'd want it to be someone I'd be excited to go with, you know? Someone special.

So, not knowing what else to do with all these papers, I toss them. I make sure none of the girls are around, though. I'm not that rude. I meet up with Babs in the hall. Even though I always walk with her anyway, I think it's best to stick at her side, especially now.

It doesn't work as well as I had hoped, though. "I can't believe Jacob asked me." Babs rolls her eyes, her arm looped through mine as we weave our way towards Calc, a class we take together. Props to her. "I

mean, I thought he thought I was annoying. I mean, he calls me ‘Babbler.’ Who knew.”

“This whole thing really opens your eyes about people,” I mutter, trying to avoid eye contact at all costs. How many girls are in this stinkn’ school? “Oh boy, is staring good or bad?”

Babs laughs loudly, the sound ping-ponging down the halls. Of course, she doesn’t care. Because why should I? It’s just another party. It’s no big deal. And they’re just girls.

Girls that look at me as if I’m either the best chocolate ever— I don’t know why girls love chocolate so much, but alright— or as if I’m an annoying little fly that needs to be squashed.

And here I thought they all liked me.

“It depends.” You know, Babs is enjoying this way too much. When her voice changes a little, though, I look up. Her smile’s forced, that strange all-in-one look back in her eyes. “Have you said yes to anyone yet?”

“No.” I didn’t mean to scoff that loud. Oh... oh no, they’re going to skin me alive. Or burn me at the stake. I don’t think I can handle this anymore. Why is this so hard? They’re just girls, for crying out loud!

“Don’t worry.” Babs nudges me when we get into Calc, her smile soothing my fraying nerves, calming my pounding heart. “They’ll get over it. Just give it a day. They’ll move on to the next boy.”

“Okay.” I can’t stand how lame and stupid I sound. Especially in front of my math teacher. Why can’t girls be like math equations and super villains? You know, predictable?

I feel like a little kid clinging to Babs for the rest of the day. But it’s worth it. I know the guys will make fun of me— since when did that ever bother me anyway, though?— but when Babs is around, most girls don’t risk it. By the end of the day, I have five girls ask me, excluding the pile of letters. I think I got more tactful at saying no. I mean, they don’t look like they’re going to get their dads to pound me, so, success? Maybe?

“Just think, after this week, it will all be over.” Babs shoves her books into her locker, stuffing her backpack with all her homework; our day done, finally. “And you won’t have to suffer again, at least until the Spring Formal next year.”

“Darn it, Babs!” I smack my head into my locker, letting it rest on the cold, soothing metal. “I don’t know if I can do this again.”

“You’ll get used to it.” Babs nudges me. I turn my head to her, a smile spreading across my lips at the sight of her smug little smile.

“Besides, think of it this way. Everyone loves you.”

“HA!” The voice is screechy and high-pitched, scoffing from across the hall. I straighten and turn, even as Babs bristles like a porcupine. Katherine Walker, the ‘new girl’ as everyone’s calling her, smirks at us from her locker. I don’t know how she got away with it, but the whole thing, door, interior, and even padlock are shocking hot pink like someone just drenched the thing in Pepto Bismol. No, really.

“What is it, Kitten?” Babs’ eyes narrow like she’s looking at a worm or something gross. That’s unfair, really. I mean, Katherine, or her other nickname I forgot, Kitten, hasn’t done anything wrong since school started. I mean, she’s obnoxious, but when was that ever a crime? *Cough*, guilty, *cough*.

“You are cute, and all, Dickie,” Kitten chirps at me, ignoring Babs completely. Oh yeah, maybe that’s it. “But you can’t hold a candle to— HIM!”

I try not to laugh when she whips open her locker with such flare, she could be unveiling that I got a new car, but even that dies on my lips as soon as I see what’s inside. Pictures, news articles, plushies, and even

a birdarang sit in that locker, meticulously placed and tacked up. And when I say pictures and things, I mean of me. Or Robin, I guess. All of it's bedazzled with hearts, glitter, roses, and a real candle even burns in there, setting the glossy sheen of the pictures aglow.

Is that allowed?

But the worst part is the lipstick marks all over the pictures. Okay, I think I just threw up in my mouth. What? This girl's obsessed with... Robin? I think my eyes just popped out of my head. Oh... that's not creepy at all.

"See? This is true perfection!" Kitten purrs, hence the name, I guess and holds out a Robin plushie. Maybe she's like Catwoman? I mean, the two are obsessed with us and have cat-related names. But that plushie... I didn't even know they sold those— wait, did she make that herself?

Uh... nope. Nope, nope.

"Really, Kitten?" I'm glad Babs does the talking because I think I lost my tongue or something. Well, at least I have one dedicated fan! Points for me, I guess. "You don't even know who he is."

"He is perfection personified, and if you are a Batman fan, Gordon, you should already know that!" Kitten sneers at Babs. My chest

burns, and my fists clench. How dare she look at Babs like that. “I’m going to ask Robin to Homecoming.”

I don’t know what kind of noise I just made, but I know for sure that I was never in a thousand years expecting that. I suppose I should be flattered, but honestly? I don’t know what to think. I mean, Dick Grayson and Robin can’t be in the same place at once. And if Dick Grayson won’t say yes to a girl he barely knows, why would Robin?

“You do that.” Babs’ face shakes so much I think she’s having a heart attack until Kitten smirks, skips away, and disappears. Then the laughter explodes like water from a broken pipe. “Oh my *word!*” Babs leans on my shoulder, doubling over, her shoulders shaking as she giggles, her face beet red. “How well do you think that’ll go?”

I shake myself. *Get over yourself, Grayson!* I can’t think of anything else to do, so I fall on what I do best. “Naw, you’re just jealous that you got competition for the Boy Wonder.” I wiggle my eyebrows at Babs. “You better hurry, or he’ll be taken.”

Babs straightens as stiff as a poker in seconds, her eyes snapping, her mouth puckering into a frown. “I would never go with a boy I don’t know, even if it was the Boy Wonder.”

With a sigh and sad shake of my head, I place a comforting hand on her shoulder. Okay, so it's not really comforting, but that's the point of teasing, right? "Well, at least you have so many options here. I mean, you can still say yes to Matt or—"

SMACK!

I think I just lost all feeling in my arm. It bruises, it hurt! Man, where'd Babs learn to punch like that? "Hey! That hurt! I was just—" Then I look at her face. I'm expecting to see an annoyed but amused expression. I mean, I thought I was funny. But instead, I see burning eyes, a trembling lip, and— wait, is she going to cry? What did I do? What did I say?

"Babs?" She turns away from me, but I grab her shoulders. What did I do? What did I do wrong? "Babs, what is it? Babs, I'm sorry. It was just a joke. What's wrong?"

I don't think I've ever seen her look at anyone like this before. Her eyes cut through me more than any knife ever could. It hurts, the way she looks at me, like I just crushed her or something. What do I do? How do you get a girl to not cry?

Her lip trembles so much it's hard to actually see it, even when her eyes snap onto mine. Water's glistening and starting to spill, despite how fast she's blinking. Oh man, I messed up— but what did I say?

“You know.” Her voice hardly shakes. It's hard, biting, but thick and heavy. I wait for her to keep going, to explain. Instead, she pulls away from me, yanks her backpack onto her shoulders, and dashes down the hall, slamming out the front doors and out of school.

Gone.

I can't move. She's gone. She just snapped at me. Babs never snaps at me, at least not with that face. It was a joke... wasn't it? I was just teasing! What did I just do?

“B-babs?” Her voice didn't tremble, but mine sure does. What did I do? What can I do to fix it? My stomach plummets to my sneakers, and my cheeks go cold, then hot.

What just happened?

CHAPTER FOUR

SOMEONE SAVE ME, I'VE BEEN CRUSHED

I don't say anything for once when Alfred asks how my day went. I don't even lean into the driver's cab to look out the front window at the city zipping past. I sit in my seat, looking at my sneakers, blindly studying every scuff and speck of dirt as my mind whirls like a tornado. That is to say, it's caught in a loop. *What did I do? What did I say? How can I fix it? What can I say?* And so on and so forth. It seems like such a stupid thing. You might think that I'm being dramatic. You might be thinking, 'But Dick! You were just teasing!' And I was. That's not the problem. Babs was my first friend here. She was there when the Commish brought me into the GCPD. She was there and waiting, ready to listen— ready to talk.

She didn't care that I was an orphan, or from the circus, or that I was crying. She handed me a tissue and asked me my name. Simple as that. And later, when I came to school, she wasn't any different. She didn't care how many people stared or that I was the ward of billionaire Bruce Wayne. To her, I was Dick Grayson. I was a human being to her, not some charity case or sob story.

I needed someone, and she was there. And she still is.

But... I've never seen her cry before. Out of all our time together, all we've done, I've never seen any tears leak from those glistening green eyes. Not even when we watched her sad, sappy romance movies. Not once. But now I'm the one that's made her cry. I'm the reason.

What've I done?

Something heavy weighs on my shoulders and won't let me get up. It presses me into the seat, keeping my feet rooted on the limo floor, my hands limp in my lap. The way she looked at me... It's like I betrayed her, slapped her, or told her I hated her. I run our conversation over and over in my head. Everything I said didn't seem like something that should make her upset. I was just teasing. Was it about Robin? No, it couldn't be. She was fine when Kitten did her whole 'creepy fangirl' spiel. Was it about Matt? I mean, he's not the nicest, but she should know that that was a joke!

I rest my head in my hands, clenching my eyes shut, my fingers grasping, pulling at my hair. What was it? What did I say? To be honest, though? With Babs? It really could be anything.

Is this a big deal? To me? Yes. Yes, it is. Because I don't want to lose her. I can't lose her. What would I do without her?

“Master Dick?” Alfred’s voice breaks through my hurricane of thoughts, shattering them all to glass, tossing them into the wind. I look up and blink at him, only to realize that he’s standing at the open door of the limo, Ace next to him panting, his warm brown eyes begging me to come out and pet him.

I blink some more. We’re at the Manor. I’m home. Behind Alfred, the hills roll like they always have. The trees’ leaves whisper as they’re picked up by the wind and tossed into drifts of vibrant oranges, golds, and reds.

The world doesn’t crash and burn, even after you have an argument with someone. Okay, so it really wasn’t an argument... or a fight. What even was that? I shake my head and force myself to focus on Alfred’s perfectly trimmed and waxed mustache.

“Uh... yes?” My voice doesn’t sound right. It’s too loud in my head. It echoes and pounds. What did I do? What can I do? I need to fix things... I need to talk to Babs— no, Bruce. I need to talk to Bruce.

“Are you alright, Master Dick?” I finally meet Alfred’s eyes. His brow is creased, lips turned down into a pinched frown. But what hits me the most is the concern in his smokey eyes. If it hit me before, it will hit

me again and again. Alfred cares. Alfred knows. Besides, I didn't talk to him in the limo. I always talk to him in the limo.

"No, I'm not." The words come out in a sigh. It's no use lying to him. He knows something's wrong. I mean, me not talking? Call the ambulance. So I keep going, trying to force the maelstrom in my brain to calm down for a second. "Babs and I... well," How do I put this? Again, it wasn't really a fight, "To be honest? I don't know what I did."

Alfred doesn't do what I thought he would. I was expecting an *'oh dear, I am so sorry, Master Dick'* or, *'That is dreadful, what happened?'* Instead, Alfred smiles, *smiles*, at me, his frown reversing into a frantic lip twitch. I stare at him. The concern is gone, poof, like a bunny in a hat— wait, no, they pull bunnies out of hats. Yeah...

A small cough escapes his lips, and he quickly covers it with a fist. What is he— Wait, is he *laughing* at me? Betrayal! "Is that so, Master Dick?" His voice is clipped as ever, but something twinkles in his eyes. The concern is an afterthought because now nothing but amusement fills his face. It's not funny, though! How could he laugh? And here I thought he was the understanding one in the family. Wait, no, scratch that; I'm probably the most understanding one. Or maybe Bruce— nope, definitely not Bruce.

“Yeah.” I slide out of the car, my hand going to run through Ace’s thick fur. The soft touch on my fingertips soothes, sending warmth and assurance racing up and down my arm. I don’t want to be angry at Alfred, but I can’t help the frown ruining my face. Really, I’m going to get wrinkles young at this rate. So much for my youthful complexion.

Alfred composes himself, more or less, and gives a small, curt nod. Well, at least there’s that. “That is unfortunate. Master Bruce is in his study. Perhaps—?”

My heart lifts slowly. Talking to Bruce. That’s what I need right now. Just talking, maybe some sparing. I need to do something. I can’t just sit— or stand— anywhere. I can’t be angry with Alfred anymore. He always knows just what to say, what to do. Where would we be without him?

My frown lifts, my stomach rising. Youthful complexion saved, I guess. Yay me. “Thanks, Alf.” Thank you is never enough. I tell ya, we need to come up with a better phrase, something that means more. I mean, you say ‘thank you’ to people who give you a flyer off the streets; how much more does someone like Alfred deserve? Not even a ‘thank you so much’ would fit. I mean, I’m thankful, I’m grateful, I appreciate it,

much appreciated, and much obliged— all of those are great, but what about for a person who cares for your every need?

Wow. I'm getting sentimental in my old age. I blame puberty.

Without another word, I trot with Ace to the front door, giving him a good scratch around the ears before stepping into the Manor. I can feel Alfred's eyes on me even when the doors click closed.

I mean, I do appreciate him so much, but still... What's so funny? I don't get it. Is it some kind of inside joke? Am I missing something? I mean, he's older, so I suppose he might be used to not understanding girls— or women for that matter— by now. But then again, I always see him and Dr. Leslie Thompkins, who is the best doctor ever, let me tell you, getting along just fine.

What am I missing?

I quickly drop my books off in my room, slipping out of my school uniform, freeing my neck from the tie and my shoulders from the stiff coat. After the hot, stressful day of being hounded by girls, slipping into a T-shirt and shorts is like shedding a thick, clunky winter jacket. I kick my shoes across my room, leaving them to thump against my desk. Oops. At least I didn't kick that hard. I'm liable to break something.

Sneaking out of my room, I pad through the silent halls of the Manor, listening to the chirping of birds from outside and the soft hum of the air conditioning inside. Alfred must have made pasta for lunch because the smell of basil and freshly baked bread wafts through the halls, calming my stomach. Turning a corner, I pause in the portrait hall to gaze at the people staring down at me.

The ceilings arch up here, reaching for the delicate crystal lights that hang down like willow branches, lighting the faces on the walls. Some seem disapproving, others welcoming. Honestly, it's hard to tell. All I know is that all of them are so life-like that they could start talking to me, gossiping about what they saw in life, what they did, and how they knew the Wayne family.

At the end of the hall, I stop in front of a large painting of three people. The burnished gold frame still sparkles new and untouched by time.

The patron sits in the red velvet chair, legs crossed comfortably, and hands draped over the chair's arms. Steely gray eyes stare out at me, assessing, analyzing, but also gentle in their own way. Behind him stands an older man, his suit perfectly pressed, his mustache pristinely groomed.

His smokey eyes are soft, kind, and welcoming but have that no-nonsense look.

On his other side is a boy, twelve years old. His suit fits him like a glove, his hands clasped behind his back, but he's somehow not stiff. His smile is contagious, subdued as it is, and his deep blue eyes sparkle with life and excitement. Really, only two years ago, I still had baby fat on my cheeks. How embarrassing.

I still remember posing for this picture, laughing at how professional we all looked but so thrilled to be in an official Wayne Family portrait.

Well, okay, so I'm not really a Wayne. I am the ward of a Wayne, the foster son of a Wayne, but I'll forever be a Grayson. This was a present from Bruce after he won me back in court. A sort of welcome home present, as it were. And I don't mind one bit. Because even though I'm a Grayson and just his 'foster' son, I can't see Bruce as anything less than my father. We are family. Yeah, yeah, I know. Super sappy. I'd die of embarrassment if I ever said that out loud. But it's true.

I don't call him Dad much. That's saved for special occasions. But he is my dad. And what are dads for?

Well, one thing is girl advice.

I smile at the picture, waving at my younger self, before continuing on, down hallways and around corners, before I stop in front of Bruce's study. The door's closed and locked, but when did that ever stop me? I lean forward and press my ear against the wood, letting my heart slow and my breaths quiet. He probably already heard me, but it's always fun to try and sneak up on him. He's talking to someone on the phone, his voice all business but relaxed. I know exactly who he's talking to, even before I hear his words.

“That will do fine, Lucius. Yes, I am sure of it. No, the board will have to get on board or off completely....”

I grin against the door's grain, slipping a small lockpick from my shorts' pocket and jimmying it in the lock, my ears listening to every click. Yes, I have a lock pick in my shorts, and no, don't ask.

Lucius and Bruce run Wayne Enterprises in such a way that would make all other businessmen roll around in their graves. I mean, they are all about their tech helping people.

Medicines, medical machinery, gear for the Justice League— you know, all that great stuff. But it's effective and so successful that no one else argues with them— well, okay, gets away with arguing with them, at least.

With one last turn, the lock pops, and I swing open the door, peering in through the crack. Bruce sees. Of course, Bruce sees. How could he not see? The man's Batman. He holds up one finger, but his hard eyes soften, a smile teasing his lips. Yup. This is my sort of dad. "Of course. Uh-huh. Alright, well, I have to go, Lucius. Dick just got home from school." I give a small thumb-up sign and point to Bruce, wiggling my eyebrows. He gets the signal. "He says that we're doing an excellent job. Yes, I'll tell him. Uh-huh. Bye."

Bruce sets his phone down on his desk, and I open the door all the way, slipping inside the now familiar space. To any casual onlooker, this would be a perfectly normal office. The walls are lined with cases displaying awards and bookshelves filled to the brim with solid material, you know, stuff that's actually interesting to read?—and brick-a-brack. A sturdy, chestnut grandfather clock rests on one wall, its hands not moving, the polished gold weights just waiting to be pulled. That's not weird, trust me.

In the middle of it all rests an enormous mahogany desk, the polished wood gleaming in the soft lamplight, the PC whirring softly like a little kitten.

Perfectly normal. But to the uncasual observer like me and Bruce and Alfred, this room is so much more. I mean, that clock is one of the entrances to the Batcave. Yes, it is cliché, and no, I will never complain about it. It's just too cool.

I close the door behind me and stand, waiting. Bruce speaks first for once. "Lucius told me to tell you that you are doing a marvelous job." Bruce's eyes glint, his smile soft and genuine, though tiny. "And he also says hi."

I'm doing a marvelous job? Aw, shucks, that's so nice of him. And Bruce did say it, so I'll count it but... really... why—? Nevermind.

"How was work?" I take a few more steps into the office, nearing the desk. I want to jump right into the problem at hand, but might's well let Bruce get his few words in.

"Alright." And there it is. His few words. Whelp, got that out of the way. "And how was school?" And there are the rest of his words and my segway into, well...

I don't know what to do with my hands. I clasp them in front, in the back, but finally, cross them. No, hug myself is more like it. Yeah... I hug myself. Wonderful. "Well... it's Homecoming week and..."

“Oh yeah?” Bruce sits back at his desk, leaning forward, his voice serious. “And how many girls asked you?”

I don’t know if it’s how his eyes dance or his mouth twitches just the tiniest bit, but I know he’s teasing. Everyone stop what they’re doing right now! Bruce Wayne is teasing me! Actually, it’s not that special of an occasion. He’s loosened up a little over the years. And when I say ‘little,’ I mean little, tiny, the smallest bit. The measliest amount. Wait, is ‘measliest’ a word? Eh, well, it is now. “Well, counting all the notes? About twenty-five.” I rub my neck, giving up on my self-hug. “Is that some kind of record?”

“Well, I had fifty on my first Homecoming.” Bruce winks at me. “But you’ll get there.”

“A weird thing to look forward to.” I scowl at him, but I can’t keep it on my face. Of course, he would have fifty girls ask him. I mean, look at him! His perfectly sculpted features, admirable physique, not to mention he’s, oh, I don’t know, a billionaire? I bite back my laugh, trying so hard to keep it in, my face heats up, quivering. Somehow, with Bruce here, everything’s alright, even though he still hasn’t said anything. But I don’t want to think about that. “Besides, I just said no to all of them.”

Bruce laughs, the short sound loosening my shoulders even more. My laugh comes out and joins his, though I didn't think that part of the whole ordeal was funny. Oh well. "And how did that go?"

"Oh gosh!" I cover the rest of the distance between me and Bruce's desk, leaning on the edge. "It was horrible! I thought they were going to boil me alive or something!"

I can tell Bruce is trying not to laugh harder than that tiny chuckle that squeezes through his lips, his face flushing with the effort. So... this is normal, apparently? I guess that's... good. "Don't worry. They'll get over it. But Dick, who *are* you going to go with?"

The question sends my stomach plummeting again. Babs' words crash into me like a ten-ton weight. '*You know.*' Know what? What do I know? "Bruce..." I swallow hard, plunking down in one of the chairs across the desk, my hands grabbing my knees and gripping tight. "Babs and I... we had a fight today."

Bruce's eyebrows barely even quirk up. You'd almost think he wasn't surprised. "Oh? What about?"

"Well, it wasn't even really a fight and— Ugh... That's the problem! I don't know!" I smack my head onto the table, my forehead pressing into the firm wood, squishing my nose. "I was teasing her about

going with other boys, and she snapped at me! And it's not just today. She's been acting really weird." I turn my head to the side and look up at Bruce, blowing some stray strands of hair out of my eyes with a huff. "Did I do something wrong? When you see us together, what do you think?"

I don't let him answer, not yet. Apparently, I needed this. The dam has been broken, and the river will roar. I guess I was holding more in than I thought. "She keeps on punching me, which hurts; she won't leave me alone about, well, anything! It's like she's trying to mother hen me or something. I know I'm a year younger, but I didn't think that mattered to her!" I lift my head up to rest my chin on the desk, my teeth clacking with the words. "And she's super protective, too! You should have seen the looks she was giving the other girls! I thought they'd spontaneously combust!"

Bruce gives a small cough, but he keeps his eyes fixed on me, the steely gray analyzing, taking in every word. Really, when you talk to Bruce, everything you say, do, and even think is under scrutiny. I mean, he can understand so much from just a person's eyes that it's frightening. I am not that good... yet anyway.

“And then...” I swallow hard. I don’t really want to talk about it. I mean, it’s awkward, but then, this is Bruce. He was a teenager once, too, as weird as that sounds. He should understand, right? “I feel... weird around her. Fuzzy. And clammy. And sweaty all at once.” I clear my throat. “I mean, we’re friends, right?”

Finally, the flow has ebbed. I take a deep breath. I didn’t know I needed that, but it felt good.

“No.” Bruce is finally ready to say his piece. But I was not expecting that. I lift my head completely, straightening in my chair. I can’t help the panic that surges, my hands gripping my knees so tight I can’t feel them anymore. What does he mean Babs and I aren’t friends? Did I mess up that badly? What if I— “No, I think you are a little more than that now.”

I come crashing back down to earth, so sudden and fast I think I just burned up on reentry. What does he mean by— oh. Ooooh... wait, what?

Bruce finally breaks. His laugh fills the study, and I can’t help the heat blossoming in my cheeks. Oh boy. Oh no... Bruce stands and walks around the desk, looming over me like a humongous statue, casting me in his deep shadow. He sits on the edge of the desk in front of me, the

shadow gone, his hand reaching out, landing on my shoulder. It's heavy, comforting. A sigh escapes my lips, my racing thoughts slowing, skidding to a halt. Bruce is here. Everything is alright.

Even though he's laughing at me. Oh well.

"Dick, Barbara has a crush on you. Has for some time now."

Okay, well, I was not expecting that. Way to be the world's greatest detective and not even tell me until now, Bruce! I blink up at him. I don't want to believe it. I mean, we're friends... but then it all makes sense... more or less. "Dick, she's been trying to show her affection, but she's been waiting for you to make the first move, beating around the bush. Girls do that sometimes."

I open my mouth, then close it. Punching me... of course. Giving me a harder time... of course, of course. It all makes sense... wait, how could I've missed that? Bruce keeps going. "The reason she was so mad at you is she wants you to ask her to Homecoming."

And Mike drops. I stare at Bruce, not wanting to think about how ridiculous I look with my mouth hanging open. Like a guppy. Or something. Wow, Grayson. "She—you—wha?" I don't think I can English anymore. Babs has a crush on me. Babs wants me to take her to Homecoming. Babs... Babs likes me. I mean, *likes* me, likes me. That

warm and fuzzy feeling races through me, snuggling me in a blanket. It fills me up like Alfred's hot cocoa. It feels... right. But then... we're friends. How does that work?

“And I think you have a crush on her too, Dick.” Bruce wasn't finished, apparently. I jump at his words, nearly falling out of my seat, my arms doing frantic helicopters to keep myself upright. Me? Have a crush on Babs? What? No...oh!

Actually... Because I don't want to lose her. I can't lose her. What would I do without her? My own words come back to bite me. Oh... OH!

“Well...” I think about how Mom and Dad were together, how Vicki and Bruce are. They're so natural together, teasing, laughing, giving each other a hard time like Babs and me. Then I finally know. Babs has changed. We both have. We hit puberty. Hurray for us. We aren't those little kids who met in the Commish's office anymore. We grew up, at least a little. I mean, ha, me, grown-up? Never. And yeah, she's... well, she's Babs!

Bruce gives me a knowing look, his eyes softening. “I knew this was coming. You two... well, you have a connection. Something that all those other girls can't compete with.”

“What do I do?” My voice squeaks. Well, there goes all that work. And here I was, thinking I was done with the sliding voice thing. Apparently not. Bummer.

“You ask her.” Bruce’s hand slips from my shoulder, giving me a good smack on my upper arms, then drop to brace against the desk, his smile coy. “And she’ll say yes.”

“But... she hates me!” I can’t help but think about the tears that leaked from her eyes and the hurt on her face. What if I already blew it? What if she doesn’t talk to me for weeks? Think I’m being dramatic? Well, you don’t know Babs. She’s liable to sulk for two weeks tops. Well, okay, that’s when she was denied an interview with Batman and Robin, but still!

“No, she doesn’t.” Bruce waves a hand. You’d think he has experience with women. I wonder why? “Just give her a heartfelt apology and something special and ask her.” He winks at me. “Flowers and chocolate will always do the trick, though I’m sure I can manage to get something more... Batman-themed.”

I can’t help the smile that lifts my mouth or the surge that boosts, well, everything. Yes, she’d like that. Even still, though. How will this change what we have? Will this just make things weirder between us? I

can't imagine things changing too much, but... what if I ask her and she's so mad at me that she says no?

But... it's Babs. Even if I ask her and we go together, we don't have to be a 'date' or a 'couple' like those other people. Because most of those people hardly know each other. We can actually have a good time.

"Get your homework done, Chum." Bruce's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. He's back at his desk, typing on his computer or little talk done. It's not a chat, oh no, because Bruce doesn't do 'chats.' Still, same old Bruce. Straight to the point. "Then finish the rest of your studies. I want you sharp and alert for tonight. No daydreaming, understood?"

I leap out of my seat, giving him a small salute. "Absolutely, Commander B-man, sir!" I rap a fist on his desk. "Though technically, it would be at night, so it wouldn't be 'day' dreaming, would it?"

"Dick." Bruce gives me a look.

I laugh like an imp and scamper out of his office, making sure to shut the door on my way out. But as I race into the banquet hall where my books and homework wait for me, I can't help but wonder.

Why didn't Babs say anything sooner?

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN THE CLOWN COMES OUT TO PLAY

Have I ever said that the people of Gotham are crazy? Well, I stand by that statement, even though it includes me now, I guess. Then again, I dress in a cape and mask, jump on a motorcycle and race off to fight crime with a Bat-themed vigilante, so... Yeah... I'm crazy. Oh well. You win some, you lose some.

Anyway, so yeah, Gotham's crazy. I mean, when you race through these streets, all you have to do is pick an alley, walk down it, and see something random happening. Either a mugging or a drug dealing—really just take your pick. But as anyone here knows, that's not even the worst. I mean, this is a city of psychos, and every once and a while, they'll break out of their little clubhouses to make some mischief.

I mean, I gave the guys at Blackgate Penitentiary a hard time, but they got nothin' on the people who run Arkham Asylum. Really though, when they're famous for their inmates and how many times said inmates escape, you know you have a serious problem. And that's like... every other week, so yeah... famous for all the wrong reasons, I guess.

So yes, there are several kinds of nights here in Gotham, and I've taken the liberty to label them, even though that really doesn't matter, and no one cares, but oh well. There're patrol nights, which consist of stopping muggings, breaking up gangs, catching robbers, and sometimes stakeouts, which are boring, but who am I to complain? Then there're Blackgate nights when the B-listers come out to wreak havoc. They're still off their rockers but not cuckoo bird crazy if you know what I mean. Example one would be Bane. Those nights are action-packed but not that long. Usually, we can put those perps down quick and hard before too many people get hurt.

Then there are Arkham nights. I don't think I really have to explain those. I mean, lots of casualties, insane antics, you know, a complete madhouse of a long night. Like tonight.

I don't even have to see the Bat-signal light up the sky like a beacon to know this will be an Arkham night. I mean, there's confetti drifting down on us from across three blocks. Yes, confetti. And glitter. Rule number... well, I guess five? Yeah, rule five is you can never be surprised about anything here. After run-ins with sentient plants, flocks of killer birds, and a walking Frosty the Snowman, you've seen everything.

Man, I should write a book.

“It’s Joker. Be ready for anything, Robin.” Batman’s voice growls in my ear, keeping up with me as we tear through the streets, blazing through red lights and whipping around tight corners. Just one name, and it looks like our entire night is booked. Goodbye sleep, hello tons of action. Hurray, hurray.

I glance down at the tiny screen on my R-cycle’s dash and see a huge green dot pulsing in Old Gotham, with tons of little red dots around it. Wait, Joker’s in Riddler’s territory? I hope this isn’t the start of a turf war. Those are so annoying.

“The Commish?” I whip my cycle around another corner, nearly knocking over a line of garbage cans, stray wrappers, and things I do not want to identify flying in my face. It’s no secret that the streets are empty, bare. I mean, it makes sense. Who wants to be out and about when the Clown Prince of Crime comes a calling? I mean, at the point when we have a siren warning for a crazy clown, you know it’s serious.

So while everyone else is safely locked up tight for the night, I’m out here with the Bat sweeping up after the jolly ol’ clowny. Just another night in the life of a vigilante. Never a dull moment... except for stakeouts.

“Already there.” The Batmobile keeps pace with my R-cycle, the lights cutting through the night, the engine growling like a lion ready to pounce. Really, it’s a thing of beauty. Maybe I’ll get my own someday.

“He’s putting on a show. Waiting for us.”

“Of course he is,” I grumble, unable to resist rolling my eyes. I mean, Joker claims to be random and chaotic, but really, he has so much personal flare it’s getting kind of boring. Everything’s clown-themed and random, but when everything’s random, it’s expected, if you know what I mean. So yeah, boring. Well, as boring as fighting an insane clown can be.

When we enter Old Gotham all chaos breaks loose, slamming into me like a train. The air reeks of fumes, both natural and unnatural. And yes, the smell of circus food gone rotten is very unnatural. The street echoes with the roaring of fire, the boom of fireworks, which light the sky overhead, and the screaming of people and laughing of clowns.

My ears ring even in my helmet, the mufflers doing nothing to keep out the unholy din. Oh boy, it’s going to be one of those nights. People run away on foot, packing the streets, running into buildings, and even breaking in windows to get inside. They slam into me, knocking my

elbows and smacking my face. I mean, I can't blame them but also—
rude.

Glitter and purple and green confetti fall like snow, my tires
kicking it up in drifts, sending little cyclones of the stuff into the crowd.
It flies in my face, covering the visor of my helmet with the horrible
glittery mess. Not glitter. Why glitter?

I hate glitter.

“Stop here.” I can barely hear Batman, even when he speaks
right into my ear. The dark form of a caped knight leaps from the
Batmobile and disappears into the sky. Well, that goes without saying. I
mean, you can't really ride through a tidal wave of panicked pedestrians
and expect to come out in one piece.

I pull my bike to a stop, leaping off and letting my helmet drop to
the ground, a shower of sparkles landing on my shoulders. Aw man!
Alfred's going to have a field day in the laundry room tomorrow.

I pull out my grappling hook, and in seconds, I'm flying over the
heads of the crowd after Batman, my cape billowing behind me like a
bird's wings. I open my mouth to say something, but instead of spitting
out quips, I spew out crape paper.

Below us Joker's goons round people up and put them in little bleachers like you'd find at a high school football game. I count four of the things, but that's not the problem. They have hostages, and that always complicates things. Around us, buildings burn, which explains the smoke and the smell, and the fireworks still explode overhead, rocking the sky and painting the hundreds of windows in a myriad of colors. I'm glad my mask filters out things like smoke because I don't really want to smash into a window because of stinging, smarting eyes.

In the middle of it all, one steady part in all this pandemonium stands an enormous stage behind a giant Jack in the Box. I know, right? Balloon arches run across the whole thing, waving green, purple, and white. Where does he get all this stuff, and how does he have time to set it up hours after a prison break? Seriously, is there a villain shopping mall or something?

At first glance, you'd think it was some sort of festival, with people crowded at the base of the stage, clawing to meet the celebrity, having a good time. But this is Gotham. And this is the Joker. In reality, all of the 'guests' clamber to get away, pushing and shoving, a mosh pit of people, their screams and panicked shouts mixed with maniacal

laughter and the blare of music coming from three booming speakers, the off-tune song so screechy I can't tell what it's supposed to be anymore.

Yup, this is an Arkham night, alright.

Spotlights dance, catching us in their glow and a string of maniac cackling sends the hair on my neck standing on end, welcoming me to the party. There he stands in the middle of it all, arms spread wide, dressed in a purple suit, a flower on his lapel, his thin tie striped yellow and orange, a silver chain dangling at his waist. I'd recognize that chalk-white skin and head of bright green hair anywhere. I mean, it's not exactly subtle.

“AHAHAHAHAHA!” That's a laugh that'll give you nightmares. I don't really know how to describe it. It rakes at your ears, screeching like fingers on a chalkboard... it sends your mind ringing with alarm bells. “Oh, here come the Big Bad Bat and Little Birdy! What a time to play!” Joker's voice still slides from low to high like a teen in puberty, or you know, like mine does sometimes, I guess, but worse, and I have a stinking suspicion that he does it on purpose.

I whip my grappling hook back, retracting the line as I plummet the rest of the way to the stage, the wind whipping through my hair, the ground rushing up to meet me.

Smack!

Both feet slam into a goon's shoulders, sending him crashing to the stage. I use his body as a springboard, sliding my bō staff out of my utility belt as I flip, letting it click into place, landing in a crouch on the stage, my gloves gripping the rough wood. A *woosh* behind me signals that the Bat of the hour has arrived, looming over me, watching my back.

“Oh ho ho! Welcome, welcome! Bat and Birdy!” I lock onto the Joker’s face, my masked eyes narrowing. I don't think I’ll ever be able to forget that smile. That smile pushing way too close to his eyes, stretching his cheeks, painted bright ruby red over yellow teeth that bare like fangs. Not a friendly smile. Not a ‘nice to meet you’ kind of smile. It’s permanent and so, so wrong.

Bloodshot eyes soak us in with such glee you’d almost think this was a game to the Joker, and it might as well be if not for the hostages and burning buildings and goons with weapons ranging from bats to broomsticks. Very original, really.

“You know, this is getting kinda old, Jokester.” I stand and twirl my staff, falling into a ready stance, my muscles tensing to spring. I mean, it is. When I was first Robin, every Joker fight was new and chaotic. Scary and exhilarating all at the same time. Now? Meh. “I mean, a party? Lame. What happened to all the A-material?”

“Your Boy Blunder is back, Batsy! How wonderful! I certainly missed having my bright little nephew squeaking and bopping around!” Joker ignores me, sort of. I barely catch that look of pure unbridled rage and loathing that zips through his red-rimmed eyes and is gone in a flash as he claps his hands like a kid in a candy store. But it was there. Really, he’s never forgiven me for existing.

Joker stretches his arms as if he's basking in the glow of the apartment building blazing behind him, soaking up the warmth as casually as if it was a campfire. He might be enjoying this, but all I see are the people in danger around us. My mind starts churning, but I keep my eyes fixed on Joker. You never know with him. Anything could happen at any time. “And here I had thought he’d gone and died, and we had you all to ourselves again! So sad! That would have been such a great joke! Such a shame! Eh he he!!”

“Naw—” I start moving closer to the edge of the stage, Batman swapping places with me, skulking forward without a word. Typical Batman. “You can't get rid of me that easily, Clowny!”

“AHAHAHAHAHAHA!!” Joker throws back his head when he laughs as if he could care less that we are here, ready to take him out like we always do. He waves me away as if I'm not even here. Well, how

rude. “Our little Birdie Boy always did take after me, didn't he, Batsy? A tiny little Joker Junior.”

Me? Take after him? Well, I guess I am the funny one in the Dynamic Duo— oh, I do really like that name!

“**Robin.**” Batman doesn't look at me; he doesn't have to. That one word is enough. I know exactly what he means.

While Batman and Joker race at each other to engage, Batman with purpose and speed, Joker weaving around like a drunk pelican, laughing like a hyena, I dash off to deal with the goons. Ah, the life of a partner. From detailing the Batmobile to mopping the floor with goons, you always get dull jobs.

I flip and kick, slamming into lackey after lackey with my bō staff, battering them away, delivering quick knocks to the temple, you know, all that good stuff to take them out fast and hard.

And, of course, as I fight, I chatter, my tongue flapping without a filter. “Oh, Jokester better pay you extra to dress like that!” I laugh, sliding under a punch that would've broken my collarbone, slamming my boot into a colossal dude's face, and probably knocking out a few teeth. I mean, really, who'd sign on to paint their face in clown makeup and wear

a frilly costume? Well, at least the clowns at the circus get well paid and fed. These guys just get beat up by yours truly.

“Does the job come with good dental insurance? I sure hope so.”

Bam! I knock another guy out, delivering a double-flying kick to his head. He goes stumbling, smacking into another dude. “Oh, that looks like it really hurt. Need some bandages and kisses for your boo-boos?”

“Shut up, Runt!” One guy with a white polka dot clown shirt billowing over ripped jeans looms in front of me, his face so serious under his smeared clown makeup that I can’t help myself.

I lose it. I know laughing is the Joker’s thing, but really, how could I not? My cackle cuts through the orchestra of noise, the goon’s face blazing beet red under his paint. “Oh, buddy, I hope you don’t go shopping like that!”

“I said, shut up!” The guy lunges for me, but I’m already gone, launching back, then leaping forward.

“I. Don’t. Do. Quiet.” I duck under each clumsy swing of his beefy arms, throwing in quick jabs of my fists into his squishy gut. He’s like a living, moving punching bag. “All of you should know that by now.”

I do a few handsprings back, then take a running start right at him. He gets ready to punch my face and break my nose, but I'm already gone, soaring over his head. I twist in mid-air and grab his shoulders. Really, it's like doing a routine on the uneven bars.

Smack! The heels of my boots drive into his shoulder blades, and I push off, throwing all my weight into him, kicking back. I fly up, and he crashes down, face planting into the confetti-covered asphalt.

“And that—“ I land in a slide, snapping my bō staff out to catch a goon in the stomach before he can hit me over the head with a baseball bat, “Is what I call a win-win.”

Do they know what I'm talking about? Eh, probably not. Do I care? Nope. I give the stage a quick once over. Batman and Joker are fighting, Joker with knives and squirt guns and— is that a crowbar?— and Batman with his fists, batarangs, and feet.

Well, since he has that handled... I move on to the hostages on the ground and trapped in the bleachers, unwilling spectators to our crazy little show. And, since I can't seem to keep my mouth shut, I keep talking. Maybe they should call me the jabber jay instead of Robin. “So, is this supposed to be a play?” I scoff loud enough for Joker to hear, my

voice scratching at the strain, crashing into goons as I go. “Because if it is, I would like an intermission right about now! Oh, and snacks!”

Even as I chatter, my mind whirls, assessing. If I can get the guards away from the stands, the people can make a run for it and get away from this insanity and to normal Gotham, not that that’s much better.

So I throw myself into the chaos. The screams, laughter, the booms of fireworks, and the crackle of house fires send my ears into panic mode, my head pounding, my jaw aching with the noise. It’s hot, the air sweltering, beginning to pop the balloons— *oh no*—

Because Joker just had to pump those things full of something other than air. A green gas starts to spread, drifting down from above like a poisonous blanket, descending on the crowd like doomsday.

Not Joker Venom. Of course, it has to be Joker Venom. Oh, come on!

“Robin! Clear!” I don’t even need to hear Batman’s shout. I already have my gas mask on, breathing in the fresh, filtered air. But not everyone has that privilege, namely poor innocent civilians. And I suspect no one wants a permanent smile and to laugh themselves into misery tonight.

“Go! Move it, people! No pushing, no shoving— watch your step, Sir, and no elbowing.” I slam my fist into a goon’s temple, my voice snapping the panicking crowd into action. They scramble over each other, not really listening to me, but as long as they’re moving and moving away from our impending doom. That’s good enough for me. “Keep moving, keep moving, *vamos*, let’s go, people, let’s go!”

I sigh as I land a kick into the last goon in this section, scanning the stands for any stragglers. Everyone’s gone, blowing past me like a herd of wildebeests. The first set of bleachers is clear.

I wave my staff at the people on the others like a traffic guard, motioning for them to leave, to keep going. They stampede forward, practically falling down the steps, slamming into the metal railing. It’s hard to see their faces, eyes so wide and panicked, skin pale. Children are the worst. Most of them stumble and are ping-ponged by the oblivious adults, some staying put, screaming for their mothers. My heart clenches in my chest, blood rushing to my ears. No one can ever get used to this.

Because this is no joking matter.

I catch a poor young woman to keep her from bashing out her brains on a street lamp and rush over to help a mother who's desperately trying to keep her kids with her, pulling the tiny tykes into my arms,

pressing their hands into hers and scooping up a couple myself. “Up we go, little birdies.” I keep my voice cheerful, trying to soothe their screaming wails and distract them from the chaos. “We’re going for a run!”

One glance at the two-year-old girl cradled in my arms is enough to send adrenaline pounding through my veins, shooting into my heart and pattering into a frantic drone. One thing repeats over and over in my head.

Protect, protect, protect. This is why we fight. Protect.

“Everyone, keep your heads and arms away from the gas, please; there you go, Sir— Ma’am.” My hair sticks to my forehead, the autumn chill evaporating in the middle of this writhing mass of bodies. I gently push a young man forward; he can’t be much older than I am but turn at the pounding of footsteps and the angry shouts of an approaching gang of lackeys. I quickly hand off the kids to some adults that actually have the situational awareness to help; I’m not about to dive into a fight with my arms full of kids, okay?- before elbowing my way through the crowd, pushing through, ducking under legs, limbs battering my sides, whacking me in the face.

I mean, I don't blame them, but also, ouch. When I clear the crowd, I snap my bō staff back out, the metal pole extending to its full length, and rush to meet the incoming horde. Two more bleachers. I have to free two more bleachers before the gas gets to us. A clock begins to tick in my head, or maybe that's the sound of the speakers fizzing and crackling.

One, two— *Smack!* I launch into the goons, twirling my bō like I'm in the color guard or something. Three, four— *Whack!* I duck under a sweeping blow from a broom, pun intended, of course, that would've given me a nice goose egg. "Wow! Do you guys have good benefits or somethin'? What's the draw?" I let my mouth go, my eyes darting from the stage where Batman's lost in the oncoming storm to the goons, the people on the bleachers, and the people fleeing behind me. Five, six— *Wham!* "Oof! Excuse me, but have you ever heard about personal space?" I'm grabbed by two guys, another getting ready to give a good solid kick to my face. I whip my legs up, slamming into him, then twist up further, launching my legs in a split kick. The world whirls, and I roll on the ground, popping up into a run. "I guess not! Sorry about that!"

Seven, eight—

Pop!

Oh no—

Pop, pop, pop!

More balloons are gone. More clouds of gas roll toward me, sending the clock ticking faster, though my heart seems to stop in my chest. *Oh no— no, no, no!*

Not enough time, not enough time! But I have to make it enough. Failure is not acceptable, especially when lives are on the line. I grit my teeth and push my legs faster. I don't allow my breath to hitch. I don't allow myself to feel the bruises, the blistering heat from the fires, or the pounding in my head.

I can't.

“This is the worst homecoming party EVER, Joker!” I howl through the thrumming, scraping noise, ignoring the splitting pain in my head, slamming into the oncoming goons, my bō staff knocking them to the side like bowling pins. No time to bother even making sure they're out. No time. No time. “You are the worst party planner in the history of party planners! Besides, I thought I was your favorite nephew! Whatever happened to a quiet night out on the town?”

The people are beginning to move on their own, a sea of humanity rolling over the stands. They scream, they push, they shove.

But at this point? I still don't care. They need to get out. They need to get out now, and they know it.

“How rude of you!” I don’t know how I still hear the Joker’s maniac twitter above the chaos, but I don’t really care. “Uncle Jay needs to teach you some manners! Poor ol’ Batsy can't keep up with your discipline. You have grown up into such a naughty boy!”

Crack! I slam into a goon, ignoring the Joker. Really, I need manners? Ha! *Whomp!* I knock another clown-themed henchman off his feet. *Smack!* Two more down. “Me? Manners?” I laugh, my cackle too high-pitched. I don’t think I like it. “I’m not the one who let everyone come to the party! Really, there’s such a thing as RSVP.”

I ignore my burning arms; I don’t feel the sweat dripping down my face in sheets. All I see are the people— and the toxic cloud rolling toward them. “Everyone out!” I never thought my voice could be this deep, this commanding. Thank you, puberty! You finally did something right! “No pushing, no shoving! No tripping or falling. Go! Now!”

Surprisingly, they listen to me. While I batter the goons like they're giant pinatas, the citizens barrel through the streets like a herd of sheep, though some stay behind to help me, getting a few good licks in. Good for them.

The cloud creeps closer, trickling over the bleachers, swallowing the street, coming closer— closer, like fingers reaching towards us. I glance over at some of the people still running. Some are older, some younger, but all of them are going too slow. My heart stops in my chest, my breath catching. They aren't going to make it— no, I can't, I *won't*, accept that! I dash forward, tucking my shoulder under an older man's arm, scooping up an armful of wailing kids, and hiking a middle-aged woman with a limp onto my back and make a break for it, my feet stumbling over themselves, my eyes fixed on the empty street beyond the insanity, beyond this Arkham night.

The weight crushes my shoulders, but it doesn't feel real. *Nope, this isn't real. Just focus on the street ahead. Tick tock! Running out of time. Focus, focus! Babs has a crush on you, and you like her back.*

What? Did you think the crazy clown, a cloud of toxic gas, house fires, fireworks, impending doom, and screaming civilians would make me forget?

The *whoosh* of gas racing towards us taunts me, the cool relief sending the hairs on the back of my neck and my arms prickling, even as heavy, smoldering bodies press close.

Too close, too close, Tick tock—!

A long sigh escapes my lips when I clear the block and meet up with the rest of the freed hostages, reuniting the kids with frantic parents, letting the older folks find their family or friends, and getting the injured sitting down and comfortable. Sirens blare, and lights flash. My job here is done. But the night isn't over yet.

Still, I nod and allow people to hug me, slap me on the back, and, yes, even snap a few pictures. I smile and crack jokes, ignoring the pain or how cold and hot it is all at once. All I can think about is that these people are safe and sound, and gosh, what a story they'll get to tell at work tomorrow.

But now it's time to go back to my own job. Kicking butt and taking names. Or, you know, helping Batman totally make a joke out of the Joker. "It was a bucket of laughs, everyone, but I need to get back." I give a two-fingered salute, acknowledging their thanks and cheers before turning and running back the way I came, right into the thick green haze of Joker Venom.

Really, they don't have to say thank you. I'm not in this for the praise, but honestly? The look some of those kids gave me, that wide eyes wonder— Well, accept no substitutes.

The world inside the cloud of gas is alien, the haze casting everything in a sick green, moving and shifting, stirring with every breath, every step I take. Forced crazed laughter comes from everywhere. The goons I took down twitch on the ground, their lips stretched into permanent smiles, tears rolling from their panicked eyes. I ignore the rock that settles on my chest, pressing and weighing me down. There's a cure— but if this is the deadly version of this, then— I shake my head and keep going, my feet pounding through drifts of confetti, my bō staff out and ready.

Batman and Joker still fight on the stage, duking it out. Now, you might be wondering how Joker can last this long against Batman. I mean, he's Batman, the really 'super man' because he's, like, a one-man army. And really? I don't actually know.

I catapult onto the stage, landing in a silent thump, racing towards the two. And let me tell you, you think the Joker's crazy already? Well, just add some Joker Venom in the mix, and he's as loopy as a rubber chicken.

“The Brat Bird is here! Birdy, Birdy! Flaps his little wings!” His voice still slides through his laughs, though it's several notches too high

than should be humanly possible. His eyes glint red in the fog, peering at me from behind a looming shadow that can only be one person.

“Darn right!” I launch myself into the fight, sliding under a mad swing of a crowbar, the metal whipping just inches above my nose, clipping my hair. “I couldn’t let you two go without me. I mean, I’m the life of the party!”

“You? AHAHAHAHA!” Joker smacks at Batman with a baseball bat, the blow landing on a waiting arm twisting in a movement only trained eyes can see, sending the weapon clattering away, rolling across the stage. Really, where does he hide all these things? In his jacket? Does he have a Joker utility belt? “What a funny thought! Don’t make me laugh.”

“You’re already laughing.” I land a kick on his back, sending him headlong into Batman. “Besides, who would be the life of the party if it isn’t me? You?” I snicker because I don’t think a downright cackle would sound good, especially with all that laughter already echoing down the street, pounding in my head. “Really? You’re such a snooze. A boring old fart.”

“Oh ho ho! You hear that, Batsy?” Joker yanks himself out of Batman’s grip, stumbling back, his eyes glinting dangerously, his hands

suddenly holding two knives. “The kiddy thinks his Uncle Jay’s overrated.”

My blood boils, my skin crawling at the sight of the shimmering silver blades. I come to stand close to Batman, keeping my eyes on Joker. Though the laughter still echoes around us, the street’s silent. Abandoned. No fireworks, no crackle of fires, even the speakers have finally died.

Shivers race down my back. I know that the police and firefighters are probably handling things outside this mad cloud but in here? A butterfly could flap its wings, and you could hear it.

“Your Boy Blunder thinks he’s all that. What a swollen head. I can cut it back down to size for you.” Joker tilts his head to the side, his eyes as wide as saucers, his teeth bared. He looks just like those creepy kids in horror movies, only he’s not a kid. My heart freezes in my chest.

“Mine’s swollen?” I make my first mistake, well, not my first and not my last, but a mistake nonetheless. “What about you?” I rest my bō staff on my shoulder, and though my muscles are ready for action, I’m the picture of calm, cool, and collected. “You’re so boring, Joker, but you still act like you’re the center of attention.”

“Manners.” Joker’s words aren’t light anymore, not playful. His voice deepens more than I’ve ever heard, his eyes locking onto mine, and if looks could kill, well... just put ‘He talked too much’ on my gravestone. “Really, Batsy, you let the kid go too far! It’s shameful!”

“Manners? Me?” I laugh, twirling my bō staff, ready to spring. I can see it in his eyes, and Batman does too. He tenses beside me but still says nothing, letting me do all the talking, as usual. “How long have we known each other, Jokester? Because you’d think you’d know that I don’t have manners. At least, not too not-nice people.”

Batman growls next to me, even though he doesn’t say a word. Then again, that growl’s something like, ‘stop talking, Robin, before you get yourself cut to ribbons.’

“Time for beddy-bye, Birdy.” Joker’s eyes light up with fire, and he charges. I get ready to lunge, my arms pull back for the swing and—

“Robin! You-hoo! Robin!” That voice doesn’t belong to a goon or a police officer, not even Harley Quinn, who sometimes joins her ‘*Puddin*’ for his nighttime strolls. No, this voice is high, girly, and way too sweet. Something that I heard recently, something... no... but that can’t be right. How is *she* here?

Before I realize what's happening, I trip. But Robin can't make mistakes. Robin can't because there are consequences. *CRACK!* I see spots. Something hard smacks me across the face, sending my head whipping back and me falling, my arms flailing.

“Robin!” Batman's voice is far away, a small buzz in the maelstrom.

Joker's laughter fills my ears like a hammer pounding into my skull. Pain lances through every nerve, telling me to sit down, to close my eyes, and take a nice long nap, but I'm on my feet, catching his next blow before it lands, even as I turn to look.

There she is at the bottom of the stage, her blue eyes wide and starry, her blonde hair brushing her shoulder in ringlets. She's dressed in all pink, which hurts my eyes, but that's not what I'm worried about.

“Kit— Hey, Lady!” I breeze past my mistake, but I can't help but cringe at the fact that I almost called Katherine Walker by her nickname, which would have been a disaster. A vigilante can't know some random girl who he's never met before in his life's name. That would a) be kinda creepy, although it probably would make her day, and b) would give me away as at least someone in her general circle. Yeah, a disaster waiting to happen.

I'm glad she's wearing a gas mask; how did she get her hands on that?— and didn't just race in here willy nilly, but still— why is she here? How is she here? I mean, did her parents just let her out on a Joker night?

“Robin, move!” I duck away from Joker, letting Batman slide between us, deflecting a slew of mad knife swipes from Joker, but his head turned to me, the white eyes of his mask narrowed. My stomach sinks, the Batglare broadcasting one thing. Mistakes are unacceptable.

“Focus.”

Well, now he talks. I grab my jaw and carefully pull at it. Agony blossoms under my fingers, but it's not dislocated. I flex my jaw and take a ready stance, giving Batman a firm nod. Eh, I've had worse.

“Excuse me!” Joker rounds on Batman behind me. His voice scrapes, clawing at my ears. “I'm the one you're fighting! Stop paying attention to the Blundering Bird Boy!”

“Get out of here!” I ignore Joker and whip my head back to Kitten, waving a hand at her like she's a lost puppy, which, with that face, she might's well be. “Go! It's not safe!”

“I mean, really, what does a guy have to do to get attention around here?” The Joker moves back towards me, trying to get past Batman. I

leap back into the fight, flying over Batman's head, landing two solid kicks on Joker's face, following it up with a solid bō staff to the stomach. Kitten doesn't listen to me. Really, why is she here?

“Oh! You're amazing, Robby-poo!” Wait... what? Excuse me? Hello? What did she just call me? Her voice assaults my ears even more than Joker's laugh that escapes his stretched lips again as a punch sails toward my temple. I duck just in time, but the blow I had aimed at his shoulder goes wide, barely grazing his arm.

Get it together, Dick! Focus!

“Oh! Look out!” Really, is she just going to comment on the entire fight? Right now? With the Joker? “Oh! Robin, to your left! Left!”

Wow. And I thought Babs was bad at pestering. I mean, really, can't a guy just do his job in peace over here?

“Look who has a tiny lady friend!” Joker cackles, his attacks doubling, speeding up, a knife to the face, and wild swipe at my back, a jab here, a punch there, a blur of purple, white and green. My mind blurs, my limbs moving on their own, catching blades, knocking him back, kicking him down. “Oh, Robby-bird, I'm so happy!” Joker wipes a non-existent tear from his mad, glinting eyes. “Look who's all grown up!”

“Well, at least mine showed up.” I hope this is almost over. I want it to be over. My jaw sings, my limbs ache, and my heart freezes every time Joker looks at Kitten. I mean, she may be obnoxious and creepy, but I don’t want anything to happen to her. “Where’s Harley ‘Unca Jay?’” I tease in the worst Brooklyn accent ever, ignoring the small round of applause and giggling from behind me.

Really, why did she think this was a good idea?

“Harley's having a girl's night out!” Joker waves a hand, ever smiling, ever laughing, even when he finally pulls out a gun and aims it at us, his finger twitching over the trigger. I freeze, letting my legs tense. “You know women.”

“Oh, Robin, look out!” *BANG!* I turn to leap out of the way, but not in time, Kitten’s voice breaking through my concentration, probably what Joker planned. I’m dead— I’m dead—

A hand grabs the back of my cape and yanks, sending me stumbling back safely out of the bullet’s path as it sings through the air.

Crack!

Mistake... I could’ve died. Some number one fan Kitten is.

I can’t help the long sigh that escapes my lips as Batman lands a solid one on the Joker’s jaw. One, I have been avenged. And two, it’s

finally over. The gun clatters onto the stage, quickly followed by Joker, who lands in a rumbled heap, his eyes still open, his smile stretching wider than humanly possible.

I don't move in to help Batman. I don't have to. He's already secured Joker and thrown him over his shoulder, not even bothering to look at me. I slide my bō staff back into my utility belt, my fists clenched. Everything might have turned out all right, but it wasn't perfect. I broke my rule.

Batman had to save me. Something churns in my stomach that I can't put my finger on. It's definitely not nausea, but it's something like it. Something that makes me sick. So I follow Batman off the stage, trying to ignore the little shadow I picked up along the way.

“Oh wow, that was amazing!” Kitten's voice bobs after me, her bright pink jacket sticking out like a flamingo in a flock of ducks. She presses close to me, too close for comfort, hovering right at my shoulder. I try to walk faster, but she keeps pace, her designer boots clicking on the blacktop. Really, not even Babs does this to Batman. She hasn't even met him yet! “He was like BAM, and you were like ‘Not today!’ POW!” She breaks into giggles even after we clear the Joker Venom.

I blink rapidly, adjusting my eyes to the soft twinkle of the streetlamps and the harsh strobing glare of the emergency vehicles just behind the roadblock, the Arkham Asylum van waiting for us, stretcher, sedatives, and a straightjacket ready for our resident clown.

I let out a long breath at the sight of people wrapped in blankets, sipping something nice and hot from thermoses, families back together, receiving what medical attention they need. A weight lifts off my chest, but it doesn't relieve that churning in my stomach. Not even when a team moves past us and back into the danger zone, most likely to gather the infected goons.

“Commissioner.” I didn't even notice Commissioner Gordon walking up to us, his tan jacket fluttering in the light breeze, his eyes twinkling behind his spectacles, his not-quite-red bushy mustache twitching over his lips.

“Batman, Robin,” The Commish nods to me, though I can see him scanning my face and arms, searching for injuries. Really, it's a bad habit of his. “A good night's work, as usual.”

“You know us, Commish!” I pull off my gas mask, taking in a deep breath of good, polluted Gotham air. Ah, no place like home. “We had this in the bag! Oh, and happy anniversary!” I elbow Batman, even

though he still doesn't look at me. "Ol' Bats lost our invitations. Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it." Gordon laughs, his hands finding his pockets. The Arkham people come forward and take the Joker from Batman, strapping him into a straightjacket and locking him onto a stretcher. More weight lifts off my chest as he's wheeled away, back to where he belongs. The Commish keeps going, unphased by any of this. As I said, here in Gotham? We're all kinda crazy. I mean, who wants to live in a place where mad clowns from horror films attack every other night? "Besides, I would always feel better knowing that you both are patrolling the streets, keeping Gotham safe."

I do my best not to cringe. We were at his party; we weren't patrolling the streets. But he can never know that.

"Commissioner." Batman's hand is suddenly on Kitten's shoulder. I jump. She was standing right next to me the entire time, staring right at my face. I turn to her, our noses so close that I could move an inch and bump into her. My lips twist into a sheepish smile, and I step away, rubbing at my neck. Really, why me? **"Take this young lady home and make sure to tell her parents that she willingly ran into danger."**

“So sorry!” Kitten gushes, yanking off her gas mask to reveal the rest of her face, her lips pulled into a bright, glossy red smile, her teeth too white. “But I just wanted to see my hero Robin in action!”

Her eyes lock onto mine and search them as if the next greatest novel is stored in my mask. Really, why me? Robin doesn’t need stalkers. “Here.” She shoves something into my hands, even as Batman pulls her away, a low growl building up in his throat, barely carrying through the noise of the crowd in front of us. “Come to Homecoming with me!”

Then, she’s gone, leaving me standing with a flyer held in my limp hands, my mouth hitting the pavement. She really did it. She wasn’t kidding. I glance down at the paper in my hands. It’s a flyer for Gotham Academy Homecoming... complete with her address written in sparkly pink ink.

“**Cave.**” Batman’s next to me again. “**Now.**”

My stomach plummets more. Oh no... I’m in so much trouble. I’m grounded... well, maybe. It’s hard to tell with Batman. I’m so wrapped up with the flyer in my hands, with the hidden anger in Batman’s voice, that I don’t notice bloodshot eyes staring right at me.

Calculating.

CHAPTER SIX

WHY DO I EVEN BOTHER?

Batman doesn't speak until we get to the cave. I know he doesn't talk that much anyway, so you are probably like, 'but Dick, what's the big deal?' And to be honest? I don't really know. There's something in the silence, a brooding, a seething. Something boiling under the surface like this sick feeling in my stomach. Something pounds into me, wave after wave, smacking me down, reminding me that I messed up.

That I broke my rule.

Never have Batman save you. Well, that one's out the window. Twice in one night. Talk about a new world record.

One part of me runs through every moment of tonight, wishing that I hadn't paid Kitten the time of day, scolding me for getting hit, chiding myself for letting the Joker get too close. The other part says something else. That it was only one hit, that I was trying to keep her safe, and for a mistake I could've made, you know, out of leaving people to get trapped in Joker Venom or hurt by goons or even killed, getting hit in the face and Batman having to step in to watch my back wasn't so bad.

Is this my first mistake? Of course not. I've gotten hit before, hurt. I mean, mistakes can be deadly, but this one wasn't. He shouldn't be mad; I mean, we got Joker, didn't we? More than that, everyone came out safe and sound, if not traumatized. Then again, this is Gotham, so take that as you will. And the more I think about that, the more the stew boils in my stomach. I mean, I saved them, didn't I? Everyone is safe and sound, alive with their families, and Joker is where he belongs. I followed the procedures to the letter. I took out an army of goons and freed hundreds of people.

So what if I got a little distracted by Kitten? I mean, who wouldn't get thrown off guard when a crazy fangirl starts commentating on the entire fight like one of those sports guys on gameday?

My mind drifts to this summer, back when I was the one in charge of operations. When I was the leader of a team. I never got on them for mistakes, at least not small ones. Especially when the team is there to watch each other's backs like Batman does for me. It builds character, and trust between members. I mean, if they always did their jobs perfectly, they would start taking each other for granted. Besides, getting punched isn't serious... It's not. And as for the gun— well, Batman was there. What else are partners for?

I just wish he thought so. As soon as I pull into the cave, the blue lights cold and welcoming, bats screeching at us in greeting overhead, I whack the kickstand of my R-cycle to prop it in its tiny little parking ring and pull off my helmet, running a hand through my glittery, stringy hair. But as I set my helmet onto my bike's seat, he's there, accompanied by the slamming of the Batmobile's door and the stomping of heavy footsteps. No more stalking as quiet as a mouse, I suppose.

“What was that?” I turn to him, a vast, imposing statue looming over me, his lips pressed in a deep frown, his steely eyes narrowed. And yes, *his* eyes. Batman is gone, Bruce free from his cowl, his chiseled features drawn, his hair clean but as messy as mine, not that I'd ever laugh at him.

His voice cuts. It sends my stomach boiling like a pot of noodles, heat surging into my cheeks. “That was a girl from school.” I force my voice to be light, and relaxed, pulling the corners of my lips into a smile. “She's kinda obsessed with Robin.” I pull off my mask, leaving my eyes vulnerable to scrutiny.

“You were sloppy.” The Bruce that teased me and encouraged me about Babs earlier today is gone, replaced by someone always there underneath the surface. Cold, demanding, his muscular arms crossed over

his chest. He may not have his mask on, but he's every inch the Batman.

“You almost got shot.”

“But I didn’t.” I dare to meet his eyes. Really, I don’t argue with him. I don’t. But sometimes, it’s ridiculous. Why is he getting on me? I already know what I did. He doesn’t have to look at me like that. He doesn’t have to rub it in or make a big deal out of it. “I knew you were there, and I knew you had my—“

“That’s no excuse.” Bruce’s voice slices through mine, cleaving my sentence in two. “You can’t leave yourself vulnerable like that.” His eyes narrow, his mouth not moving from that frown. “It is unacceptable. You cannot get distracted. You cannot make mistakes.”

“I know, but—” My face burns like a house fire, something ticking right under my eye, but I force the churning to stay down, for my words to be even, calm. That’s what I am. Calm, cool, collected— but why can’t he see what I do right for once? That I saved all those people, that things actually worked out in the end? That... well, I can actually do my job better than most?

Bruce interprets again. He’s a mountain, unmovable, unstoppable. “When you are distracted, you put yourself and those around you at risk.

You could have been killed. You could have gotten us both killed. You put our team at risk.”

“It was just one hit.” My head is like a balloon on a string, bobbing, trying to float away. Something burns in my eyes, trying to get out. Why is it such a big deal? I’m not perfect. I mean, no one is. But I’m pretty gosh darn close! “And I know you can take care of yourself— I was relying on you to—“

“You cannot assume anything.” Bruce takes a step forward. I don’t flinch. I refuse to flinch— but the look on his face... I might’s well have gotten someone killed. But really, it was just one hit! And he had my back! Can’t I rely on him to have my back? If you always look out for yourself, how does that work in a team? “If you cannot pull your own weight, what is the point of you being out there with me?”

Joker might’ve missed, but Bruce might’s well have just shot me point blank in the heart. It aches; it thunders and races in my chest. My temples pound with the rhythm, my fingers shaking. I clamp my mouth shut. How *dare* he? I watch his back all the time! Every night I make sure that he doesn’t have to worry about a thing, that he can focus on the mission. And then he—

“Is this how you led your own team?” My eyes widen, ticking even faster. I force them to relax, to be normal. I bite my lip hard, my eyes burning, hurting. I clench my hands into fists but refuse to look away or down. After all this time, this is the first time he’s mentioned my team. And... and...

My stomach lurches, bile surging into my throat. How dare he? He’s the one who let me go in the first place! Why bother if he didn’t trust me enough to do a good job? He should know I can handle it! I can handle it! I mean, I did! Just ask the papers or the rest of the Justice League, you know, the people who actually tell me I did a good job?

“Did you assume? Did you put them in danger?” Bruce takes another step forward. Too close, too close... my fists tremble, something copper leaks from my lips as my teeth dig in, clamping down hard to keep them from shaking. “Is that how you led them? Recklessly?”

Recklessly? Who does he think I am? My temples pound, my knees shake, and I make a huge mistake. I try to open my mouth again. “Of course not!” My voice wavers. It sounds so far away, alien. “I would never—”

“You don’t make mistakes around the Joker.” Bruce’s eyes snap. I look right up at him as he stands just a foot away. I might’ve grown since

we first met, but I'm barely to his shoulder still. I shrink under his gaze, even as I try to stand taller, straighter. "We're done here."

"Bruce—" I try to reach for him as he brushes past me, my fingers trembling. He can't just— why does he have to—

"I said we're done." He doesn't stop. The pounding of his boots echoes in the Batcave, mocking me. Leaving me. There's the sound of kevlar and cloth, then the *whoosh* of the elevator, and I'm alone. Or so I think.

"I can't believe him." I want to scream, to shout, to throw something. Instead, my words come out in a mutter, my hands wringing my utility belt. "I mean, it wasn't that big of a—"

"Ahem." Someone clears their throat. I don't jump, thank goodness, that would be embarrassing, but I whip my head up at the noise, my hand gripping my bō staff, ready to swing. Alfred stands by the pole leading to the top level of the Batcave, hands clasped in front of him, suit pressed as always.

Was he standing there the entire time? Did he hear all of that?

"Alf... Did you hear—?"

"Every word, Master Dick." I sigh and stumble toward him, my feet suddenly heavy, my head singing. Finally, the adrenaline's gone, and

the agony in my arms, legs, and jaw sing, hitting me like Bane on a rampage. I reach Alfred, holding one arm, my shoulders slumping. In front of Bruce, I was tall and proud, a hero. Now? Well, now I'm just me. Dick Grayson. The young man who's still a dumb, inexperienced kid in Bruce's eyes. "Do not fret," Alfred's arm loops behind my shoulders, firm, comforting. I blink rapidly, teetering on my feet, my mind so heavy that it's a miracle I'm standing at all. Alfred's brows press together as he leads me to the pole, whisking us to the upper level, "Master Bruce was simply on edge."

"Oh yeah?" My laugh is dry, and humorless as Alfred helps me out of my Robin suit and onto the medical table next to the analyzing station. "Well, he has a funny way of showing it." I wince as Alfred grabs my jaw, rubbing some soft, cool cream onto the forming bruise. It tingles, dulling the pain, but it doesn't take it away. I want to say more to Alfred, but... well, what would I say?

That Bruce is a jerk? That he has a horrible way of showing that he's proud of me? That he can't let me catch even a little break? I mean, I could say something... but honestly, all I can see Alfred saying are excuses. Bruce was on edge. So? What does that have to do with anything? Why can't the Bruce I talked to about Babs be around all the

time? You know, the one who cares? The one who relates to me, who actually has human empathy? I'd even take fake showboat Bruce over what I just got.

And seriously, why can't he trust me to do my job? It's not like I'm still a newbie hero, twelve years old and green. I mean, it's almost like he trusts me less now. Was it something I did? Something I said? Did I mess something up in Jump that I didn't even realize?

My mind whirls so much I don't even feel Alfred wrapping cuts and rubbing cream on bruises, his gloved hands steady, practiced. All I see is what I did on that stage—and Bruce's narrowed, disapproving eyes. He should know I can handle it. He should know that I'm ready. Didn't he say so himself?

I don't even notice Alfred helping me into a plain white T-shirt, barely feeling the soft cotton rubbing on my skin, and the light flannel pants protecting my legs from the chill of the cave.

What if Bruce grounds me? How would that look to the Teen Titans, seeing their leader off the streets because he wasn't good enough? What would the Justice League think?

Alfred's hands are phantoms as he helps me off the table, my bare feet shying away from the icy stone of the Batcave floor. We start

walking, but all I see are the Joker's red eyes and hear Kitten's delighted twitter.

I can't blame her; I mean, I could if I wanted to, but I won't. I just hope she doesn't do it again and leaves Robin alone. I mean, what does she expect? For Robin to actually come to Homecoming with her? Could you imagine me bringing that up with Batman? Especially after tonight?

"Here we are, Master Dick." I shake my head slowly and look up. The manor's softly lit halls passed by in a blurred dream, each twist and turn as lost as my wandering mind. My room waits in front of me, cleaned and welcoming. Dark and quiet. Finally, peace. For once, silence is the most welcoming thing in the whole world, even more than last night after the party. Because Joker parties are always way louder than normal-person parties.

I close my eyes and nod slowly, a sigh escaping my lips, lost in the halls. Alfred is the best. Have I said that before? Well, I can't say it enough.

"G'night, Alfred." I catch the doorway with a hand, pulling myself forward, my feet feeling like someone attached boulders to each of them. I know Alfred would be more than happy to get me situated for

the night, you know, the grownup version of tucking me into bed? But the man needs sleep too.

“Goodnight, Master Dick. Sweet Dreams.” Alfred doesn’t walk away. I turn to him, trying my best to keep my eyes open, despite the horrible hammers taking turns banging against my brain. “Master Dick...”

“Yes?” I’m expecting him to say something like, ‘Master Bruce means well,’ or ‘He really is proud of you, Master Dick,’ or even ‘Do not judge him too harshly, Master Dick. He was simply venting.’ But no. For once in all history, Alfred opens his mouth, but then his eyes soften, his hands move behind his back, and his mouth closes. We stand there for a while, but I don’t think I recognize that look in his eyes. The normal affection he has is there, but there’s something else. Something that doesn’t belong.

Sadness.

“Nevermind.” Alfred bows to me, sharp and curt, but that look doesn’t leave his eyes. Something churns in my stomach, other than the horrible feeling that stewed when Bruce scolded me. But again, I don’t quite know what it is. “Goodnight.”

Before I can ask what he wanted to say, he's gone, his quick, short strides taking him down the hall in a blink until he turns a corner and disappears into the Manor. I wonder if he's going to talk to Bruce. Maybe. Maybe he'll smooth things over between us, telling Bruce the things I would never dare. How does Alfred do it?

I stumble into my bedroom, not bothering to do anything other than collapse into bed, worming my way under the covers, burying my aching head into the pillow. Though my shoulders relax and the pain ebbs, that feeling doesn't go away. This sick feeling... what is it?

I roll to the side and glance up at the windows, my eyes drinking in the soft sliver of moonlight shining down on me. I don't want to think about tonight anymore. What's the point? Bruce got his last word in; there's nothing more to say.

So I ignore the feeling that stews, that nudges my mind, whispers into my ear, and instead think about tomorrow. The day when I am going to apologize to Babs, ask her to Homecoming, and... then what?

I turn onto my back, letting my arm flop over my face, a small groan escaping my lips. I really don't want things to be weird between us. I don't want it to be awkward, like how I've been around her lately. I

want things... well, to be normal. Maybe if I get this whole thing off my chest, it will be.

But... how will I say it? How do you ask someone, a friend, who you like to be your date to a dance? I should've asked Bruce. But now... well... I snuggle against my pillow, pulling my knees to my chest. I'm usually good with words, I mean, they just come out, and people laugh and... but... this is Babs. And if I mess this up...

Before I know it, thinking of Babs turns to thinking of what I can get her to make up for our... well, not-quite-fight. And, in the middle of thinking about what I can grab from the Batcave to give Babs, what?— Bruce himself gave me permission!— I'm lost in a dream.

I'm back in front of that run-down building. Only this time, I can see the mildew and mold, the plants growing up around and in through the splintering, crumbling boards, choking it. The fog swirls around me, sending shivers up and down my spine. The doors bang, swinging on rusted, bent hinges, dejected and abandoned, revealing the inky blackness of nothingness within the building.

I can move. I step forward, though, toward the building. Something echoes around me, the poor tinkling of an out-of-tune music box winding down, droning on but not stopping. Never stopping. My

hand reaches toward the door— the voices come, singing all around me, slow, methodic, echoing.

“Hush, little baby, don't say a word. Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird,” Then another song, singing back, trickling down my neck. My hand lands on the door, the wood crumbling, creaking under my fingertips. *‘All around the cobbler's house, The monkey chased the people. And after them, in double haste, Pop! goes the weasel.’*

I step into the darkness of the warehouse, an icy chill waiting for me like I just stepped into a freezer. My breath puffs in the air, sending white into the abyss. The voices grow louder. Something's close to me, the scritch of nails on the dirt under my feet, the creak of boards.

‘And if that mockingbird don't sing, Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring,’ I take another step forward, my hands out, feeling around in the darkness. What am I looking for? Behind me, the music box clicks out its song, the voices crooning behind me. *‘A penny for a spool of thread, Another for a needle, That's the way the money goes— Pop! Goes the weasel!’*

I search, stepping forward, with feet scuffling behind me. Someone breathes close but never shows themselves in the darkness. It may be horrible, but it's a dream... a dream...

'And if that diamond ring is brass. Papa's gonna buy you a looking glass,' My hand touches something. Something frigid, stiff, but familiar... I grasp a hand, my fingers entangling with theirs. It doesn't move, not a twitch, not a sound. *'All around the mulberry bush, The monkey chased the weasel, The monkey thought it was all in good fun, Pop! goes the weasel.'*

The voice is right in my ear, whispering, the songs churning something inside. Something... something... Then someone whispers. "So... he really doesn't trust you, does he, Champ?"

I turn, but I see nothing. The voice echoes around me. It laughs, even as the other voice sings softly, a whisper, a memory. So close... so close...

'Why do you stand it?'

No... no! This is a dream, a dream, a dream. This isn't real... but the laughter is so tangible I could reach out and touch it. It rakes; it claws. It hurts.

'And if that looking glass gets broke, Papa's gonna buy you a billy goat.'

'You will never meet his standards... never.'

Not true... not true....

'A penny for a spool of thread, A penny for a needle, That's the way the money goes, Pop! goes the weasel.'

'He will turn you away.' Hands settle on my shoulders. They grip, the pinch, they bruise. So heavy... so familiar... I shake my head. Those words... can't be true. Bruce still loves me. He took me in... He made me Robin... didn't he?

'And if that billy goat don't pull, Papa's gonna buy you a cart and bull.'

'You keep believing that... Dick.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I GET MY FIRST DATE, SORT OF

I break into a run, building up speed. *One, two, three*— I launch into a string of handsprings, pushing off the board, building height, landing on the platform, and— my hands push off, propelling me into the air. I tug my arms in and twist like a top, flipping through the air, falling down—

My feet hit the mat. I fling my arms up and out, even though no one's watching. "And he sticks the landing!" My voice echoes through the empty gym, bouncing off the equipment.

With a small smirk, I hop off the pads, snatch my towel from my bag, and wipe the sweat beading on my forehead and clinging to my neck. The dream from last night woke me up too early, and by too early, I mean only two hours after I fell asleep, which was at one o'clock in the morning already. Bruce might sleep in until three o'clock in the afternoon, but Dick Grayson gets up stupidly early. Sleep? What's sleep? Who needs sleep?

But I can't be too mad. I mean, what better way to use my night than to plan how I'm going to ask Babs to Homecoming, and apologize,

then working out in the gym to distract myself from the butterflies having a ball in my stomach.

I move over to the climbing ropes, gazing up to where the bell waits for me at the top, glistening bronze in the fluorescents. I've already done hours of gymnastics, strength training, and martial arts practice.

Why not?

I pull on my grip gloves, flex my fingers and leap onto the rope, scaling up, up, up, hand over hand, my legs looping around the rope, my upper arms burning, sweat slipping down my nose. I keep my eyes fixed on my goal, the bell, willing my arms to go faster, higher. Two more pulls and— my hand grabs the clapper and sends it swinging, the boisterous clang spelling triumph and victory. Ah, I love the smell of sweat and BO in the morning.

“Master Dick.” I peer down at the floor, feeling for all the world like a monkey in a tree. Alfred stands to the side, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixed on me. I search for the sadness I saw last night, but I can't quite see it from here. What? Just because I have twenty-twenty vision doesn't mean I've got X-ray vision. I'm not Superman over here.

“What’s up, Alf?” I pause and loop my legs through the rope, flipping so I’m hanging upside down, my hair flopping, my mouth stretching into a grin. “Well, except me.”

“Master Dick.” Curt, as usual, but add exasperation to a list of Alfred’s range of emotions. Oh, come on! It was a good joke! Then again, this is Alfred we’re talking about. He doesn’t know a good joke, even if it stole his duster. “Please be careful.”

I twist around again, threading the rope through my legs, just like the good ol’ days when I gave circus guests heart attacks, and settle in the splits, my toes pointed, reaching out for the open air. “I’m always careful. Didn’t you hear B last night?”

I’m sorry, but I couldn’t resist that jab. Bruce deserves someone to get on him if only a little. Only, it sends that sick feeling surging in my stomach again, but I force my grin to stay plastered on my face. Alfred clears his throat but says nothing, well, at least nothing about that.

“I simply came to inform you, Master Dick, that the gift for Miss Gordon has arrived.” I can’t help but perk up, my smile twitching into something real. Sometimes waking up stupid early has its benefits, like figuring out the perfect gift for a girl you didn’t quite argue with.

“Really?” I swing my legs out of the rope and let the fibers slip through my fingers, sending me zipping toward the ground. The short rush of wind feels good, combing through my stringy, sweaty hair, and can I just say, wearing gloves while sliding down a rope has to be the best idea anyone’s ever come up with. My feet touch down on the pad, leaving the open air, or gym air, I guess, behind me. “And...?” I cock my head at Alfred. Does he approve? He knows something about girls, right? I mean... well, actually, I don’t really know that.

I wish I could ask Bruce.

“I believe she will love them, Master Dick.” Alfred steps to the side, letting me nab my towel, which is really my best friend at this point, and motions toward the exit. “Would you care to see?”

You know, I realized something through this whole experience. As much as you’d think that I wouldn’t know anything like ‘Babs favorite flower’ I actually know more than I thought I did. Casual conversations like talking about window boxes or decorations at parties came rushing back to me last night, and the more I thought about the past year with Babs, the dumber I feel.

She was literally shoving the whole thing in my face the entire time. Well, time to make up for my, what would you call it?

Obliviousness? Well, whatever it is when Alfred leads me into the banquet hall to see what I've accomplished, I know I'll at least be partially forgiven. A spray of rich purple and white flowers sits on the long, glossy table. Lilac, baby's breath, sweet alyssum, and so many more rest in a crystal vase, their vibrant petals reaching for the warm light, even though it's not the sun.

I take a few steps forward, carefully reaching out to the crisp white card tied to the vase with a yellow ribbon. *To: Babs From: Dick*. It sounds so cheesy, I know, but I can't wipe the grin off my face. It looks so... Babs. "They're perfect." I turn to Alfred. Again, it seems so stupid to say it, but what else can I say except— "Thank you."

"Of course, Master Dick." Alfred's lips twitch, his eyes soften, his hands clasped behind his back. "And if I may, I do believe she will adore them."

I rub my neck as if that will make this fluttering, sick feeling disappear. But what if she doesn't like them? What if she laughs at me? Calls me desperate and too late? I resist the urge to shake my head or move, for that matter. Oh... I think I might just throw up in my mouth now. "I-I think she will too."

“And Master Bruce’s contribution.” My eyes widen, tracking Alfred as he steps forward and grabs something hard and shiny off the table, something that I didn’t even notice until now. My eyes might’s well have popped out of my head because Alfred holds out a glistening batarang, the edges scuffed and chipped from impact, the finish worn away from years of use.

My hands go numb as Alfred places the weapon into my hands, the corners of his mouth turning into a small smile. This shouldn’t be a big deal. I mean, I’ve seen batarangs before. All the time. But... after what Bruce said, after last night, I didn’t think— “Alfred.” I raise an eyebrow at him, my hands lose around the cool metal as if the thing’s a bomb that might go off at any moment. “Did you take this from the Cave without permission?”

Alfred snorts, placing a hand over his heart. “I would never dare take a thing from Master Bruce without his permission.”

Wait, was that *sarcasm*? My other eyebrow flies up. Everyone stop everything; Alfred just snorted *and* was sarcastic. What a day, what a world. Maybe I do take after Alfred after all. I blame all that tea he makes me drink. Then again, Earl Gray is pretty good— you know what? It’s not important. “Alf... are you—”

“The truth, Master Dick,” Alfred slides in, smooth as a knife through soft butter. It doesn’t hurt, not like when Bruce interrupts, “He did give it to me. He remembered his promise.” Alfred brushes imaginary lint off my bare shoulders, his smile softening. “He told me to tell you that he is rooting for you.”

“Thanks, Alf.” I smile, my heart swelling a few times too big in my chest. Of course, I smile; I mean, Bruce does care. He does. But I can’t help but wonder... Why didn’t he tell me that himself? Then again, this is Bruce we’re talking about.

That feeling’s back in my stomach, adding to the butterflies flitting around like they’re right at home. Only now, the feeling isn’t as bad. Bruce still cares. Bruce’s still rooting for me. And that’s all I can ask for.

So I sit and eat my breakfast, trying to tell the butterflies to settle down, which never works, thank you very much, and try to imagine my conversation with Babs.

In my mind, it’ll go something like this. *‘Hey, Babs!’* Then Babs will turn away, scowling at me, her lips pressed into that tiny pout. Then I hold out the flowers and batarang and say, *‘look, I’m sorry for yesterday. You want to go to homecoming with me?’*

Then? Commence the Babs-isn't-mad-at-Dick-anymore montage that includes movies, ice cream, pizza, geeking out about Batman (which I still find hilariously indulgent), or something like that. Then we go to homecoming, and I dance with Babs... At least, that's how I want things to go. That's how they should go. But to be absolutely honest? I don't even know what I'm going to say. I mean, what do you say to a girl who's your friend but you like in more than a 'just friends' way? How do you make it... I don't know, not awkward?

"Alf..." I stop mid-bite, my French toast dripping syrup onto my eggs, and turn to where he stands at my elbow, hands folded in front.

"Yes, Master Dick?" Alfred raises an eyebrow, but his eyes have such a disapproving look that I pause. And realize that I just spoke with food in my mouth.

Oops.

My cheeks blaze like a campfire as I snap my mouth shut, chew, and swallow. Let me tell you, I usually wouldn't bother, but when Alfred gives you 'the look,' well... good luck eating any other way. "Sorry," I mumble, stabbing my fork into my scrambled eggs before turning back to Alfred. Take two. "But Alf... um... I know it's stupid, but..."

“No question is ‘stupid’ as you say, Master Dick.” Alfred straightens. “What is it you wish to know?”

“Girls.” I nod to the flowers sitting ready and waiting on the table. “How do I—“

“Sir,” Alfred does a rare thing. And when I mean rare, I mean super rare. It’s a full smile, not just a small smile or his tiny lip twitches. It’s a smile that twists his face differently, lifts it, and reaches his eyes. “I am hardly one to ask.” His voice softens, and his hand finds my shoulder. Just like Bruce, he isn’t exactly a touchy-feely person, so this is practically a bear hug. I relax under his hand, the pressure holding me down, keeping me from spiraling into space. “But if I may say so, you will find the words.”

I look right into his smokey eyes, searching for something. And I find it. Genuine affection. What would I do without Alfred? What would either of us do without him? “Remember, Master Dick, she is not merely a girl.” Alfred’s hand squeezes so light, so gentle yet strong and firm. I always forget that he’s the one who raised Bruce. Well, okay, *practically* raised Bruce. Has he had this conversation before? “She is your best friend. Think of that when you speak, and speak from the heart.”

My hand finds Alfred's, his hands gloved but not frail like you'd expect from an old man. Then again, far be it from me to call Alfred 'old.' My smile grows, beaming up at him. Butler, yes, but what kind of butler gives you life advice and takes the time to care about your well-being? No, Alfred's so much more.

"Thanks, Alf." I turn back to my breakfast as he pats my shoulder and returns to his default position. How boring would it be to stand sentry at someone's elbow, waiting for them to ask for something? Really, who would ever want to be a Butler?

My stomach does somersaults as I finish breakfast and get ready for school. I don't know if it's my impending conversation with Babs, but I spend more time in the bathroom getting ready than I ever have. Stupid puberty. I mean, since when did I care this much about my hair? Or how my breath smelled? I mean, Mom... when she was still, well, anyway, she always fussed over my hair and appearance on circus days. Well, you'd be so proud, Mom. Your little boy is growing up.

Hurray for me.

I drum my hands on my legs as Alfred drives us through the countryside and away from the Manor. The forest is a sea of golds, browns, oranges, and reds, waving, whispering, telling stories I'll never

understand. Beyond that, over the sea cliffs, the waves smash on the sheer drop, the waves roaring against the rock, white water catching the early morning sunlight.

From here, the city of Gotham actually looks nice, though still a dark splotch on the otherwise pure ocean. Well, as pure as polluted water can be.

“Alf...” I try so hard to ignore the butterflies whipping around in my stomach. No such luck. I mean, really, how can you ignore that churning, tickling sensation? “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

It’s true. When I look down at my hands, they shake, pale and trembling like the fall leaves. Wow. I’m such a sissy. I hug my stomach, trying to ignore the bile surging up and down in my throat like a sea saw. I mean, really, she’s just a girl! No... no... she’s not... Alfred’s right. Of course, he is. She’s not just a girl. She’s Babs.

“The bags are under your seat should you need one, Master Dick.” I can feel Alfred’s eyes gazing intently at me from the rearview mirror, burning a hole through the back of my head, and I can just hear the amusement in his voice. Well, at least I make everyone else laugh in my misery. I’m so glad.

I snatch one of the barf bags and strangle it, my head thumping against the back of the seat, pounding into the leather cushion, and close my eyes. Watching the waves definitely didn't help the churning. I don't think Babs will appreciate a very green Dick Grayson throwing up all over himself when trying to ask her. Honestly, I don't think any girl would appreciate that.

The drive drags on until I think I might just leap out of the car window and run the rest of the way. I mean, really, after this agony? Running through the grimy streets of Gotham seems like a welcome change. Sweat pours down my forehead, wetting my armpits, soaking the material of my school uniform. My breaths catch. When did it get so hot in here? My feet do a ditty on the floor, the heels of my sneakers tap dancing, clacking against the bottom of the seat. The barf bag tangles into knots in my fingers, twisting, choking.

“Ooooooh, I'm so dead.” The words come out breathy and squeaking, my voice betraying me as Alfred pulls up in front of the iron gates, the ivy mocking me, the brick building taunting me. Really, how can anyone do this? Am I being dramatic? Eh, probably, but then again, this is my first date we're talking about here.

The courtyard of students waits to eat me alive. Girls chat and twitter, guys laugh and slap each other on the back, and more and more, I think that there are too many kids at my school. Compared to today, yesterday seems like a casual stroll through Gotham Park. Because yesterday all the girls hounded me. Today I only have one girl in mind.

I see her there, sitting on our bench, her mac'n'cheese hair shining almost a glinting copper in the sunlight, her face focused, scanning an open book, finger running along the pages, keeping pace.

Then it hits me square between the eyes.

She really isn't the scrawny, knobby-kneed girl I met at the Commissioner's office that night. She isn't that girl dressed in the oversized purple sweatshirt, her socks yanked up to her rug-burned knees, her frizzy hair sticking to her face. Her freckles sparkle like gold flecks, dusting her nose and cheeks. Her eyes glitter like emeralds, a rich green like the grass around the Manor, and her cheeks blush the lightest pink, like roses.

Aw man, I'm turning into a poetic sissy.

I mean... well, to be honest? She's beautiful. I swallow hard, my knees jelly, my brain mush. How can I do this? Am I overthinking this? Probably. Do I care right now? Not really.

All I need is to get the words out, somehow, and I'll be fine.

Yeah... fine.

I grab the vase of flowers, make sure the batarang is tied with the card, and move toward the door. There are so many people out there, so many people watching... I can already feel the girl's eyes on me, giggling, mocking me. And don't get me started on what my fellow guys will do. Maybe I should've thought this through before getting a bush of flowers. Maybe a single rose would've been better.

Alfred opens the door, but I stay rooted in my seat. I'm strapped down, trapped. I can't do this. But it's Babs! I have to do this! But... it's Babs... *Come on, Grayson!* I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing my heart to slow, my breaths to steady. In... out... In... out. *Get it together! You just faced off against the Joker last night! You can go up and talk to your crush— er— best friend!*

In... out... I snap open my eyes and huff. It's now or never. Might's well rip the bandaid off. "Good luck, Master Dick." Alfred's voice spurs me on as I stride past him, keeping my eyes locked on Babs. I let his words play over and over in my head, blocking out the ooohs, and he's going for it!s— from the kids around me.

I can do this. I can do this.

Bruce's words from yesterday echo in my head. *'Dick, she's been trying to show her affection, but she's been waiting for you to make the first move.'*

I can do this... I can do this...

I force my feet to take one step, then the other, one after the other, my hands slick with sweat, clutching the vase with all I have. I bite my lip as I step up to the bench, up to Babs. Her hair's pulled up in a messy bun today, the curls smooth and silky, not like the frizzy nest it was when we were younger. Huh... so I guess I'm not the only one who takes more time in the bathroom. Then again, she is a girl. Isn't that what they do?

I swallow hard, nearly choking on the lump clogging my throat. Babs isn't looking up, though from a twitch of her hand and a slight dart of her eyes, I know she sees me.

She's ignoring me.

I guess I deserve it, but why does she have to do that? I swallow hard again, my breath hitching, my heart coming to a screeching halt. Now I have to say something. But their eyes are boring into my head, watching. I bet some of them are even recording this. I mean, I guess it'll be funny in, oh, I don't know, twenty years? But right now? I can't do this, not with everyone gawking at us.

“Um... Babs?” My voice squeaks again. Gosh, thanks so much for that. That’s just what I needed right now! But I keep going. My face drips with sweat, but I refuse to wipe at it. “Can we talk somewhere... less out in the open?”

Snap! Babs shuts her book and settles it in her lap, her eyes darting up to look at mine. There are no tears, but the hurt still lingers, and it punches me right in the gut, slapping me across the face, yelling, *‘how could you be so oblivious?’*

My stomach sinks. But no, no... *I can do this... I can do this...*

“Fine.” Short and hard. Wow. Has Babs been taking Howsons from Bruce? She stands abruptly, and I finally realize something else. I’m taller than her, by quite a bit, actually. When did that happen? And they call me a detective. So shameful.

I follow Babs around the school building toward another, more secluded and shaded part of the courtyard, shooting everyone else my version of the Batglare, which isn’t very good, but it still gets the point across. No one follows or eavesdrops. Hopefully, they’ll not, but at least if they listen in, I won’t have to know. At least not until they give me an earful after school.

I sigh as soon as we walk under the trees, the autumn leaves rustling, falling like fat raindrops, setting a nice scene. Or, at least, I hope it's nice. Babs turns to me, taping her book against her leg, her eyes darting from my face to the flowers. Her eyes soften, only a little, but it's there. So, she doesn't completely hate me. That's a start. "What is it, Dick?"

I relax, only a little, at her voice. It's lighter and softer. More of the Babs I know. Okay... progress... I clear my throat. I have to do this right. For Babs. For Babs... "I'm sorry." Sorry will never cut it, but then again, I'm so thankful the words don't gush out of my mouth that I let out another breath, the churning slowing in my stomach. I look her right in the eyes. I can do this. For Babs. "I'm sorry about what I said yesterday. I didn't realize that it would hurt you. I was..." I pause. What word describes how I was yesterday? Stupid, yes. Oblivious, yes, but what about insensitive? Clueless? What are other words for that?

"A doofus." I perk up at the small laugh, the sun finally feeling warm and bright. She's smiling, her book clasped casually in her hands, her lips teasing, her eyes shining. "You're always a doofus, Dick."

"Oh gosh, isn't that the truth?" I rub my neck, holding out the flowers. This is going a lot better than I thought, but still, as she said, I'm

a doofus. I can't mess this up, not now. "So yes, I'm sorry I was a clueless doofus. I—" I can't help but stutter, my tongue tripping over itself. Come on! I can quip without thinking, but when it comes to asking a girl to homecoming, I might's well be mute! "I... Would you... um..." Babs sniffs the flowers, looking at me over the vibrant petals. She's smirking, so casual it hurts. She's enjoying this way too much.

"Yes, Dick?" I laugh as she screeches, finally finding the batarang, her mouth in a perfect O, bouncing on her toes. It's a nervous laugh, but it shoos the rest of the butterflies away.

I can do this.

"Would you like to be my date to Homecoming?" I don't know what to do with my hands, so I strangle the strap of my bag, watching her face carefully. I hold my breath. She's looking at the flowers, inspecting the batarang. She doesn't say anything... she—

"Yes." My heart leaps. One word and our friendship's changed forever. One word and I landed myself a date. One word and I have officially moved on to... what are we to each other now? Friends, yes, but what do you call the next step? I mean, I don't feel like her boyfriend.

Woah... that sounds weird.

“Really?” I try not to sigh. “Aw, Babs, gosh, that’s Babs—” I play with my bag but keep my eyes on her face. Her beaming, pretty face. My tongue finally just goes on autopilot. Well, at least some things never change. “Alfred can pick us up in the limo, and I’ll make sure to make it extra special! What do you think about a nice, fancy restaurant for dinner? I’ll even wear my cummerbund. You know, with my really fancy tux.”

“You’re so cute.” Babs shoves my shoulder, her blush flushing brighter, cradling the flowers in her arm like a baby. “And thank you for the batarang. And the flowers. But mostly the batarang.”

“Well,” I stick my hands in my pockets, letting my grin widen, trying to ignore the hot chili blazing on my cheeks. Batman for the win, I guess, “What’s the point of being rich if you can’t pull a few strings?”

It hurts having to lie to Babs, especially at a time like this, but right now? With the look on her face, like I just handed her the moon, I’ll let it pass. “You little stinker.” She pulls her Batjournal out of her uniform’s pocket and stuffs the batarang inside, shoving it in with the rest of the mess of papers. She moves toward me, her steps light, her smile coy. “Does Bruce know?”

Well.... I mean... “Yeah.” I turn with her, moving back around the school, waiting to hear the first bell that sends us to our classes. Bruce does know. But she doesn’t have to know why. “But he doesn’t mind. Besides, we spare no expense when it comes to these things.”

“You’re so sweet.” Well, look at that. I’ve moved up in the world. Cute and sweet, just what a fourteen-year-old boy wants to hear. Then again, it’s Babs.

But then, just when I think things can’t get any better, Babs does something unthinkable. Something I would have never expected in a thousand years. Something that goes beyond all I could ever do for her. As we round the corner, the first bell thrills from the speakers, and the courtyard explodes to life with students rushing through the front doors, clambering to get to their classes. Then, just as I reach the steps, ready to take them two at a time, Babs leans over, puckers her glossy lips, and pecks me on the cheek.

It’s so light and gentle that I don’t even realize what she just did at first. Besides, I haven’t been kissed on the cheek since Mom... I mean, Poison Ivy’s tried to kiss me, but that wouldn’t be nice. Try dying a horrible death.

So I freeze, my hand flying to my cheek, my eyes bulging as huge and round as soccer balls. It tingles. Then it burns like a solar flare just exploded on my cheeks. Did anyone see it? Well, I don't even care.

If I handed Babs the moon, she gave me the world.

When I turn, though, my mouth opening and closing like a poor little guppy, Babs is gone, her laughter taunting me as she waves from the school steps, shouting over the crowd. "You're going to be late for class, Dick!"

I shake myself, a huge, dumb grin cracking my face as I run after Babs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALL I WANTED WAS A BURGER

Across Gotham sits an island cut off from the rest of the city, lingering behind a dark fog, weathered against the crashing waves. A stone wall rises above the rocks, men standing in their posts, rifles at the ready, still as gargoyles.

An old mansion whose owner passed into legend rests in the middle of that island. She went insane, people said, thinking that ghosts were out to get her. So she hid deep in the dark halls, adding twists and turns, stairs, and chambers to conceal herself.

The towers reach the smog-filled sky, and the windows peer out at the world like eyes, dark and winking. The iron gates twist into letters, warning those who would come in... and those who would try to get out.

Arkham Asylum.

Up a worn drive through the gnarled trees sits the sharp wire fence abuzz with electricity, and beyond, large oak doors creak on rusted hinges, swinging open to a dark maw.

Screams and laughter echo in those stone halls, each corridor holding heavy metal bared doors, hands clawing at the tiny windows, feet

scuffling against the rough stones. Water drips from the ceiling, puddling on the floor, the sound rebounding through the chambers like a clock ticking.

While staff walk around in white, their heads focused on clipboards, their ears blocking out the insanity, a dark shadow lurks, trailing behind, skulking in corners. No one sees, and not a breath is heard as the man approaches one cell in particular.

The source of the laughter, a sound that rakes on the ears, that creeps into the mind. The shadow waits for the guards to pass, then emerges before the door. He is tall, barely visible in the flickering lights, save for the glinting copper of his mask.

He pulls a wad of green bills and tosses it through the small window, the roll caught by a straight-jacketed fist. A bloodshot eye appears at the window, and the laughter stops. “Who comes knocking at the jolly J’s room at this hour?” The voice slides up and down, a rumbling growl to a high-pitched squeak. “I didn’t order room service! Though I’ve run out of rats to play with. You know how it is.”

The shadow holds up a key, one eye glinting behind his dual-colored mask. He remains silent, but a white face presses against the

window, the yellow-toothed smile shining under the glaring lights. “Oh ho ho! Someone got his hands on the golden egg! I’m listening.”

The rest of the day is well... I don’t know how to describe it. It’s normal. I mean, really. Girls leave me alone because, of course, they all heard the juicy news of the day. That I asked Babs to Homecoming. Guys slap me on the back, congratulating me, but to be honest, I’m just glad she’s not mad at me anymore.

I’m so over the moon that I don’t even notice Kitten raving about how the superhero Robin will be her date for Homecoming or Mr. Lawrence's droning tone during the lecture. Really, who knew that the history of the first colonists of Gotham could be so fascinating for the fortieth time?

We hang out at lunch like usual, eating on our bench, Babs geeking out over the batarang, sketching the thing into her journal and telling me all about the Joker fight last night. She doesn’t think that Robin messed up. In fact, she gushes about Robin and Batman. I do dare to tease that maybe I have some competition. With myself. Oh how wonderful.

Surprisingly, I'm not distracted in class. You'd think I would be, especially after the kiss that wasn't quite a kiss because it was on the cheek, still... I go through the day like it never happened because it just felt... right? That's what it is. It feels right. The awkwardness of before, that something between us that unspoken thing, it's gone. Because it was spoken, more or less. Acceptance, I suppose.

Now, it doesn't feel weird when Babs loops her arm through mine as we walk to AP Spanish. It feels natural, like she's meant to be there. I count that as an absolute win. Then again, I just asked her to Homecoming, which isn't exactly a step forward, but eh, who cares?

Okay, so maybe she does, but I'm not ready to completely spill my guts yet. Hey! I've had enough stuttering and tripping over my tongue to last me a good solid month or two. So yes, I have a date. An almost date? Girlfriend sounds so wrong. I mean, it's Babs! She's my friend... that's a girl... that kissed me. I can still feel the place where her lips touched, like the fluttering of butterfly wings on my cheek—you know what? I'll just stop now.

When Alfred comes to pick me up, I can tell he's looking, turning from me to Babs, who's chattering on like there's no tomorrow about how Batman is the greatest superhero, and no one can tell her otherwise. I give

him a small thumbs up, unable to stop my grin. Success. I couldn't have done it without him.

“Well, Dad's here.” Babs stops a few feet from the limo, her fingers running up and down the straps of her backpack. She smiles at me, and the sun shines brighter. Okay, I know, I know! It's super cheesy, and I'd never live it down if I said it out loud! But it's true!

I glance to where the Commish waits by their family sedan, watching me like a hawk. But I can see, even from here, the smile twitching his bushy mustache. I give him a small wave, and he crosses his arms, his eyes narrowing. But his shoulders shake.

Well, at least I amuse him, too.

“I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then?” I blink hard and turn back to Babs. Her shoes scuff the sidewalk, kicking at the pebbles and leaves.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.” I wiggle my eyebrows, elbowing her lightly in the ribs. “Unless you blow up my phone tonight too.”

“Oh, haha.” Babs walks backward, a skip in her step. Finally, can I just say I'm so glad she doesn't want to kill me anymore? “See ya around, Dick!”

“See ya!” I wave, trying not to look like a giddy kid who just had all his Christmas presents handed to him at once, watching her slide into

her car, already chattering, her words carrying through the fresh autumn air.

“Oh my word, Dad, he finally asked! He asked!”

My chest soars, my mind a tizzy. Nothing can spoil this moment right here. Nothing. I think I might just skip the rest of the way to the limo. I don't, but I might's well have from the way that Alfred looks at me, that amused glint in his eyes. “Your attempts were successful, I take it, Master Dick?” He opens the door, allowing me to slide into my seat. Finally, my hands don't shake. Finally, my stomach doesn't churn. Finally, the pressure is gone.

“Yup!” I grin up at Alfred. I don't care that he thinks this whole thing is hilarious. I don't care if everyone was expecting it. Finally, things aren't weird. Finally, things are normal. “And she loved the flowers and the card and the batarang. Bruce was right, as usual.”

For once in my life, that phrase doesn't phase me. I mean, Bruce knows what he's talking about when it comes to girls, as hilarious as it is. And just think, after all this time, maybe he will be my third wheel—yeah, nope. That sounds weird. Nevermind.

“Very good, Master Dick.” With a muffled slam, the door closes, leaving me in the momentary silence of the limo. I wait, my hands stuffed

under my legs to keep them from drumming on the seat, waiting for Alfred to slide into the driver's cabby. For the first time since last night—wow, was it only last night?—everything's right in the world.

As soon as Alfred straps himself in and looks at me, I go, my tongue finally free to talk as much as it wants. "I'm ready to go home now, Alfred." What? I have to say it; otherwise, the man won't drive. I mean, it's still weird, but what else am I supposed to do? Speaking of him driving— "By the way, Alf," I turn around, leaning into the driver's cab, honestly, it's a bad habit by now. I mean, I probably would crash through the windshield if we got in a car accident. But at this point? I don't care, "Would you mind being our chauffeur for the dance?"

Alfred's eyes soften in the mirror, and he nods crisp and curt as usual. "Of course, Master Dick. It would be my pleasure. I will also make certain to press your best suit for the occasion. And provide the corsage."

Oh right. More flowers. Really, what is it with girls and flowers? They smell like a perfume aisle and die super quickly. Then again, they are bright and colorful, says the teen who dresses up like a traffic light every night. "Thanks, Alf." My hands drum on the seat, unable to stay still, my eyes scanning the streets ahead. Traffic presses around us like a

herd of cows, honking and whipping around each other. Ah, home sweet Gotham.

“I am proud of you, Master Dick.” Something squeezes my chest. Alfred doesn’t turn to me, thank goodness, I don’t trust Gotham drivers, but he spares a glance. It sends warmth from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. Alfred was rooting for me, too. “What did I say about young ladies?”

“Flowers, chocolate, and words from the heart.” I shake my head. “Except replace ‘chocolate’ with ‘pizza and Batarangs’ and add ‘geeking out about Batman’ to words from the heart and there’s Babs.” My heart soars again when I remember her face when she first saw that batarang. Too bad she doesn’t know. I can just imagine how she would react to seeing the Batcave for the first time.

“Indeed.” Alfred turns onto the main highway, carrying us back across the sea toward Bristol and Wayne Manor. “Quite the enthusiastic young lady. Perhaps we can have her over at the Manor sometime.”

Only then does it hit me. After all these years, okay, after two years, Babs hasn’t come to the Manor. I’ve been over to her house and seen her room, which honestly looks like a Batman-themed museum with a conspiracy board as a wall decoration. I’ve slept over, watched movies,

and, yes, even engaged in a pillow war. No, not a pillow fight like I used to do with my family. A pillow *war*. Casualties being her stuffed moose, Mugmoo (don't ask), and my pride.

But after all of that, she's never seen my room. We've never gone running through the halls of Wayne Manor, or even the grounds, together. In fact, now that I think about it, no kid's ever been to Wayne Manor, not even at parties.

"I'd like that." My words are soft like I'd fracture this moment, this idea, if I speak any louder. "I'd like that a lot."

Alfred and I make plans for the rest of the drive home, which include movie nights, parties in the yard, and even gymnastics practice in our home gym. So when we pull up the long driveway and chug to a stop, I fly out of the limo, bumping into Ace and racing him the rest of the way into the Manor. He doesn't know what's going on, but I don't think he cares; his tongue flapping, panting, his warm brown eyes locked on me.

The quiet that greets me doesn't last long. Bruce walks around a corner, his voice firm as he speaks into his phone, echoing in the entrance hall. I'm surprised he's home now. Then again, he doesn't like to hang around the office for too long. And I don't blame him. Who would? "No, we aren't—I'm serious, Mr. Powers. Wayne Enterprises will not engage

in such a thing. I understand that it is for a good cause. Yes, I understand.” He locks eyes with me. I freeze, my smile stuck on my face, my mood crashing down like a plane without an engine, exploding on impact.

Something’s not right still. The way he looks at me, I can’t even describe it. It’s not hard or cold; it’s just... icy, cut off. Bruce doesn’t know what to do. And to be honest, neither do I. I mean, I know what he should do. Apologize for one. That would be nice. But Bruce Wayne hardly ever apologizes. Because Bruce Wayne is always right.

“Goodbye, Joseph. Yes, you as well.” With a click and a sigh, Bruce tucks his phone back into the pocket of his jeans, running a hand through his perfect coal-black locks. “How did it go, Dick?”

There’s a rock in the pit of my stomach, that sick feeling coming back with a vengeance, swirling, stewing. I force myself to ignore it, to keep smiling. Smiling makes it better. Besides, he remembered. He asked. I’ll take small wins. “She said yes.” I shove my hands into my pockets. Really, why can’t he say something about... well, what happened? I can’t stand this! “Oh, and she forgave me.”

Is that a hint? Yeah, it is. Does he notice? Well, if he does, he doesn’t say anything.

“I’m proud of you, Dick.” Bruce’s mouth turns up a little, but he doesn’t smile. His eyes don’t soften, not entirely anyway. They’re like a steel wall, keeping me out. Keeping me away. “I’m sure you will both have a wonderful time.”

But after that? Those two measly sentences? I might as well not even be here anymore. I’m not mad he’s ignoring me; I’m not. It’s just... there’s that icy chill in the air, like an early winter wind. And I don’t know what to do. I mean, I want him to be proud. I want him to say something other than that I’m unacceptable and irresponsible.

I mean, I do my best, but to be honest? It’s not the same. Something just feels weird. And it’s not just what Bruce says. I turn and walk away as Bruce starts to talk to Alfred, ignoring Alf’s look, ignoring the fact that I’m being ignored.

As I walk through the Manor, the thoughts hound me, all the day’s emotion draining out of my feet as I plod through the halls, every noise rebounding off the mahogany furniture and gilded paintings. He should trust me enough to do my job. He let me lead a team for crying out loud; why can’t he trust me on the streets of my very own city? I still held my own against Joker, even when distracted.

Didn't he see that? Or is he so wrapped up in those two tiny mistakes that nothing else I will ever do matters? Is that how he sees me? A failure? I shut my eyes and let my forehead rest on the door to my room, trying to block out the pounding thoughts that hurt. Why can't things go back to how they were when I was younger, when I was first Robin. When I didn't have a care in the world, well, okay, fewer cares in the world. You might think it's stupid, but I'd trade anything to be that starry-eyed kid again, who thought Batman could do no wrong, who joked around and laughed through everything.

Is it wrong that all of a sudden, I wish I was back at Titans Tower, leading the team, away from Bruce? Because it sure feels wrong. I don't want us to fight. I don't want it to be like this. Can't he see?

I need to punch something.

As soon as I open the door to my room, I'm a blur, shedding my clothes and bag, snatching my workout outfit, and dashing toward the gym. I really need to punch something, and I don't think Alfred would appreciate cleaning up broken glass.

The thoughts don't leave. They hound me, twisting my stomach into a knot, sending red swirling at the edge of my vision. *Bruce doesn't trust you.* The voices say. *Bruce never trusted you. And he never will.*

Bam! My fist finds something hard, something that swings back toward me. My leg snaps forward. *Whack!* Why can't he see that I'm not just a kid anymore? *Smack!* I'm not weak... I'm not a failure; I'm not! *Thwack!*

Thank goodness for punching bags. I lay into the thing, trying to get the look in Bruce's eyes out of my head, trying to tell myself that he does trust me, that he does—no... I'm unacceptable. That's what he said. *Whack!*

Someone walks up behind me. They clear their throat.

I whip around, catapulting into a front flip, my leg slamming forward in a kick. The intruder steps to the side, and I trip. The world spins. It's hot. It presses in on me. "Master Dick."

"Alf?" I shake my head, running a hand across my eyes, wiping away the salty sweat. I blink, squinting at the blurry figure standing in front of me. You know, someday I might accidentally break him if he keeps sneaking up on me like this.

"Miss Gordon is calling you." Alfred holds out a vibrating phone, the word Babs scrolling across the top over an old picture of her trying to block the camera. I shake my head again and look around. The punching

bag lies dejected across the floor, knocked from its hook, and thrown away into the weights. When did that happen?

“Uh... yeah, right.” I accept the phone, flexing my sore, throbbing fingers. How long have I been here? How long was I abusing that poor punching bag? I click the answer button and press the cool, welcoming box against my ear. “This is Dick Grayson speaking; how may I direct your call?”

I unwrap my hands, holding the phone between my ear and shoulder. I know, I know, mad skills. My voice is light, chipper even. I smile at the speaker, but it feels wrong. No, that’s not right. Smiling’s supposed to make it better. Smiling always makes it better.

“Yes, hi, I’m calling about a business opportunity.” Babs’ voice is so casual, so free. My smile slowly relaxes, the clenching in my chest ebbing. And for the first time in my life, I’m jealous of Babs. I’m jealous of the chirp in her voice, the laugh hidden in her words.

“A business opportunity, huh?” I drop my wraps into my duffle and head out the door, not even bothering to grab my towel. I need to get out of this gym. It’s too hot in here. I pass by Alfred, and though I smile and wiggle my eyebrows at him, I don’t get a lip twitch, not even an

eyebrow raise. Nothing. He knows. He sees. Of course, he does. I keep going, though. “And what would that be, Miss Gordon?”

“The newest place in town.” I can tell Babs is trying to keep it in. Trying so hard not to burst out laughing. If only I had that problem again. That would be nice. “Bat Burger.”

My heart jumps. So... like a date? Kinda? Sort of? “Oh, really?”

“Really. Dad and I went recently, and I know you haven’t gone yet, so I wondered... if you would like to go with us.” I can tell she’s holding her breath, waiting for me to say yes so she can gush about the food, the aesthetic, everything.

And I open my mouth to say yes. It’s on the tip of my tongue, ready to rush out. I can just imagine it now. A nice, quiet night with just Babs and the Commish. With burgers, no less. But then I look up and see Bruce. He stands there, his eyes hard, his head shaking.

He mouths, *‘You can’t. There’s no time. You have training with Alfred, then patrol tonight.’* For once, I regret learning how to read lips. Then again, a simple head shake is enough for me to know what he means.

For a second, I have half a mind to say yes and just go with Babs anyway. But... well, if Bruce already thinks I’m irresponsible, what

would that say? So I ignore the queasy mess that's my stomach. "I'd love to, Babs," I force my words not to stutter or get stuck on the lump in my throat, "But I have something tonight." I can't let my voice break or even bite my lip. Bruce is watching. "Sorry. Maybe next time."

There's a horrible pause. I envision her crying again, giving me that hurt look. But this is Babs. She doesn't just burst into tears over spilled milk. "No prob, Dick!" There isn't even a hint of something wrong in her words. She understands. My heart squeezes. I want to tell her what I'm really going to be doing tonight, but I can't. And even still, she just rolls with it. "This was last-minute anyway. Maybe we can make plans for next time, okay?"

I nod, even though she can't see. Yes, plans. Something that I can work out with Bruce. Something that won't change. "Sounds good. See ya tomorrow, Babs."

"See ya!"

Click. She's gone. I look up at Bruce, trying desperately to keep the churning in my gut from showing on my face. I don't think it works, but Bruce says nothing. He only walks past me, an unreadable expression on his face. I clench my fists. I don't mind training or patrolling. Not at all. In fact, they're some of my favorite pastimes.

Only, I can't help but think back to the summer. With the Teen Titans, we trained, went on patrols, and fought hard to keep our city safe. But there was always time for other things, like hanging out, grabbing a burger, or playing video games.

If I could do that with a superhero team and still take care of the city, why can't I spend more time with Babs outside of school and parties?

CHAPTER NINE

THE TWO FACE OF COMEDY

After last night's impromptu party, tonight's eerily quiet as I swing through the streets, racing across the tops of buildings. While some scuffles still sound from the alleyways, everything else is so silent, so still, that every bark of a dog or screech of a tire sends my nerves rattling. I wouldn't trade this for the world, though.

After several nights of zipping through the roads on my R-cycle, racing across buildings, and swinging from the line of my grappling hook is a welcome change. With the wind rushing through my hair and my stomach dropping and rising, I can almost forget that I could've been done with my night with Babs and the Commish, having a nice belly full of juicy burgers and fries. Just the thought makes my mouth water.

So I laugh, waving at the people walking the sidewalks, trying to ignore the awkward chill between Batman and me. I mean, again, he doesn't talk much anyway, especially when we're swinging, even when people scream hellos and wave like we're royalty. But... there's something off about the silence that I just can't put my finger on.

I mean, I know why it's there, obviously, but I can't for the life of me pinpoint why it's *still* here. Why couldn't he have said something about it already? He didn't even lecture me about it before we left the cave for patrol. Nothing, not a word. Not a criticism or warning, nothing.

My feet pound across the top of an apartment building, the gravel barely kicked up by my silent feet, and my eyes locked on the oncoming ledge. Three... two... one...

My hand whips out, my grappling gun aiming for the next building. With the pull of the trigger and a *whizz-clink*, the line's secure. My feet push off the edge, leaving me falling, swinging out over the littered and tagged alleyway.

The GCPD building looms in front of us, illuminated by warm lights. I can see the giant spotlight from here, the symbol already glinting on the looming, dark clouds. The Bat-signal. A sign that all criminals fear, a sign that causes the people of Gotham to look up with hope.

I swallow hard. It's always up there, looming over me, isn't it? I mean, it's a good sign, but...

I relaunch my grapple, latching onto the GCPD building and letting the line pull me up, flipping onto the top of the building. My cape

drapes over me, concealing the reds, greens, and yellows in black wings.

Batman's beside me, eyes narrowed, his mouth a hard line.

In front of us, the Commish stands, his back to us, his hand resting on the Bat signal. Really, if he always has such a hard time with this part, why does he always have his back to us? **"Commissioner."** Batman's growl snaps through the air. Gordon jumps, his hand flying to his chest, his breath coming quickly. I choke down a snicker. How can we get him every single time?

"Batman, Robin." The Commish clears his throat, straightening his jacket. I don't blame him. The autumn breeze nips at my bare arms, teasing my short green sleeves and tossing my cape back and forth.

"Good to see you."

"What's up, Commish?" I smile, trying not to think about the walking icicle next to me or that I could've been chatting and laughing with Gordon and Babs all night. So instead, I punch a fist into my hand, letting my eyes spark with mischief, even though he can only see the mask. "Who's getting the beat down tonight?"

"Two Face." Commissioner Gordon holds out a file. It's in Batman's hand in seconds, open, the papers fluttering as he scans through them carefully but quickly. I don't let my smile tug into a thoughtful

frown. Robin doesn't frown. But still, why would Two Face be causing a fuss? I mean, sure, the man slipped out of Arkham a couple of weeks ago, but he's been on the down low, trying to get his territory in order.

Of course, Batman and Robin have been there to stop the operations, but there hasn't been any sign of a man with half his face burnt off anywhere. Yeah, that would be very noticeable, even in Gotham. He isn't one to just parade out in the open, though. He's more subtle, if you could call it that, with his whole schtick. All about choices.

Batman doesn't say anything, so the Commissioner keeps going, his eyes flitting from Batman to me. I wonder if he can tell something's wrong. Who knows. "He sent a message; the letter is in the file, basically saying that either Batman and Robin come to his hideout, or he will set off a bomb somewhere in the sewers."

Is it wrong that I roll my eyes at such a thing? Yes? Well, blame it on living in Gotham for as long as I have. I mean, is Two Face so cliché that he can't think of anything other than a bomb? Ugh, he and the Joker have really lost some mojo.

I peer over Batman's arm, scanning the message sitting on the very top of Two Face's file. It's written on nice, creamy paper, half riddled with water damage, tears, and smudges. The handwriting sprawls

from nice and neat to scribbled and nonsensical. Well, that's Two Face for you. A DA turned psychopath. How wonderful.

The note basically spells out what the Commish said, the usual threats about the bomb, how much time we have to show, you know, all that boring, typical villain stuff. Complete with a huge word written in red at the very bottom.

'Choose.'

"Wow. This is very sad." I wrinkle my nose, shaking my head. "So cliché. I mean, really, can't he come up with anything original?" No one says anything, Batman not caring, and Gordon's mustache twitching as if he wants to laugh but knows that people, including me, might I say, will never let him forget it.

"Robin." Faster than blinking, the file is back in the Commish's baffled hands, and Batman is on the edge of the building, ready to jump. I shake myself, give the Commish a small wave, and race past Batman, leaping off the building first.

To be honest, Gotham's whole 'who has what territory' is ridiculous. I mean, they all mostly intrude on each other's territory anyway. Take Joker, for example, parading through Riddler's territory without a care in the world. Then again, he is the Joker. But Penguin has

his extortionists in all parts of Gotham, same as Black Mask. Then again, shenanigans ensue when certain people without as big a rep come through, i.e., Riddler into Joker's territory. And by that, I mean all-out turf war.

I don't know; it's just stupid. I mean, if you think about it, if they all worked together, they could run this city. But don't tell anyone that because I would hate to see what would happen if supervillains actually got smarter than they already are and worked together. League of Supervillains, anyone? Yeah... nope.

Anyway, I have to say out of all the territories in Gotham that 'belong' using that term very loosely here, to a certain villain, Two Face's is the most... I don't know, normal looking? It actually looks nice, mostly a home to high-end society, but the clean streets, shining windows, and calm atmosphere have a flip side. There's always a flip side with Two Face. Behind the tidy homes, cute little bakeries, and grandiose department stores are the filthy, dirty back alleys, the gaping tunnels leading into the underground sewer system, which isn't as fun as some would think, you know, with the scuttering of rats clinging to the darkest shadows and the horrible smell?

The flip side, a mirror of what you see.

I wrinkle my nose. Anyone who tries to cover up a stench with the overwhelming smell of flowers and herbs is setting themselves up for failure. Honestly, I think it's much worse than the original smell, which is an unholy combination of wet fur, burnt rubber, and decaying trash.

Yeah, try to get that out of your nose. A nose plug should be a required tool for all superheroes. I could go for a clothespin or something, anything, really. Well, welcome to the Diamond District, I guess.

I land on the rim of a round, concrete tunnel, my hands gripping the ledge, sitting like a monkey in a tree, minus the screeching, and wait. Batman lands beside me, the black of his suit swallowing me. With barely a look, he drops down, landing on the choked asphalt without a sound. I follow, my boots squishing the weeds and out-of-control grass.

Wow, this is Ivy's kind of town. I wrinkle my nose when I stick my head into the tunnel, the stench hitting me like a wall. "Whew," My voice is soft, barely making a dent in the horrible silence of the night, "What died?"

Batman doesn't answer. Typical. Then again, I'm not sure I want to know the answer to that question. So I hold my breath and follow Batman as he steps into the tunnel, instantly disappearing into the

darkness, his suit melding with the shadows, fading out of existence as if he was never there in the first place.

As soon as the darkness swallows me, I force my breath to slow, to quiet, my heart to steady, and my feet to tread softly on the soles. With two blinks, my vision bursts back to life, cast in the green of night vision, the filter making Batman look like a ghost, whispering in front of me, leaving me behind. I shake myself and keep going, scanning the tunnel. I mean, if Two Face gave us an invitation, you can bet your batarangs that this is a trap.

It's always a trap.

So I'm not surprised when a horde of goons bursts out of adjoining tunnels and jump Batman. With a click and a whirl of my bō staff, I race forward, still silent in the tunnel. Flashlights beam and shake, tumbling to the ground in the scuffle, barely missing catching the glint of the gold underside of my cape. I laugh, the impish sound cackling around the tunnel, echoing down the passageway.

Some men stiffen in fear, whipping around, guns trembling. I hate guns. They're so boring. *Bang!* The first shot goes off, missing my head by feet. So sad. When I reach them, I leap into a flying kick, diving into the fray, my staff slamming into bodies, my heels connecting with ribs.

“Robin.” Batman’s voice is right beside me. He looms over us all, pounding down on the goons, grabbing two at once and slamming them into the tunnel walls, the crack of concrete pounding down the tube.

“Two Face. Go.”

Me? He wants me to deal with the big bad while he beats down on the goons? My heart surges in my chest. Is this his way of telling me that he does trust me? That he’s willing to give me another chance to prove myself? I can’t stop my grin as I zip off, leaping over the heads of the poor lackeys. Really, they can keep coming from those tunnels, but they won’t get the up-and-up on Batman. He’s Batman.

My heart soars as I dive through an opening, entering a vast chamber filled with strange things. My eyes scan the room for movement. Ugh, I can’t see with this stupid filter! With a couple of blinks, the world is awash in natural color and light, allowing me to really take in the random decorations. Well, not random. All of them have to do with choice or something with two sides. Coins hang from the ceiling in a sort of chandelier, heads or tails spinning around in a hidden draft. The carpet spread over the moldy floor is part wool, part cotton; the threads dyed black and white. Half the room stays in the shadows, the darkness swallowing up the tunnels, pipes dripping sewage, and the

cabinets of weapons, while the other side is bright and cheerful, dressed up to be like a sitting room, and yes, I know what that is. We have way too many in the Manor.

A fire burns in a thin keep along the dark side wall, the flames flickering, barely touching the darkness. On the other side, a crystal clear fountain bubbles, out of place in this stinking, slimy dump.

“Wow, Double Dude.” My voice echoes around the chamber, muffled and hollow. “I love what you’ve done with the place. Very... you!”

No answer. I step further into the room, my shoulders tensing, my fingers gripping my bō staff tighter. I scan the room, my eyes peering through the darkness, listening for any sound, a breath, a heartbeat, anything. But on the outside? Well, I am the definition of casual, swinging my arms, twirling my bō staff. “I mean, look at that lovely water feature! So snazzy. How’d ya pay for that, Harv?”

I know he’ll say something now. He has to. Two Face hates when I address his other half. And, sure enough, someone sighs in the darkness, followed by a harsh barking laugh. It isn’t like the Joker’s or the Penguin’s. It’s hard, sharp, and painful. I fall into a ready stance as he emerges from the room's dark side, straightening his tie as he comes.

I have to say, out of all the villains in Gotham, I actually feel bad for Two Face. He wasn't always this way. In fact, he was a friend of Bruce's, Harvey Dent. You wouldn't know it to look at him now, though.

The right side of his face is normal. Strong features, pale skin, sandy blonde hair, you know, an overall good-looking guy. He'd fit right in at all of the parties in Gotham, even down to his small, teasing smile. But all he would have to do is turn only a little, and you would know.

The left side of his face... well, let's just say something went horribly wrong. It's so scarred, mutilated, and burned that it's hard to even tell if the raw pink flesh belongs to a human anymore. His eye blinks wide and wild, glinting a cold black, his hair sticking up in a white stringy rat's nest, the complete opposite of his carefully combed hairdo on the other side.

While the right side of his mouth has that small smile, the other side twists into a painful snarl, baring white teeth.

He's dressed in a nice three-piece suit, though unlike most, half of it is a stark white and the other a pitch black, sending my eyes blinking. Really, where do villains get all their stuff? There has to be a supervillain shopping mall. I mean, really, where else do they get this stuff?

“Boy Wonder.” This voice growls, deep and foreboding, vibrating my chest. It’s as if he’s talking from only one side of his mouth. He flips an old, worn penny between his fingers, the glinting side flashing in the lights as he walks closer, limping. “Finally.”

“I thought you might be expecting us,” I smirk, keeping my eyes locked on his, my legs ready to spring. He has no visible weapons, but when did that matter? He’s a Gotham baddie. “Why the note, Two Toned? Are ya so bored sulking in here all day?”

“Oh, Robin! You have no idea.” Another voice speaks, this one smooth, gentle, kind. Human. Not the beast that spoke only two seconds before. “The only reason we are here is to give you a message.”

“Shut up!” The other voice growls, flipping the coin as if it’s as natural as breathing. Stepping closer... closer. My mind races. Give me a message? Not Batman? Not both of us? Just me? I don’t know how I feel about this. “We promised we would deliver, and we will deliver.”

“Flip the coin.” The other voice, Harvey’s, I suppose, argues, his head cocking to the side, looking at me with that pitiful eye. I clench my teeth but don’t let it show. My stomach churns. Flipping the coin is never good. “See if we should do it or not.”

“Fine.” The first voice, Two Face, snarls, his broken half of a face stretching into a sneer, his crazed eye looking at me as if I’m a mouse and he’s the hawk. “Heads, he gets pain. Tails, he gets words.”

Now, you might be thinking, but Dick! Shouldn’t you attack while they’re distracted? Answer? Not when I want them to keep talking. I need information, and if they just spill the beans? Well, that’s an automatic win for everyone present. Well, except Two Face. And his goons. You know what? It’s an automatic win for Batman and Robin. There we go.

“Um, I’m standing right here?” My hands grip my bō staff, my feet scuffing on the cracked concrete. Waiting. He isn’t armed, at least not visibly, and I’m curious. Who wants to give me a message? And why pass it on through Two Face? Also, isn’t heads the *positive* outcome? Then again, he is a psycho, so...

The coin shoots up into the air, spinning, a glinting copper on one side, a rusted, scratched green on the other. It lands in his palm, and he slaps it down on the back of his other hand, the one with the burned, charred flesh. I don’t flinch, but I hold my breath.

Behind me, the sounds of a scuffle, or, you know, an entire squad of goons trying to beat down on Batman, still echoes in the tunnels.

Apparently, they aren't doing as badly as I thought they would. People surprise you every day, I guess.

“Heads.” Two Face snaps me back into reality. A reality where he just pulled a long, shining baseball bat out of his jacket. Do they have hidden pockets or something? How does that work?

“Aw, man,” I laugh, even as he smiles or grimaces, stalking toward me, “But words would be much faster. Why don't we try again?” I twirl my bō staff, keeping an eye on the bat, his eyes, and the sounds behind me. I don't think anyone would get past Batman, but if someone else shows up? Well, that would complicate things.

“No second chances. The coin decides.” Two Faces charges so fast he's a blur. But I'm faster. I launch myself to the side, sliding under his mad swing, whipping around, my bō staff cracking into the wood.

I lunge forward on the offensive, ducking in, slamming kicks, punches, and thrusting with my bō staff. Two Face dodges, blocking with the bat, swinging it at my head as if he wants to hit a home run. No thanks. I like my brains where they are, thank you very much.

“Maybe you should do something other than flipping a coin.” I leap into the air, my legs smacking into his head in a double kick. He staggers as I twist around for another blow, landing a good, solid one on

his shoulder. “I mean, it’s so slow. Maybe, I don’t know, help me out here?”

“You talk way too much.” Two Face snarls, wiping a hand across his warped mouth, straightening his rumpled suit jacket.

“Why does everyone say that?” I sigh, launching into a string of front flips, getting in close, but my bō staff is knocked off target by the bat, the gleaming wood winking at me. Something slams into my shoulder. It hurts, but I don’t bat an eye, ha! Pun intended. “I mean, I thought I already explained that to everyone. If the Bat doesn’t talk—” I leap into another attack, a quick group of jabs to his gut. He doubles over, wheezing, his eyes blazing. *Wham!* Something hits me across the arm, but I ignore it. *Perfect... perfect... You can’t make mistakes,* “I have to pick up the slack.”

Smack! I slam my bō staff into his shoulder, finally knocking him to the ground. Really, Two Face is more terrifying with a horde of lackeys to back him up, unlike the Joker. With a slip of my wrist, handcuffs dangle in my hands. The next second, Two Face is trussed up, growling on the ground like a feral dog.

“By the way, that wasn’t a lot of pain.” I tap my bō staff against my shoulder, squatting down to Two Face’s level, cocking my head to the side. “But what did you want to tell me? A message or something?”

“I didn’t want to do it!” Harvey’s voice trembles, his one good eye blinking rapidly, tears slipping down his cheek. “He made us do it! He made us—”

“Shut up!” Two Face jerks his head, thrashing against the handcuffs and cord. “Remember, this is a professional courtesy!”

“But you said we’d never make deals with him!” Harvey meets my eyes, and for the first time, I almost think he’s actually all there. Almost. “Robin...” He swallows hard, the motion looking so strange with his half-decimated face, “I’m so sorry.”

I freeze, though I keep my smile light, bouncing on my heels. What is he sorry about? Who asked him? Who made him? “Um, thanks?” I move my bō staff to my knees, keeping it ready, even though the sounds of the beat down just outside are fading fast.

“You don’t understand!” I jump at the sudden shout. Harvey, not Two Face, thrashes against the binding, his normal eye as wide as his crazy one. “You don’t understand! You’re in danger, you—”

“I said shut up!” I jump out of the way as Two Face launches forward, smacking face-first into the ground, his growl deep, feral. “You will ruin everything!”

“What?” I try to keep my voice calm, disinterested. It doesn’t work. What’s going on? I mean, it makes more sense why he would send an invitation and not have a trap planned if he was just delivering a message. But what’s the big deal?

There’s the *whoosh* of a cape behind me, and Batman looms at my shoulder, casting a shadow over Two Face. “**Dent.**” His growl matches Two Faces; no, it surpasses it. Even still, my shoulders relax. He’s here, and he knows that I had things handled. He trusts me... right?

“Batman.” Two Face spits, lifting his head just enough to see us, one half of his face terrified, one sneering with pleasure. I never knew that was possible. Then again, this is Gotham. “I have a message for your little bird. He wanted you to hear it too.”

I open my mouth to say something quippy, you know, something to lighten the mood, but Two Face doesn’t stop. He looks at me, that wide, wandering eye locking onto mine. It’s as if he can see right through my mask, my smile. “A killing joke is coming, Boy Wonder.” His voice

sends chills down my spine, freezing my heart, stopping my breath. “And there’s nothing Batman can do to save you.”

A killing joke? What does he mean by a killing joke? But that would mean—The world goes quiet as Batman slides past me, grabs Two Face, and slams him into the nearest wall, snarling, demanding answers.

I don’t hear him. All I hear are Two Face’s words. Over and over. A killing joke is coming... a killing joke... but Joker is locked up in Arkham. We just got him. He can’t get out again this soon, right? And how did he get a message to Two Face?

No... it has to be a mistake. Then again, it’s the Joker. But... what could he have planned, if anything? My eyes find Batman, who drags Two Face past me, the mad side laughing that sharp, barking laugh, the sane side crying. Both lash against the cords and handcuffs, trying to get free.

“Robin.” Batman looks at me. So, he didn’t get anything out of Two Face. I’m surprised Dent didn’t spill the beans. Not that it matters. It’s the Joker.

“Yeah... yeah, I’m coming.” I shake myself and run after Batman, leaving the split room behind and entering the tunnel where groaning goons are piled against the walls, groggily trying to get onto their feet.

The blue and red lights flashing ahead seem so far away. The voices bounding around me are phantoms. A killing joke...

What does Joker have planned?

CHAPTER TEN

NEVER TAKE ME SHOPPING

I had hoped that Batman, or even Bruce, would say something on the way home after patrol. Something, anything, maybe a ‘well done Robin.’ I’d even take a pat on the shoulder or a comforting word like, ‘don’t worry, we’ll get to the bottom of this,’ or, ‘he won’t touch you.’

I’m not picky.

But he says nothing except to Gordon. To Gordon, he spells out the entire message Two Face gave me, threat and all, and the two talk about security in Arkham and how Two Face even got the message, while I stand watch on the edge of the GCPD building, disappearing behind the long shadow of Batman.

I mean, I don’t blame him for being distracted, being all business. But... is it wrong that I want something, anything to tell me that he doesn’t think I’m a failure? That I am actually a good partner that he can rely on? That he cares? Am I being selfish? Is a pat on the shoulder too much to ask?

Part of me says yes. The other part? Well, the other part just wants something to stop this churning in my stomach, to ward off the chill in the air.

There are times I know better than to talk, and Gordon and Batman talking in hushed tones about the Joker, and this whole ‘killing joke’ thing is one of them. There are times to be silly and times to be serious. In fact, I don’t even joke when we head home or when we enter the cave. When I slip out of my suit, I’m silent. Such a shocker. Okay, so I did wave and say hello to civilians on the way back, but they don’t know what’s wrong. It’s better if they don’t.

They have to deal with too much insanity already; they don’t have to worry about two Joker attacks in one week. I rub my eyes when I pull off my mask, blinking hard against the thoughts that pound into me. Joker, Batman, Babs... they all tumble like a barrel of fish, flopping around, shoving each other to the side.

“Bruce—” I start. I try, I really do, but Bruce is already at the Batcomputer, typing away at the keyboard, the files of all Arkham inmates popping up on the wall of screens. I bite my tongue hard. It’s not important right now. It’s stupid. Stupid... why should I care how he thinks I did? Stupid... but... how are things between us? My stomach

churns. Does he still think I'm useless? That I can't do my job? That I'm so incompetent that now the Joker's after me?

I swallow hard, the motion getting stuck on the lump in my throat. The chill is still there. It won't go away; it won't leave. Selfish... but... shouldn't I be helping with this? Two are better than one. "Bruce, what do you—"

"Go to bed, Dick." His voice cuts through the nippy air of the cave, and whether he meant to or not, it's a slap across the face. I want to help. It's my job. Selfish... but no! I'm his partner! I shake my head hard. Things were so much simpler when I was younger, so new, so inexperienced. Back when Batman was always right.

I move toward the elevator, brushing past Alfred, ignoring the look he gives me. *It's just Bruce being Bruce.* I try to convince myself as the steel tube shoots me back up to the Manor. *He just wants to keep you safe. He is worried about the Joker. He doesn't have the time to worry about that fight. He trusts you.*

But if he trusts you, I can't stop the other voice from arguing, trying to close my eyes against the pain pounding behind my eyes. *Then why doesn't he let you help? Why does he push you away, keep you in the dark?*

“He wants to keep me safe,” I mumble, my arms pulling in close, hugging myself. “Safe... that’s the rule. No mistakes. If you make a mistake, you’re dead.”

Safe? Sure. The voice tickles my ears. I can’t stop it. I can’t block it out. *He just thinks you’re a child. Weak. That you can’t handle yourself. Sidekick. Failure.*

“No.” My voice is barely a wisp in Bruce’s office as I step out, greeted by the hushed atmosphere of the Manor. I can’t argue with myself anymore. I can’t. I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to think about any of it. Because it makes no sense.

He trusts me enough to lead a team of young heroes with no experience, basically forming them into the heroes they’re going to be, but he doesn’t trust me to handle myself in the city where I was raised as a hero? He trusted me when I was young and green and tiny, but not now, when I’m older and stronger and know more about what I’m actually doing?

I pound a palm into my forehead. No, I’m overthinking it. I’m overreacting. Everything’s going to be okay. We’ll deal with the Joker like we always do, I’ll go to Homecoming with Babs and Bruce, and I will... work things out. Yeah... everything’s fine.

But no, my mind won't stop whirling, questions sneaking up when I least expect them, pouncing on me unawares. My dream, or nightmare, isn't much better. It's back to that run-down factory and that out-of-tune music box. Only, someone laughs from inside, the noise scraping at my ears. "Oh, Birdie Boy," The Joker cackles, "Batman can't save you. You can't even save yourself!"

I've never been so happy for my alarm to send me flying out of bed. The morning seems to mock me, so bright, so cheery, with the gentle breeze sending the trees dancing, the lawns rolling with the tumbling mass of fallen leaves scampering across the grass. Even Ace is having the time of his life, barking madly as he barrels after an unfortunate raccoon who managed to get over the fence.

I try to distract myself during my workout by humming my favorite song, *Rockin' Robin*, echoing off the gym's walls. But even that can't seem to lift the haze, the weight that's settled over this place. And it's my fault. "Get. A. Grip. Grayson!" I huff as I swing from the bars of the trapeze, sweat rolling down my face, soaking my tank top. "It's not like the world's ending! Stupid puberty." What? I have to blame something. And I'm not about to complain about Bruce out loud. You never know with him.

I flip through the air, my word a blur, my hands reaching out,
ready to grab the next swing....

My fingers miss.

The swing falls away. My heart lurches in my chest as I plummet,
my hands still reaching out for the swing that's now feet away.

My eyes widen, a small gasp squeezing out of my lips. My heart
stops. Something flashes in front of my eyes, something I don't want to
see. A thought crashes into me, unwelcome.

I'm going to die, just like they did!

Mom reaches out for me, calling my name and screaming for me.

No!

SMACK! I slam into the thick blue mat, intentionally bringing my
arms down in a hard slap, keeping my head tucked, and letting my legs
lift up. in shoots through my back and arms, but it isn't a searing pain. It's
a dull pain, tolerable. I stay there, taking the time to breathe, to assess.
Nothing broken. Nothing injured. Just maybe a big honkin' bruise.

That trapeze isn't as tall as the one from the circus. *I'm fine... I'm
fine...*

I let my legs fall, my head thumping back on the mat, my chest heaving, my eyes staring up at the trapeze, swinging sadly above me like it's waving. Mistake, mistake, mistake. I just made a mistake.

Mistakes are unacceptable. Mistakes will get you killed.

I shut my eyes, trying to block out the oncoming wave of thoughts. Killed, killed, killed. Killed like they were killed. Killed, killed, killed. Killing joke. Was this what they saw when they died? When they lay there twisted on the cold sawdust?

I shake my head, forcing my heart to steady, my breath to even, to slow. *Calm... calm... I'm okay... Calm... you're fine.... Calm...*

“Oh dear, Master Dick!” The click of oxfords echoes through the gym, not running but walking quickly and deliberately, as always. My shoulders relax at Alfred's voice. Thank goodness it's him and not... “I heard a thump. Are you injured? Master Dick?”

“I'm fine.” I'm so glad my voice doesn't shake that I let out a long, cleansing sigh. I'm fine. I'm alive. I clench my trembling hands into fists, forcing myself to breathe, just to breathe. A shadow covers me, blocking out the glaring lights. I open one eye and squint up at Alfred. His lips are pursed into a thin line, his eyebrows furrowed as he

scans me, his sharp eyes taking in everything. Finally satisfied, he nods stiffly.

“Nothing broken, I hope?” Alfred steps to the side as I flip up to my feet, pushing off with my hands, willing my knees not to wobble and my stomach not to lurch. “Everything where it should be?”

“I’d hope so.” I roll my shoulders, wincing when the pain bites back. I’m fine... I’m okay... I’m fine... “It wasn’t that far.”

“Master Dick...” Alfred’s hands slip behind his back. I try to ignore that soft look in his eyes. “Are you alright?”

No. No, I’m not. What gave that away? But I give him a small smile and a nod, taking another long breath. “Yeah... I just missed the swing.”

“Hmm.” Alfred looks me over again. The soft look turns sad. I look away. He knows. How could he not? I mean, he reads Bruce like an open book; how much easier would I be? “Master Dick, you should speak with him.”

I jump, whipping around to look at him, ready to laugh. But the look on his face... oh. Oh, he’s serious. He knows. I shove my hands into my pockets.

Alfred's mustache pulls into a frown, his eyes still searching me intently. "Master Dick, you cannot go on like this."

"You know him. He won't listen to me." I flinch at my own words. That came out way more bitter than it should've. Wow, Grayson, why don't you tell us how you really feel? "I mean," I try to make up for it. I can't have Alfred looking at me like this. Sad, shocked, "You know him. You heard what he said."

"You should not believe that for a second, Master Dick." Alfred's voice is challenging, rising to meet mine. His hands reach out and gently grab my shoulders. The tension on my neck slowly dissolves, though the churning in my stomach doubles. "Master Bruce cares for you deeply. You must speak with him."

But how? Bruce always interrupts. How can I ever get any words in to explain myself? Besides, talk to Bruce about feelings? Ha! Yeah right. I'm not a scared little kid who sits on the couch with him anymore, nervous about going to school. Still, I know Alfred will get on me until I do, especially now that he's brought it up. So I nod slowly, trying to ignore the racing thoughts of how that will go.

How do I even start that conversation?

“Good man.” Alfred pats me on the shoulders, his voice sliding right back into his clipped usual. “And do it sooner rather than later, Master Dick.” He sniffs, brushing nonexistent lint off my slick shoulders. “I also must live in the middle of this kerfuffle. And that is not pleasant for anyone.”

I laugh, and for what seems like the first time in too long, the laugh isn’t forced. It does make me feel better, the smile lifting a horrible weight off my chest. Because Alfred’s right, this isn’t ‘pleasant’ for anyone. Yes, I will talk to Bruce if it kills me.

Alfred makes me pancakes. I know, I know, I had pancakes two days ago, but seriously, Alfred knows me so well. Besides, pancakes are just the perfect comfort food. I scarf them down, forcing the fall, the impending doom, and my upcoming chat with Bruce out of my head. Because today I get to go to school. Yes, I *get* to; I don’t have to. Do you know why? Because Babs is going to be there. And she is officially my date for Homecoming.

Yeah... It’s still weird. But not as weird as that strange period where both of us, well, okay, when Babs wanted me to say something, and I had no idea that I had a crush on my best friend.

Yesterday I asked, so of course, she was in a good mood. But today? I guess today is when the fun really begins. As soon as I check my phone when I get out of the shower, I have fifty texts from Kory detailing all the amazing things the team is doing in Jump, and about the same amount from Babs telling me that she has so many things to tell me and show me at school.

So I sit and chat with Alfred on the way to Gotham Academy, every moment sending my chest lifting. He tells me about a party that took place at Wayne Manor while I was gone, and let me tell you, the way this butler describes the socialite crowd cracks me up. By the time I get to school, I forget about Bruce, almost, and walk right into an ambush.

Okay, so it's not really an ambush, but Babs does emerge out of the shadows again, her arm immediately looping through mine, her eyes sparkling and excitable. Apparently, she really isn't mad at me for last night. Well, I'll take all the small wins I can get.

"Okay, so I know you won't really care, but I want your opinion!" Babs pulls me to our bench, and I laugh, giving a thumbs up to some of the guys who send silent cheers and less than subtle guffaws my way. I plop down on the bench, Babs leaning closer, shoving her phone in my

face. “Personally, I think it’s a little too much, with all the glitter and things, but I need to know what you think.”

I blink at the screen. “Well, I think it’s a dress.” It is, indeed, a dress. Sparkly, purple, and pretty, I suppose. What? I’m not the biggest fan of clothes, and wait a minute, is Babs asking me about what dress she should wear? Aw man, what’ve I gotten myself into?

“Way to go, Genius.” Babs rolls her eyes, but her lips twitch. “I want your *opinion*. You know, what do you think about how it looks?”

“Well, I’m wearing all black and white.” I hand the phone back to her, or at least I try to. “So I think you can go with any dress you want.”

“You’re no fun.” Babs huffs, flipping the screen with her thumb, showing me the next dress. It’s still purple but with fewer sparkles and ruffles. More simple. More, Babs, I guess. “What about this one? Personally, I like it better, more my style. But do you think it’s too plain?”

“I do like that one better, but Babs, I don’t *do* shopping.” I nod at the other girls chatting and laughing in the courtyard. “Wouldn’t one of them be better to ask?”

“I mean, sure?” Babs shrugs, shoving her phone back into her pocket. “But most of them would say to go for the first one. What do *you* think? You, personally?”

“Um... go with what you want?” I hold up my hands as Babs gives me ‘the look,’ trying to stop the grin from teasing my face. Really, after last night and this morning? I’d take this kind of problem any day. “What? I’m not good with clothes! You already said that I don’t really care!”

“You’re no help.” Babs sighs, letting her head drape over the back of the bench, her hair falling in thick curls today, free of braids or buns. For a moment, she stares morosely at the bluish-brownish sky above before a smile cracks her lips, and she lets out a small laugh. That laugh turns into a full-on bout of laughter, not giggles, thank goodness. My chest buzzes with warmth. “But you’re right. You aren’t good with clothes.”

“Hey!” I’m not offended because it’s true, but I still put a hand to my chest, trying to look dignified, my lips twitching, trying so hard not to smile. It’s good to have this Babs back, even when she does talk about things I have no idea about. “I’m not that bad!”

“You only wear your school uniform and suits.” One of her eyebrows quirks up, and I’m distinctly reminded of Alfred. Oh boy. And here I thought *I* was taking after him. “Honestly, I don’t think you’re capable of dressing casually.”

“Oh yeah?” I tuck my arms behind my head. “How about I show up to Homecoming in a T-shirt and jeans? Then would you believe me?”

“I dare you.” Babs pulls her legs up onto the bench, crossing them, hands on her bright yellow Converse. “I dare you to show up at Homecoming in a T-shirt and jeans. Good luck getting past Alfred like that.”

“Yeah... you’re right.” I snicker at the thought of the subdued disapproval on Alfred’s face if I stepped into the limo in one of my printed T-shirts and pairs of jeans, complete with sneakers and my crazy bedhead. “Besides, I already promised you I’d suffer through a cummerbund, and I’m not going back on my promise.”

“Good.” She nudges me, blowing a strand of stray bright orange hair out of her eyes. “You do look nice in your suits.”

“Aw, was that a compliment?” I sit up straighter, waving at the courtyard. “Did you hear that, everyone? Babs swa—”

Babs slaps a hand over my mouth, her glare so cute my laugh vibrates against her palm. “You doof!” She hisses. “What are you doing?”

I take her hand off, wiggling my eyebrows. “What? I want that to be solidified in the stones of history.”

“Oh boy.” She shakes her head, pulling out her Batjournal, trying her best to look annoyed, even though I can see the grin playing with her lips. “You are insufferable.”

“I know, I know, thank you, thank you.” I lean over, trying to read the scrawling writing on the pages of the journal, only for Babs to quickly flip to a new page filled with news articles. “Whatch’a working on?”

“The Joker.” Babs pulls up a newer-looking article, handing it to me as she scans through the pages. “I’m compiling a section about him from Dad’s database and whatever I can get my hands on.”

Her voice is different, not as playful. That makes sense. It’s no secret that the Joker murdered her mom. My hands go cold as I scan the article. It’s from our latest fight, the time when I messed up. I flip through the paper, not knowing what to expect. A tale of failure, Robin messing up, and almost getting killed.

But no. Victims of the night tell of a young vigilante, so brave, so strong, his words comforting, his kindness unnatural. His courage unparalleled. My hands go still, but my heart flutters. Is that how they see me? How *they* saw me? It doesn't seem real. This has to be about someone else, another young hero.

But there it is. I saved them, and they saw. They know. My chest surges with warmth. It's not because of pride or ego. I mean, those do get a nice little boost, but no. They saw. I saved them. They lived, and they're safe.

And isn't that what matters in the end?

Babs chatters on about Joker, his history with Batman and Robin, and so forth. But I look at the article, then I look at Babs. Right now? Everything's alright. Right now? I couldn't care less about dresses or suits. Because Homecoming isn't just going to be a party. I'm going to be at school with friends. We are going to have a good time.

Everything's going to be okay.

So I start counting down the days. Three to go.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DISORDER IN THE DYNAMIC DUO

A shadow creeps through Arkham, slipping through the halls. They already got through the gates, silent, screens flickering as they passed. The Shadow melds with the walls, disappearing into the darkness, the soft tread of his heavy boots covered by the nightly noises; The drips of the leaking stone, the echo of shutting doors, the screams of the inmates banging on their cell walls.

No one challenges him. No one sees.

Not even the guards on patrol, with their guns at the ready, their muttering complaints bouncing down the corridor, notice the shape slipping past. So he skulks forward, a ghost in the darkness, a whisper in the draft.

He works his way, just like he did before, passing by door after door, avoiding the hands that reach for him, clawing, desperate for a way out. For escape. They moan, they cry, they laugh. And the Shadow scoffs. Pathetic what these poor creatures are reduced to. Pathetic that he can waltz in unchallenged.

Everyone in this city is pathetic, to the Shadow at least. With only one exception. Someone stands above the rest here, a strong pillar amidst the madness. And it is time to see if that pillar will break.

He arrives at a certain cell, pausing before it. Within the confines of stone and mortar, a madman leaps, giggling like a schoolchild. For a moment, the Shadow hesitates. Perhaps this plan of his is too risky. Maybe he should take a different approach.

For he wants the pillar to be tested, not killed. And one never knows with those who balance on the line of insanity.

But no. The time is at hand, his quarry ripe for the picking. For madmen are useful in a time such as this. A time for chaos.

The Shadow taps the door lightly, his knuckles rapping on the thick steel. Laughter explodes from inside, barely stopping long enough to hear—

“It’s time.”

“Joker’s free.” Two words, just two, and all the excitement and joy I felt this morning with Babs comes crashing down. My fists clench as I stand behind Bruce, my eyes locked on the video footage of Arkham Asylum, looking at a cell.

An empty cell.

Why do they always have to escape? Really, what is security like over there? Do they just take coffee breaks all day long? Five-hour naps instead of shifts? I mean, really, it's so pathetic. I wonder how they are the most famous psych ward in the US of A.

"Has he made any announcements yet?" I keep my voice steady and calm. But my heart lurches in my chest like a student driver on the road, screeching to a stop and then speeding up. Joker. Out. Again? This soon? Not good.

"No." Bruce stands, his jaw set, his steely eyes glaring at the screen as if he could will the Joker back in his cell, behind the bars that protect Gotham from his whacked-out ideas of fun. And he's not the only one.

"Wow. That's not like him at all." I slide into the seat, slipping past Bruce, my fingers flying across the keyboard. In seconds, we have access to all video footage from Arkham, each monitor flashing a different cell, even the break room, office, therapist rooms, all that good stuff. I know, I know, hacking into a prison seems a little sketchy, but hey, if Batman does it, I can do it too. Besides, it's part of my job.

I find the video feed I'm looking for, one that shows a cell bedazzled with graffiti and slathered paint depicting anything from a simple smiley face to things I wouldn't care to look closer at. You know, creepy clowns, a hangman game that's a little more... enthusiastic, and so on.

Only a couple of hours ago, Joker was still in his cell, playing hopscotch with boxes scratched onto the floor, a dead rat as the marker. Well, that's one way to play, I guess. I raise my eyebrows for a moment, but quickly press fast forward. The day skips by, leaving Bruce and me to watch as Joker rambles and paints through his day, scribbling on his floor, jumping rope with his straightjacket's loosened sleeves—who put that on him?—and even crooning an old lullaby.

I cringe at the out-of-tune keys. Yes, Arkham makes sure they record audio, too, all part of the 'knowing their inner thoughts so they can help them' thing. All the good that's done them.

After 'platytime' a guard brings the Joker dinner of some unnamed mushy brown slop, then it's lights out, then— "There!" I stop, Bruce peering over my shoulder, his hand gripping the seat. Untrained eyes wouldn't be able to see, but there's a flicker, the slightest glitch of

the feed. A blink and you'll miss it moment. But it's very much there. And more of a problem than most people would think.

Because the next frame of the tape, Joker's gone. Gone, vanished, without so much as a trace. Not a strand of green hair or a peel of laughter.

I quickly scroll through all the hall cameras, running through all escape routes and all possible exits. They all do the same thing. Flicker just the tiniest bit, then jump back to normal. "From the way the cameras track," I cock my head, typing something else into the computer before pointing at the appropriate screen, "I'd say that he got out through the back."

That's so unlike him, though. Joker's the kind of person who flaunts through the front, skipping, laughing, and leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. There has to be something else, something we're missing. I flip the screen back to his cell, peering at the shadows, my eyes scanning for clues.

"There." Batman nods, his finger pointing to something flashing in the corner, a reflection in a pool of water confirming my suspicions. The rippling, blurry reflection of one of the digital clocks from the hall

winks at us from the corner of the cell, barely visible in this definition, but undeniably there.

My eyes widen. I turn to Bruce, my stomach plummeting. “This was a *thirty-minute* time skip. This wasn’t just a cut in the feed, Bruce. Someone tampered with the footage.”

But if they can mess with it, I can mess with it better. I stick my tongue out in concentration, a bad habit that’s never gone away, sadly, and scan the list of people who had access to the footage. As soon as I bring up the page, plain white glares into my eyes. Bright, void. No names pop up. No history, no time stamps, nothing.

Whoever it was not only tampered with the footage, they also wiped all traces of their existence. Alright, then. Challenge accepted. “They’re good.” I barely think twice, sweeping the system for viruses or any trace data left over. Come on, come on—Nothing. They left no signature, nothing for me to grab onto. Nothing. I sit back in the chair, glancing up at B. “I mean, really good. So no one from the Joker’s gang. This guy’s a professional.”

“Search all hackers that could have any connection. Anything.” Bruce moves to another keyboard, sliding into another chair, his fingers flying, his eyes glued to the screen, casting his face in a soft blue. “Send

the information over, and I'll cross-reference with our database. If we find how he got out—”

“Gotcha.” I dive into my work, not wanting to shatter this peace between us, this comfortable, if not still a little cold, silence. Things are almost back to normal. And maybe, when we catch the Joker, and this all blows over, I'll talk to Bruce, and things really will go back to normal.

But for now? I do my job. My eyes scan our CDB, or criminal database, darting from one file to another. Hundreds of names whizz by; really, how many hackers are in the world? But in a matter of minutes, I whittle it down to a list of fifty-seven names, sending the files Batman's way.

After that, I pull up Joker's history, regular stomping grounds, potential and unexpected hideout locations, and allies still out and free. I frown, my eyes locking on one name in particular. Harley's out. Of course, she is. Why not? That's a problem.

“Locations?” I straighten at Bruce's voice, a grin cracking my face as I send the list over to Bruce, pushing my feet off the cold stone of the Batcave floor, rolling up beside him, squinting at the map that spreads out across one of the larger screens. The territories are marked, labeled, and ready, with several locations blinking red.

Targets acquired.

“I say we do a sweep of Amusement Mile.” I point to the isle and the west side of Gotham, letting my finger sweep along the road and across the bridges. “Then fan out from there.”

“Hmm.” Bruce nods slowly. My heart lifts. Yes! Points for me! Maybe if I keep this up, the conversation might not even be necessary. Maybe, if I do a good job tonight, he’ll notice that I can handle myself, just like with Two Face. “Suit up. Let’s go.”

I slip into my Robin suit. I pull on my green undershirt, slide on my red vest, hop around as I yank on my boots, and smooth my mask over my face, checking and double-checking my utility belt. Satisfied, I slide down the pole to the lower level, snatching my now glitter-free helmet from the plush leather seat of my motorcycle and sliding it on my head.

Time to catch a clown.

Batman leaps into the Batmobile, Bruce gone, hidden under his cowl, replaced with the man, the myth, the legend. I slip on my motorcycle, and Batman revs the engine, the grumbling thunder filling the cave, sending the bats flying to a frenzy. I can’t help my smile. Sure,

we're chasing the Joker, but I can't help but think everything's going to be alright.

Tires screech as Bruce whips the car around to the exit tunnel, the concrete doors grinding open, revealing a tunnel leading down into the rock, lights flickering at the sides and the top, running in strips, just like a runway. As soon as the doors open enough, the Batmobile's gone, the headlights disappearing in an instant, zero to sixty in point five seconds.

Okay, so not really, but it's cool to think about it that way.

With a muffled roar, I start my R-cycle, the engine purring underneath me, ready, waiting. I shoot forward after Batman, whooping as I leave the cave, the tunnel closing shut behind me, leaving me in a huge concrete tube illuminated by the blue lights that whiz by, blurring into a single line. The Batmobile tearing ahead in front of me fills the tunnel, echoing and re-echoing, pounding against the mufflers in my helmet, trying to get to my ears.

I laugh again, popping a wheelie just for the sake of it. Because right now? Everything's alright. I love using the tunnels. You drive under the bay, through the city, and no one knows you're there. Plus, there's no traffic down here. Or rampaging super villains. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. Underground roads. A genius idea, if I do say so myself.

The tunnels split off, branching into a system that runs under Gotham as soon as we hit Amusement Mile, reaching out like roots, popping up all over the place with hidden entrances. I follow the Batmobile to the exit, zipping out of a large, sloping sewer grate that slides open for us at the push of a button, the night air chilling my arms, cooling the sweat and heat from the tunnel. I flip my headlight off, screeching to a stop, whipping to the side of the road, kicking up dust clouds. In one swift motion, I leap off my cycle, freeing my head of the helmet and tucking it under my arm.

The circus grounds, the zoo, and the aquarium stretch out in front of us, the smell of the sea and stale popcorn tickling my nose. Grass rolls in the wind, rippling like the ocean waves boxing us in on all sides, long and thick. The circus grounds stand empty save an old Ferris wheel that creaks in the wind and a line of booths, long abandoned wrappers, and torn tickets skipping across the fields.

Beyond that, the zoo stands under soft lights, the nightly noises of the animals alien against the screeching cry of seagulls overhead. The parking lot stands empty save for one car, most likely belonging to a night watchman. Beyond that, the Aquarium sits dark and undisturbed, only the outside lights blinking against the rolling fog sweeping in from

the island's east end; it's only visitors, the pelicans and sea birds nesting on the flat roof. I walk over to where Batman stands, scanning the area ahead. Nothing. No people, no headlights dancing their way down the roads or bridges, no sign of anything out of the ordinary.

But that isn't right, at least, if the Joker's here. It just isn't his style. Something's wrong. Horribly wrong. The Joker always makes a big show of getting out. He never does anything without his signature fanfare. Sneaking through the back, not even coming to his favorite stomping grounds, it's not right...

A killing joke is coming. I can't get Two Face's words out of my head. Were they true? I mean, why should we trust a lunatic with a dual personality? Then again, he isn't one to beat around the bush with threats. But wouldn't Joker make a big fuss about it all? He isn't one for traps or subtle kidnappings. Wouldn't he want to tell Batman and me about it himself? Rub it in, keep us guessing?

Then again, isn't that what he's doing now?

"What do you think, B-Man?" I tap my Bo staff against my shoulder, sparing a glance up at him. His jaw's set, eyes scanning the area ahead, his mind no doubt churning, trying to figure all this out, just like

me. Maybe he has it all figured out. Then again, how can you put logic to anything the Joker does? “Should we do our normal sweep?”

“This isn’t like him.” Batman turns to me, and I can imagine the look in Bruce’s eyes behind that hard mask. Concern creases his frown and tenses his shoulders. He’s ready, waiting. He’s remembering what Two Face said, I guarantee it. “Something is very off about all this.”

“Tell me about it.” Something swells in my chest. Even though this isn’t the best situation, Bruce and I are talking and working together. The chill has dissipated. My heart leaps. Finally! Things are back to normal! Just give us a common thing to work toward, and we work through things, I guess. Or at least put them on the back burner. “Do you think he has a partner?”

“No.” While Batman pulls up a holo from his gauntlet, I tap at mine, scrolling through the files, searching for a possible connection. Harley could have gotten him out, but she isn’t one for slipping away silently, either. That’s the problem with all potential allies of theirs. None of them have any sort of stealth mission, prison breaking, and breakout expertise. “We should do our normal sweep. One of his men might have heard something.”

An idea hits me. Something that just might make everything easier, something that just might have everything fixed between us. I lick my lips. If he trusts me to lead a team and go after Two Face, he should trust me to do this, right? And if he trusts me to do this and I do a good job, everything will be fine. Besides, what difference would it even make if we're just looking for Joker and interrogating goons? I'm a little more intimidating now; height and a deeper voice, and the fact that I'm not a twelve-year-old in a suit helps a little.

"You know," I cross my arms loosely, my hands twitching, "We could cover more ground if we each took a side. I'll take Amusement Mile since there probably isn't much to go over here, while you start in the city, and we can meet in the middle. That way, we can get twice as much city cleared." It makes sense. The Titans did this all the time, and it definitely saved the headache of taking the entire day to cover the city. Besides, if I sweep this desolate rock, we can knock it off the list while Batman works on the more important spots.

It's not asking much; in fact, I'd say it's a pretty reasonable suggestion. A little freedom for me while still being mostly safe and helpful.

I wait for Batman to nod and say, ‘*Yes, Robin. That is a good idea.*’ To even give me a small, proud look. I’d even take a pat on the shoulder or a slight smile and a nod. Instead, he doesn’t look at me. Instead, I just get one word cutting through the night, sharper than any blade Joker could throw at me.

“No.”

My stomach plummets, my arms dropping like limp, soggy noodles. No? What does he mean, no? It’s the perfect plan! And more than that, he knows I can do it if he’s read anything about my time in Jump City. “Why not?” I force my words to be steady, even. I will not be a bratty, spoiled child who whines when things don’t go his way. I will not stoop that low. But the chill runs down my back again, sending the hair on my arms prickling, and invisible hands build that wall between Bruce and me back up. No! I can’t let this happen. We were working well together! Everything was back to normal! We—“We could go a lot faster if we—”

“No.” Finally, Batman turns to me. His face is stone, and his eyes slit. To my eternal shame, I take a step back, swallowing hard. He looms over me like one of the gargoyles of Wayne Manor. What I once saw as dark and comforting, like a blanket, smothers me. “The Joker is after

you.” Batman’s growl sends my head into a tizzy, snapping through the air, shattering the silent night. “You are not going off by yourself.”

I take deep, even breaths. I can see his point. I get it. Only... “B,” I hold up my hands, keeping my face open, earnest. I won’t be angry. I won’t be mad. I won’t. Why should I be mad? “It was just a suggestion. Besides, it’s just a routine sweep. I would radio you as soon as I spotted anything! Just think of—”

“You are not going out into Gotham on your own. It’s not safe.” My face burns. I can’t help it. Keeping me safe from the Joker, I can understand. I get that. He’s after me, hello! I was the one Two Face gave the message to! So yes, keeping me safe. Sure.

But I can’t help but think that he doesn’t trust me. What does he think that I won’t radio him? I always radio him, even when we’re on patrol together! Does he think I can’t handle myself? That I can’t make smart decisions? Does he think I’m just a run-of-the-mill, stupid, reckless teenage boy? It’s not safe... what, did he not train me to handle myself? Did he not say he wouldn’t let me out onto the streets unless I was ready to beat him in a fight?

Hello, that was two years ago! If anything, I'm more capable than I've ever been! He's the one who sent me off to run my own city, my own team. He's the one who trusted me enough to handle it.

And now... what? I'm suddenly back to being that sad little boy who raced out into the streets with hardly any training, just on a whim? I try to measure my breaths, to keep my hands from clenching into fists. No, I can be responsible. I can be trustworthy. Just watch. "It was just... a suggestion," I repeat, swallowing hard. His decision. He's the head of this team. I can do this.

It was only a suggestion.

"Let's go, Robin." Without another word, Bruce is back in the Batmobile, zipping away, leaving me in the dust. Literally. I cough, waving away the thick plume, hacking on the dirt that sticks to my tongue, crunching on my teeth. Well, then. That was rude.

I shake my head hard, refusing to let it bother me. Bruce just wants to protect me. Bruce still trusts me. He's just on edge from the Joker's threat, that's all.

I leap onto my R-cycle, sliding on my helmet and racing after Batman, Bruce... Batman... I shake my head again, trying to keep the intrusive thoughts at bay. It doesn't work. It's the same dance over and

over again. *No, he doesn't trust you. Why would he say that you are never allowed in Gotham by yourself if he did?* Then right back to. *But he does trust me. He let me handle Two Face. He trusts me enough to send me off on my own.* Then looping right to. *Yeah, Two Face is a pathetic A-lister. A sad excuse for a fighter.* I shove the thoughts away, but they circle back, sneaking around, whispering, scraping at my mind until it's trapped in a whirlwind. *If he thought you could handle yourself,* the voice sneers. *Why does he treat you like a child?*

No... no... he trusts me. Yeah, trust. I catch up to the Batmobile, turning onto the bridge crossing the Miaganni Channel, my eyes locked on the city's lights ahead. Focus. I have to stay focused. Don't think about Bruce, or Batman, don't think about that. The Joker's out of Arkham. The Joker's on the loose. You need to catch him.

And if distraction nearly got me killed before, I can't help but think of where it might get me this time, with an actual threat hanging over my head like a volcano getting ready to erupt.

"So, Diamond District first?" My voice echoes in my helmet, thin and strained, the forced lightness hurting my throat. We emerge onto the streets of main Gotham, weaving through the Wednesday night traffic, people pulling over to let us pass as if we're official police or something.

The thought warms my sinking heart the tiniest bit, adding some real levity to my words. “Then down south from there?”

“No.” The Batmobile surges ahead of me, blowing through a red light. There’s that word again. No. Really, am I such a child that that word makes me want to cry? Pathetic. Such a sissy. Gritting my teeth, I race through the intersection, the red light flashing its warning, swerving to avoid the oncoming cars. Sweat beads on my forehead, slicking my palms under my gloves. Unlike the chase with Bane, something heavy settles in the air, like a wet blanket on a fire. “We’re going straight to East End and the Bowery.”

By Arkham. I suppose that makes sense. But if I were the Joker, which thank goodness I’m not, I would do something unexpected. So I would personally, again, thank goodness I’m not the Joker, go somewhere where my target, aka me, Robin the Boy Wonder, would know a possible connection.

Two Face.

What if Joker is lingering in those tunnels where we busted Two Face? It’s somewhere the GCPD wouldn’t look, and somewhere Batman and Robin could draw a connection. Plus, some of Two Face’s men were

not brought into Blackgate, and one of them might be a hacker if I remember the files right.

“But if he has contacts with Two Face,” I push my cycle faster, trying to catch up with the Batmobile, the street signs flying past, their fluorescent letters blurred. Headlights and taillights flash in my eyes like glowing candy canes, nearly blinding me. “Then he might go there for supplies. Or even have a hideout set aside near there. That one warehouse, the candy factory? It—”

“We’re going to East End.” Batman’s voice is too loud in my ear. Biting hard. It stings. “We will start from there.”

“But I think that—”

“You do not make the decisions, Robin.” My bike swerves, nearly slamming headlong into an oncoming van. The honking horn and panicked face of the driver as I pass them by safely are lost to the noise of my heart pounding in my ears. “Don’t think just because you led the Titans that you can overstep your bounds.”

My heart stops. Everything goes still, the cars, the lights, the rushing of the Gotham streets, everything. His voice rakes at my ears, demanding, accusing. Again, when he mentions the Teen Titans, he does not say I did a good job. That I was an okay leader. I would even take that

I did a decent, no, *passable* job. But overstepping my bounds? My fists wringing the handles of my bike, my breath hitching, my cheeks burning as hot as a grill. How dare he! It was just a suggestion! Something that could go somewhere useful! What is his problem? Is it because I did such a good job with the Titans? That I have just as much of an opinion as him now? That I finally pitch ideas, question orders? That I actually am trying to have a say and invest in what we do? Is that it?

“I’m your partner, not your sidekick.” I wince at the bitterness in my words, the pain stabbing my chest over and over, the sick feeling churning in my gut. My vision’s washed in red, pulsing, pounding. “I’ve *never* been your sidekick.”

Silence. A horrible, gut-turning silence. I grind my teeth, blinking my eyes hard, my swallow getting caught in the lump building in my throat. I hate this. I hate it. Why can’t things go back to the way they were?

“We go to East End.” His words are final, absolute, like a prison door slamming shut in front of me. He charges forward, and I follow, fighting the pressure building behind my eyes, the tears that sting, the tears I won’t allow.

Robin doesn’t cry.

You need to speak with him, Master Dick. Alfred's words nag at me, even as I pull behind the Batmobile, trying to stay in Bruce's blind spot. I can't let him see my face. I can't...

Calm down. I shake my head hard. *He trusts you. He respects you. Of course, he does.* But more and more, I can't fight this sinking feeling settling in my stomach. I can't stop the thoughts, the whispers. So even when I fly through the streets, the wind catching my cape, the lights shining around me, people waving and shouting at me from the streets, I drown in my thoughts.

And I don't say a word.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TRY TO ARGUE WITH BATMAN

That night I don't sleep. I don't want to. We didn't find Joker, which means he's still out there doing who knows what. But more than that, Bruce didn't say a word to me for the rest of the night. And I didn't say anything either. It felt so wrong to stand by Batman as he interrogated lowlifes, not commenting, not laughing, or giving them a hard time.

They noticed. I got so many, 'Why so quiet, Bird Boy? Scared of the Joker?' that I wanted to punch something. I needed to hit something. So I did. Only, I saved it for home. Instead of going straight to my room, as soon as we arrived in the cave, I made a beeline right for the gym, ignoring the looks that Bruce gave me.

Punching bags are a miracle. Something you can brutally pound into a pulp, and no one gets hurt. My mind whirls as I slam into the thing, kick after punch after kick. My head beats in time with my heart, thoughts hounding me again and again. It's too much. Even as I abuse the bag, sweat stinging my eyes, dripping down my nose, soaking my tank top, I don't stop.

Bruce should trust me, shouldn't he? I mean, only messing up once, okay, so twice, I'll admit, and now the Joker's after me, but what else is new? I'll tell you what. I'm a teenager. I'm older. And he's scared that I'm stepping up.

Whack! My heel catapults into the bag, sending it swinging on its chain, creaking on its hook. It comes back toward me. *Wham! Wham!* I land two punches. It swings out again. *Bam!* I land another kick, whipping around, leaping off the ground to hit higher up. *Smack!*

The bag isn't a bag anymore. It isn't Joker or Two Face or any bad guy. To my eternal shame, I don't see a villain when I look at the bag.

I see Bruce.

Bam! I kick him, my eyes burning, my veins pulsing in my neck. *Whack!* Is that what he thinks I am? Reckless? Me? Untrustworthy? Undisciplined? *Smack!*

It isn't until four o'clock in the morning that I finally realize that my arms sing, my legs burn, and my knuckles are scuffed and sore, worn through the wraps. I let myself fall onto the ground, my chest heaving, my head falling back, my eyes shutting against the bright lights. Sleep, sleep, sleep. Who needs sleep? I don't need sleep.

I crawl to my feet, gritting my teeth as I stagger, catching myself on the punching bag, which, if you've ever tried that, works just as well as you would think. Mr. Super Acrobat over here, you know, Mr. Super Balance and flexibility, finds himself flat on his face, forehead pressed into the thick, cushioned pad. I shake my head, my hair clinging to my skin, too hot, too close.

Boom! I slam my fist into the mat, the hit echoing in the otherwise morgue-like manor. I want to fix things. I need to talk to Bruce. That's what Alfred said, right? But every time I talk to him... I shut my eyes, shaking my head against the thundering thoughts, the pounding, the slamming. Why do I always seem to make things worse? Isn't there anything I can do to prove myself? Does it even matter to him? Why should I even bother if he thinks I'm a screwup anyway?

I finally find my way up onto my feet, my legs wobbling as if I just got off a boat, sending me staggering like a drunk clown, my wraps missing my duffle, my shirt landing like a sad pelican on the gym floor. I stumble through the Manor, stopping in the portrait hall.

Only a couple of days ago, I looked up at the family portrait of Alfred, Bruce, and me with such warmth and joy. Now, I scowl up at the little twelve-year-old. He's so lucky, smiling without a care in the world,

with that mischievous twinkle in his eye. Then I waved. Now? All I can do is mutter. “Just wait, kid. You’ll wish you were twelve and young forever.”

Wow. This stinks. I’m not even an adult yet, and I already want to go back.

My hand drags along the wall, skimming the decorative wallpaper, the potted plants, the mounted swords gleaming in the soft, dimmed lights of the halls. That is, until I reach a room. Not my room, oh no, I’m not quite there. No, I don’t come to this room too often, even though it means the world to me. I look at yet another portrait hanging on the wall, my heart squeezing, my breath racing out in a sigh. Mom. Dad. Uncle Rick. All of them smile and laugh. They surround me with memories and wrap me with what could’ve been.

I can’t help but wonder if they hadn’t died, where I’d be right now. Still an acrobat soaring through the big top, amazing the crowds with our deadly daring feats, most likely. I take a step into the room, something choking me yet releasing all the tension in my shoulders at the same time.

On the cozy armchair sits a blanket at the ready, one of Mom’s quilts she brought from her home country, Romania. The soft reds,

greens, yellows, and blues beckon me, but I can't sit down, not yet. I walk over to one of the display cabinets. On a shelf sits Mom's makeup kit and Dad's first trapeze awards, still polished to perfection.

But right next to those sits an old, wooden music box, the lid scratched and stained with age, the carvings of flowers faded. The handle's rusty, but I gently pull it off the shelf, taking it back to the chair with me.

I snuggle under the quilt, which still smells like Mom, bringing the memory of pancakes, pillow fights, and midnight lullabies from a long time ago. Slowly, I crank the handle on the music box, the clicking reminding me of when she would still tuck me in, keeping the box on my bunk. That was years before they died, years and years. But it's still fresh in my mind, clear as day. Her olive skin, deep sapphire eyes, and hair falling in silky waves over her shoulders, the color of freshly baked bread.

Behind her, Dad and Uncle Rick sat, one reading a magazine, the other with his arms tucked behind his head, a small smile on his face.

When I can crank the music box no more, I let it go, closing my eyes and listening. The music starts clunking, slow, and out of tune. But the melody's there, and with it, I can hear her soft, gentle voice

whispering into my ear. *“Who, Who, Who? Who will talk to me, Who will answer me, Who knows why I sing who?”* I hug the quilt tighter, clutching the box to my chest. For the first time in a long time, I want her here; I want them right now. *“Who knows the reason why I sing this lullaby, Who, who, who?”* I know Bruce cares. I know that he does. But sometimes? I just want them. *“The owls are flying, I hear them all crying, Through the trees and the curtains As they hurry on home.”*

Why did you have to go? I shut my eyes tighter, thinking about them, only them. Because I can't think about Bruce. Not right now. *There's so much I want to tell you. People I want you to meet.*

“With my feet on the limb And my eyes sad and lonely, I sing who, who, who?”

I don't remember falling asleep, the music box running out of the song, creaking to a halt, the voices fading, the memory leaving. All I know is one blink, and I'm awake. The sun brushes in behind me, lighting their faces with the morning light. At least they smile at me.

I shift in the seat, doing my best not to dislodge the box, which, by some miracle, stayed pressed to my chest the entire night. I squint at the clock and blink. Or, you know, the hour of sleep I got.

I run a hand through my hair, letting it stand straight up as I yawn, stretching. A draft finds my bare skin, reminding me I left my tank sitting sadly on the gym floor. I smack my forehead. I left a mess for Alfred.

What was I thinking?

Oh, right, too many things.

I run a hand through my hair again, walking over to gently place the music box in its spot, my fingers lingering on the soft, worn wood. I open my mouth but saying something doesn't seem right. Not now. So I leave. When I emerge from the room and into the hall, I'm met with the muffled *thump* of quick, short steps until Alfred comes around the corner. Though clipped and curt as always, I can't help but notice the relief that floods his eyes when he sees me.

"Oh, Master Dick." Alfred crosses the rest of the distance between us, his eyes scanning me, his eyebrows staying low, neutral. "I was worried when I saw the state of the gymnasium. Are you alright?"

"Yeah..." I clear my throat, the rasping word scratching and painful. I sniff and run a hand under my nose. "It was just.... A rough night." I sound so pathetic, my voice cracking, my eyes red and raw. But what else can I say?

“Oh, dear.” Alfred’s lips purse, and he gives a quick nod. “Well, off you go. Training this morning, then breakfast. And,” Alfred’s eyebrows quirk just the slightest bit, his mouth twitching, “Do put a shirt on.”

I laugh. It’s short, but it’s real. It doesn’t hurt. I mean, the hurt lingers. It stings, it bites, but I do as Alfred says, making my way to my room and changing into new shorts and a loose white T-shirt, the soft fabric, though not the same as the quilt, feeling so good against my skin.

I don’t know when I made up my mind, if it was on the way to the gym or while I was on the still rings, muscling my way through a routine, but I decide that I’m not going to think about Bruce or what he said last night until this whole thing blows over. Instead, I let myself think about Homecoming.

It’s in two days. Two days, and I’ll have a nice night off with Babs. I’ll be free from all this churning and arguing in two days. If only for a few hours. So I smile. I smile when I think about how Babs was so excited about her dress, even though I don’t really care, and how she smiled when I asked her.

I think of how we’re going to goof off in the limo, driving Alfred crazy with our Batman trivia, which, embarrassingly enough, Babs

always wins. I know, right? So, by the time I'm done with my daily routine, though my limbs sing, complaining about another workout so soon after the last, my body drenched with sweat, I don't mind.

I skip to the banquet hall, ready to sit down for a nice home-cooked breakfast, maybe even talk to Alfred about where else I can take Babs for the night. A fancy restaurant, maybe? Or maybe she'll settle for Bat Burger. Yeah, I think she'd like that.

I'm so wrapped up in it all that I don't even notice *him* sitting in his place next to mine, the paper on his plate, watching me. Until I go to sit down, that is.

"Bruce?" My mouth hits the floor. He's here, sitting at the table. At breakfast. He never comes to breakfast! I didn't even know that he liked breakfast food! The thought of him eating scrambled eggs is so strange that I almost laugh. Almost.

"Morning, Dick." Bruce carefully folds his paper, his eyes steady, watching me as if I'm a bomb ready to go off. Really? Me? A bomb? What, was he spying on me last night? Actually, I wouldn't put it past him.

"Morning?" I plunk down in my chair, staring at him as if he's as alien as the Martian Manhunter. You know, with green skin and glowing

red eyes? I can't help myself. I have to ask. "What are you doing up this early?"

"Research night." Bruce shrugs as if this is the most normal thing in the world. I whip my head over to Alfred, who enters carrying a tray of fresh sizzling bacon, fluffy scrambled eggs, and crisp golden toast. It should smell heavenly, but when I look back at Bruce, something sends my stomach gurgling in complaint. I don't think I can eat. "Oh, and Dick?"

"Yes?" I'm waiting for an apology or maybe an acknowledgment of our fight. You know, Batman and Robin stuff? Instead, he slides the paper over to me, tapping the front headline. I glance down at the page. The headline in bold black letters reads: **'Upcoming Wayne Charity Event For Victims of Latest Joker Attack.'** I pick up the paper and turn to Bruce, raising an eyebrow. "That's great. What's the big deal?"

"You aren't going to Homecoming."

How can five words shatter my entire world? My heart plummets, my stomach dropping with it. Forget sick. I think I just lost my stomach completely.

I blink at him. What did he say? Did he say what I think he said? No, that can't be right. Why would he say that? He was excited for me,

rooting for me. He's the reason that I'm going in the first place!

"W-what?"

"You aren't going." Bruce pulls the paper out of my limp hands. How can he be so calm? So cold? His gray eyes meet mine, demanding. Reading. Reading everything. I try to control my hands, I really do, but they clench into fists on my lap, my fingernails digging into my palms. "It's the same night as Homecoming. Dick Grayson has to be there."

Bruce tucks the paper neatly onto his plate. "Besides, the Joker is still at large. I don't feel comfortable with you, Robin, or Dick going anywhere without me. It's not safe."

I forget about Alfred. About the eggs and bacon. I'm cold, then I'm hot, freezing, then burning to a crisp. Not go... to Homecoming? But... but... "I—" I clear my throat. I can do this. I have to do this. Because he can't do this to me. "I understand that it's important, Bruce. Really, I want to be there. And I will." I can't look at him. I find a tiny catch on the table runner and stare at that. "But I don't have to be there all night. Homecoming starts late, right? And Alfred will escort me, and there'll be chaperones and—" I finally find the courage to turn, to look him square in the eyes. "Babs is important too."

“There are people who need you, Dick.” Bruce’s voice is stern, cold. He straightens in his chair, his jaw clenching. “People who are expecting you to be there to support the cause. All night. Besides, with Joker on the loose, GA shouldn’t even be hosting Homecoming.”

He might’s well have stabbed me. Everything goes cold, numb. Is he saying that I’m selfish? Me? Selfish? Me, who wants to give Babs what she’s been dreaming of? Me, who also wants to support those people who I saved, by the way. Me, who’s stepped aside to let him take charge, respectfully, might I add. Me? Selfish?

My fingers tremble, my knuckles turning white. My breath catches, but I refuse to miss a beat. I refuse to look away. *I refuse*. “Babs has been looking forward to this.” I keep my voice deadly calm, sounding for all the world just like the man who sits beside me, staring me down. I keep going. “I’m not going just for me, Bruce. I’m going for her. So *she* can have a good night.” My voice races on. I can’t stop it. Not now. I’m slowly standing up, my hands finding the table, heat blazing back into my body.

“It would be safer for her and you if you both don’t go.” Bruce stays seated, too calm, too hard, too cold. Cold, cold, cold. “And you have other obligations.”

Other obligations? How dare he act like he's excited for me, then have me cancel on Babs two days away! How dare he presume that I can just drop anything on a whim and do everything exactly as he says! How *dare* he think that I, the one who puts everything aside every night to go out to save people, am selfish!

"I'm not you, Bruce." The words tumble out like a snowball. They roll on, faster and faster. "I don't just ditch people for my mission. I don't just leave them hanging because I have something 'better' to do." I point at him, my finger trembling, my head spinning. How dare he? How *dare* he? How dare he ask that I ditch Babs without a second thought? How dare he question my team and abilities when he's the one who trained me! "Because those people are just as important as the people we save, right? Those people, my friends, aren't just people I shove aside, not like you!" My voice deepens, hardens. I don't like it, but I can't stop myself. Bruce is blurring, my eyes pounding, burning. "I *won't* be like you, Bruce! I know how you are with other people!" I want to say 'with me,' but even though everything gushes out, I can't bear to say that. Not now.

Everything tilts like I'm on a boat, listing from side to side. I can't see. I can't think. "I'm not going to be some self-important, *arrogant*

vigilante who never trusts anyone!” I shove my chair back, taking a few shaking steps away. Alfred doesn’t intervene. I can’t even see him, not now.

I’m not done, not done yet. The floodgates have opened. The river is free. “You are the one who let me go!” Something pounds at my temples, shaking the world. “You are the one who sent me to Jump, who encouraged me to go with Babs! Why would you if—” I can’t choke, not now. Not yet. So instead, my voice slowly rises, up, up, louder, and louder. “If you were just going to disrespect them and me? To treat me like I’m still twelve?” I won’t act like a child. I won’t. I *won’t*. So I clench my fists. I won’t whine, I won’t. But I shout, my voice cracking through the air, echoing in the banquet hall. “What are you so *afraid* of, Bruce?”

A hand reaches for me, but I slap it away. No. I can’t, not now. A shadow looms over me. His voice is hard, biting. Merciless. “As long as you are under my roof in my city, you do what I say.” Bruce is that shadow—that shadow I can’t escape. That I can’t run from.

“Why would you even want me around if I just mess up all the time?” I snap, my voice finally shaking. “Why would you even want a failure by your side, anyway? I’ll just disappoint you.”

“Dick—”

“Leave me alone.” I smack his hand away again, turning for the door. I don’t run. I refuse to run. So instead, I walk as quickly as I can out of the room, out of the hall, out of the manor.

Before I know it, I’m on a motorcycle, roaring out of the garage. I don’t care if Bruce said he needed to keep an eye on me. I don’t care about the Joker being out there. I need to clear my head, and I can’t do it here.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I VISIT MY GRAVE

Somewhere in Gotham, a madman waits. He is not one to plan, oh no, because that is not who he is. But he has made plans, yes, plans that send a skip into his step. Many have tried to break the Batman, he thinks. Many, including him.

All have failed.

Some think it is because the Batman is just too strong. Unbreakable. Some think it is because he is not a man; how could he be? While others simply let their wounded pride fester in the dark, obsessing over who the Batman is and what his weakness possibly could be.

Joker wonders no such things. He doesn't have to because he knows. He knows because he has seen it. Once upon a time, when a Bat first appeared in Gotham, he was indestructible. His weakness? Innocent lives, but wasn't that the weakness of all heroes? And that Batman could easily overcome, for he was the man, the myth, and the legend. Then, Joker was his challenge, his sole focus. The favorite of the Batman.

But then the Bird came. Joker cannot help the twitch in his eye, the itch in his fingers whenever he thinks of the Bird. A little boy who

thought he was all that. A little boy who waltzed into their city. Their Bird now, Joker supposes. His Bird. Batman's Bird.

Because Batman cares for nothing else. It's ridiculous that those B-tier villains fret and sweat over breaking the Batman. For there is a chink in his armor already.

A boy-sized chink.

And Joker would love nothing more than to stick his knife into that crack and shatter it. So yes, he skips, he schemes. He has been given all he needs. Now, he waits.

For the guest of honor.

I tear out of the Manor grounds, not waiting to see if Bruce or Alfred follow, not waiting for protests or shouts. I ignore Ace's frantic barks as I race through the front gate, the metal bars swinging closed behind me, shutting me out.

The early morning sun chases away the mist as I speed through the forest surrounding Wayne Manor, kicking up drifts of leaves, and clouds of dust. My mind races, not letting me think straight. Where I'm going, what I'm doing. All I have is one desire pounding through my head. One thing I want more than anything.

Out... I want out. I need out. Away, away from it all.

Bruce's words, my words, tumble around in my head. How come I end up making things worse every time I try to talk to him about anything? It has to be some kind of record somewhere. Not that I'd want to be known for that. I shake my head hard, trying to shove the pounding away, to make it stop. It doesn't.

So I keep going.

The world tilts around me, off-kilter, off balance, but by some miracle, I don't swerve into the other lane on the two-way road or plummet into the crashing waves below. The sound of the waves pounding, splashing against the rocks melds with the swirling, sending bile surging into my throat.

Away... I need to get away.

Instead of keeping along the coast road, heading toward the Trigate Bridge and on into Gotham, my hands guide me another way, cutting through the countryside, sliding back under the safety of the shedding trees and underbrush.

The trees press around me, hiding me from the waves, their whispering soft and welcome after the booming sea cliffs behind me.

Still, my fingers strangle the handlebars, and my jaw clenches tight.

Away... I need to find someplace to hide.

Some place where they can't find me.

EverNow then, I pass by a metal gate, not unlike the one that leads to the Wayne estate, each with a different crest. Some look in use, home to Gotham's high and mighty, probably even home to some of the kids I go to school with at the Academy. Others are lost in thick curtains of ivy, overgrown, underkept, lost to time and the forest. The perfect hiding spot. I have half a mind to sneak into one of those a place where they would never find me, but the knowledge that some gangs and villains use them as bases now and then pushes me forward, and keeps my eyes staring unseeing at the road ahead.

I don't even know when I arrived at Gotham Cemetery. Still, suddenly I'm standing beside my motorcycle, helmet off, looking out over the dying grass, the abandoned flowers rolling wilted under the gnarled, ancient trees. Two steps and I'm lost in stone. It rises around me, each a marker for the dead.

They press in, like the walls of a maze, hushed and silent. Not a bird chirps here. You would almost think that they knew. My bare feet,

how did I forget shoes?—step softly, carefully down the overgrown stone path, scuffing on the rock.

I hate cemeteries. They hold memory, sure, but here among these stones are also the forgotten. This place has stood since before the founding of Gotham, and too many graves are left unmarked, unvisited.

Some stone crumbled the words faded. Some are newer, weeping of a life recently lost. Some stand tall over the others, grand statues of angels watching with their vacant eyes, others simple slabs like stepping stones in the ground, the decaying leaves covering who they were, names lost to time.

Lost... lost... lost...

The cemetery stretches on for miles, a forest of stone and trees, a maze of monoliths and unmarked graves. I hold my breath, stepping forward slowly. Only the mournful wind speaks here, whistling through the trees that whisper back, telling what they have seen. I wander through, barely taking in the names I pass by.

My eyes sweep past inscriptions on the newer stones, such as ‘Miranda Fleece’ or ancient, decaying wood crosses whose names are all but forgotten, like a crumbling one belonging to a ‘Uriah Boone,’ the weeds and grass choking the base. Some stones have little sayings on

them, and quotes from their occupants in life, but I don't stop to read. I do stop, however, when I see a colossal monolith standing up above the rest, on a hill under the only well-kept tree in this whole place. The delicate bark of the cherry tree seems out of place here, and even though the bare branches seem to fit, I can just imagine this tree in springtime, the delicate pink blossoms the only spot of color in this dreary place.

What flowers remain are withered, long since dead, resting against the dirty granite base, probably a dozen white roses in their time, thorns cut away, petals stripped by the wind.

It should be like the other tall, grand graves, standing over the rest, but the carvings aren't gaudy; they're simple, vines and flowers chiseled into stone. A delicate pattern catches the light, or what light can make its way through the tangle of branches overhead. Two silver names glisten in the dulled morning sun.

'Thomas and Martha Wayne, Beloved Father and Mother.'

It's them.

My heart lurches in my chest. There's room for more graves on this hill, and I know who will be buried here someday. But I don't want to think about that. Instead, my hand reaches out, my fingers barely

brushing the side. I wonder if things would be different if they were alive.

If Bruce would be different.

But I can't think about that right now. So, I move on, shoving my hands into my pockets, ignoring the buzz building up in my ears.

Down the hill again, I'm lost in the maze of names, dates, and statues. But I don't look. Why did I think it was a good idea to hide here? A graveyard isn't really the best place to sort things out. But I'm already here, and I don't want to go back.

I round the path, my bare feet catching on stones and twigs, the pain in my feet far away. Without meaning to, I find a small plot of land right by a cool, small pool of water whose ripples are covered with leaves, both floating and sinking. Birds flutter and tweet overhead, ruffling their feathers and dancing in the tall, ancient oak tree. Its branches reach up into the sky, stretching out over the rest of the cemetery, its bark covered in moss.

Near the roots rest a handful of stones, the oldest reading, '*Amelia Crowne, Beloved Daughter.*' It seems out of place with its rich carvings, not to mention the name. The other last names of the plot all read, '*Grayson.*'

My family.

I find them. Two stones, only two, because Uncle Rick still lives, in a way, but he's just as lost to me as those six feet under my toes. Though the two stones are newer than the others, they're just as dirty and covered in foliage. I brush them off gently, running my fingers down the sides, revealing the names beneath layers of dirt and decaying leaves.

Jonathan Fredrick Grayson and Mary Elizabeth Grayson.

Or, as I knew them, Mom and Dad.

I busy myself with clearing off their stones, wiping the grime off with the corner of my shirt, and carefully unearthing the words that rest underneath each of their names.

Beloved Father and Beloved Mother.

Somehow, that almost seems like a mockery aimed right at me. Because, yeah, they were. Once upon a time. But now they're gone. And I'm still here. With a sigh, I remove my hands, my shirt stained brown, my fists shoving into my pockets again, twisting the fabric inside. It feels wrong that I don't think about them much or visit their room.

I haven't been here since the funeral—and even then, I didn't even register the caskets being lowered, the flowers that I tossed on top of them among a pile of others. I don't really remember what the circus troupe said that day or what words were spoken over their graves as their

caskets were lowered into the earth. To be honest, that whole time seems like only a bad dream, even to this day. As if I woke up and they were gone. Missing. Taken by time.

Taken by my nightmares.

“I miss you.” Some people think it’s weird to talk to them when I know they aren’t listening, but I can’t help it. I need to talk to someone, and it isn’t Alfred or Babs, and especially not Bruce. It’s sad when the dead are the only ones you can talk to.

I swallow hard. Even though I’m alone, even though I know for a fact that they probably aren’t listening, it’s hard to get the words out. “I got... I got in a fight with Bruce today.”

The words trip over themselves and stutter. I let out a short, soft laugh. Not my creepy imp laugh, no. This one’s different. Ironic. It falls flat, feeling out of place in this hushed silence. Laughter doesn’t belong in a maze of graves.

“He wants me to be safe... I get that. I know you would want to keep me safe, too.” I somehow remember the argument that Mom and Dad had before we arrived in Gotham. Their soft words in the dead of night that kept me up.

Something hurts in my chest. A gaping hole, which I thought had long since been filled, opens up and bleeds. It aches. It hurts. I wring my hands in my pockets, clenching my fingers against the pain. “But I can’t help but think that you would actually... You know, talk to me about it? I mean, I’m not asking much.”

I scuff at the ground, my bare feet catching on the rubble at the grave's edge. I lift my eyes to look up through the leaves of the oak, following the birds as they dance, as they fly. Even seeing them up there reminds me of them. Every little bird in the tall oak tree...

“I just want...I want...” What do I want? Do I want my parents? Sure. But that is a gift I know I’ll never be given. So why am I here? What do I want? I’ll tell you.

I don’t want Bruce gone. I want to go back to when things were right between us. So simple, so easy. Back to when I didn’t mess up every single conversation we had, back to when I didn’t even have to worry about him not trusting or questioning every single move I made.

But then... do I really want to go back? No, not really, because of Babs and Alfred and Bruce... I have something now that I didn’t then. Babs and I are closer than ever, and Bruce... well... I know they all care. I know.

And I don't hate Bruce. I could never hate Bruce. Bruce, with his late meetings and awkward talks. Bruce with his three personalities. Bruce the mystery. I squeeze my eyes shut, letting the sun warm my cheeks, as far away as it seems.

All I want... all I want... My head drops.

All I want is my dad back.

The dad who protects, sure, but who laughs with me. Who celebrates with me. Who gives me girl advice. The dad who takes me out every night to kick butt. Who swore an oath with me that we would protect the innocent and keep each other strong.

I want him back.

I hug myself tight, glad that no one's here. Happy that no one can see. I don't cry. I don't. Well... maybe a few tears slip out, but I quickly brush them away. The ache in my chest doesn't go away, even as the pressure behind my eyes releases.

"I miss you." The whisper slips out, unbidden, unplanned. But it drifts through the air, echoing, falling into the breeze that brushes my arms, and rustles the trees overhead. Somehow, I know they know that.

Behind me, something crunches, coming closer. My head lifts, my shoulders tensing, but only for a moment. The next, I relax, a long sigh

escaping my lips, whistling through the silence. They're a couple of hills away, but I know exactly who it is. I hug myself tighter. I don't want to go back. I can't go back. I can't go to school, not now.

Not now.

I need more time... I need... I want... Bruce. But at the same time, I want to be alone. Alone, alone, alone.

"Master Dick?" The voice is far away, the question filling the cemetery, calling, demanding a response, but I don't answer. I don't want to talk to Alfred. I just want to be alone.

You are alone. An unwelcome voice sneers. It creeps through my head, touching all the dark places, tugging at that ache in my chest.

Alone. Bruce is disappointed in you. Bruce doesn't trust you. Bruce is taking you from Babs. And... You're standing on your grave.

My grave. I look down, an ironic smile twisting my lips. Below my feet is an empty plot reserved for another Grayson, and seeing as I'm really the only one left... I am going to be buried here someday. I don't know how to take that.

"Master Dick!" The voice is sharper, curt, and crisp, but there's a touch of urgency, of panic as it echoes through the branches, rattling them like bones. Alfred's worried about me. Something warm stirs inside me.

“You would like Alfred, Mom,” I whisper, my smile settling into something... I don't know, real? It warms me more than the sun ever could, pushing away that voice and slowly stitching that hole in my heart together. But not completely.

I stay put, my ears tracking Alfred's progress, my heart slow, my breath steady, even. He's on the hill behind me, standing over the cemetery, searching. He's seen me, that sharp intake of breath entering my sensitive ears. Now he's briskly making his way toward me, the smart crunch of his shoes on the leaves comforting, smoothing the tension out of my neck.

“Oh, Master Dick.” I can feel him right behind me; I can just imagine the look in his smoky eyes. He seems so out of place here in this place of death. Too present. Too alive. “I feared you had gone into Gotham alone. You gave us quite the fright.”

Us? Something churns inside me, and I don't know what it is. I know Bruce worries, and sometimes that worry goes too far. But to know that he cares... It's a mixed bag, I suppose.

All I want is to whip around and wrap my arms around Alfred. I want, no, I *need* to hug something, someone. My arms feel empty, itching. But I don't. I turn around slowly, hugging myself tightly instead,

biting my lip hard. Everything wants to burst out again, tumble into the open. Sobs, words, everything. But I can't. Not now.

“Us?” The word shakes, just like the leaves overhead. I swallow hard. “Is Bruce going to ground me now?” I hate the bitterness in my voice. I hate this sick feeling. Because I don't hate Bruce. I don't! I look away from Alfred, hating the way my voice trembles, hating how it sounds so tired. It's not right. It's not normal. “Lock me up in my room? Keep me under house arrest?”

“Of course not, Master Dick.” I was right. Alfred's eyes are soft and warm, his hands finding my shoulders. They don't rub or weigh me down. They just sit there, steady. Light. A rock in my writhing sea. Alfred's clothes are rumpled for once, his pant legs covered in the mulch and dirt, his oxfords no longer polished. But from the look on his face, he couldn't care less. “He simply...” Alfred sighs, his words trailing off, falling onto nothing; they sound old, tired.

For the first time, he really looks his age. Worn. Weighed down. My fault. And Bruce's. We fight, and yeah, Alfred's caught in the middle. It must be exhausting. I duck my head. “Master Bruce simply wants you to be safe. To have everything you need.” Alfred's hands brush my shoulders gently, catching invisible lint. “He cares for you, Master Dick.”

“Safe, huh?” I lock eyes with him, unashamed of the wet that lingers, of the flush that stains my cheeks. I force my words to stay steady, but my voice is thick, choked. “Why does he even let me out as Robin if he wants me safe? Huh? Why did he let me go to another city on my own?”

“Because he knows you would do it anyway.” I open my mouth to argue, but the words die on my lips. He’s right. I remember what Bruce said to me two years ago. *‘I didn’t want you to be a part of this world, Dick. I wanted to keep you safe.’*

Safe... but he knew I would go after my parents' killer anyway. Safe, but he knew I would run off into those streets alone. Safe... so he made me ready. He made me ready.

But here he is, acting like he didn’t.

“But...” The thoughts are back again. They hound, they taunt me. My mind’s a blender. I hug myself even tighter, gripping my arms, my nails biting my skin. “That has nothing to do with Babs.” I lift my eyes to Alfred, pleading, asking. “She doesn’t deserve this.”

Alfred sighs, his hands slipping off my shoulders, falling in front of him, clasped. His lips press together, his eyebrows drooping, his eyes softening. “No. No, she does not. But not even I can reason with Master

Bruce at this time. Your safety is his top priority and... quite frankly—” I wait. I know what he’s going to say. I know. Because it isn’t that hard to figure out, “Well, you and I are the only ones he is around often. The ones that he truly opens up with. That he cares for. Aside from work and hero work, Master Bruce doesn’t have many... friends.”

“And... even Vicki.” It’s obvious, really, to anyone who knows Bruce well. It might seem to the media that he’s in a relationship with Vicki, but they’re right about one thing. Bruce Wayne is distant. He flakes on people all the time. Vicki, work, everything, tossing them aside. For the mission.

Another memory drifts its way forward. A similar conversation with Alfred so many years ago.

“You were right. He does push people away. Which is why I believe it is good that you are here.”

“Why? Why Alfred? If he’s just going to—”

“Because Master Dick. Now he has something... someone... to take responsibility for.”

I let out a long sigh. He still pushes people away. Not me, not really. Not anymore. Even when we fight, he’s still around. But other

people? It's just second nature to him. He's Bruce Wayne, the socialite, and Batman, the Hero, and those two lives come at a cost.

And now I know. I realize. He is expecting me to do it as well. To live that life of putting the mission first, everything else second. But I don't want that. I don't.

I am not going to leave Babs in the dirt. I'm not going to push her away. Because I'll never be like Bruce Wayne. I close my eyes tight, and something surges inside me. I will never be Bruce Wayne. This I promise myself.

"Alfred..." I open my eyes, giving Alfred a small smile. I've made up my mind. I know what I have to do. What I need to do. Because I refuse to turn them aside. I refuse to push them away. I refuse. "I'm going to be late for school."

Alfred's eyebrows shoot up, and he nods curtly, the surprise furrowing his mouth. "Indeed, Master Dick. However, I am sure they will make an exception given your impeccable attendance thus far." He holds out a hand, gesturing across the cemetery, the maze of graves, toward the limo no doubt parked right next to my motorcycle. "Shall we go?"

I nod, stepping forward, jumping into a sprint to catch up with Alfred's short, quick strides. I do, however, spare a glance back, back to

their graves. And I smile. “You’d really like Babs.” I don’t know if they can hear me, but quite frankly? I don’t care. Because now I have a plan. Bruce will get what he wants. And Babs will get what she wants.

Call it... Call it a compromise.

As I trail behind Alfred, my mind churns, my hands fishing my phone out of my pocket, quickly dialing Babs’ number. She’ll freak out when I’m late to school, talking my ear off about not scaring her and so on, but I’m sure she’ll forgive me after I tell her that though plans have changed, I’m still taking her to Homecoming.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I DITCH ONE PARTY FOR ANOTHER

The two days before Homecoming, before the Wayne Charity Event, pass by without much as a word between Bruce and me, other than good morning, good night, or some vital words between Robin and Batman. It's weird to see the criminals actually terrified when I don't speak, and I even get some of them asking me if anything's wrong. I laugh in their faces, of course, and tease them for worrying about me when they don't hesitate to shoot at me, but I can't help but be taken aback. Criminals and lowlifes care about my well-being.

Huh. Who knew?

Alfred doesn't step in between Bruce and me, not to fill the awkward silence or give defenses to each of us on the other's behalf. Not once do I overhear Alfred arguing with Bruce. And not once does Bruce try to explain himself to me.

A chill, a frost has settled over the Manor, and neither of us seems to know what to do about it. I mean, he could just apologize, and you know, let me share my two cents without shooting me down, but I don't want to risk it.

Especially not now.

So I avoid Bruce like the plague. It hurts every time I pass his office and hear him talking to Lucius or some other business associate like everything's still right with the world. So I run past, keeping to the gym, my room, and outside, losing myself in the grounds with Ace, my feet tumbling down the hill, pounding in rhythm with my beating heart.

At school, everything's right. How it should be. Babs gives me a hard time about looking like a vampire, you know, so tired I could be the walking dead? And I chat with her about the new plan. There will be no limo, no Alfred, but I tell her I'm going to pick her up anyway, and afterward, the Commish can take us to Bat Burger.

It hurts, lying through my teeth, but she doesn't question it, rationalizing Alfred being with Bruce at the Wayne Charity Event, understanding that I have to be there at the beginning of the night and that we might be a little late. Her father is going to be there too, after all.

Still, I can't help but feel guilty when she smiles at me, her hand slipping into mine. But I can't *not* do this. I can't tell her what Bruce told me to. I don't want our friendship to be like that. So I smile back, swinging our hands and running through the plan in my head. *Besides*, I

think over and over, *Bruce will forgive me*. Sure, he might ground me for a lifetime, but he'll forgive me.

Eventually.

What is that saying? Better to beg for forgiveness than ask permission? Well, that isn't entirely true in my case. I was already given permission. I am holding to that first conversation that Bruce and I had, where he's the one who pushed me to go, to ask Babs. *Because I tell myself, Bruce really does want me to go with Babs, to have a good time. He's just being overly paranoid. That's it. Everything will go fine, and when this whole Joker thing blows over, I'll talk to him.*

And maybe this time, I won't mess things up.

I stand in front of my mirror, carefully running a brush through my thick black hair, frowning at my reflection. Tonight has to go on without a hitch, or I'm letting everyone down. I'm already dressed in my suit, cummerbund and all, my bowtie tight, keeping my neck straight, my suit jacket fitted, barely letting me move my shoulders. What I suffer for parties.

I grab a goopy handful of hair gel and begin to slick my hair back, smoothing it all down, careful to make sure that it's nice, neat, and sleek. I take extra care to brush my teeth, even going so far as to gargle some

mint mouthwash. Hey, who knows? If she kissed me on the cheek once...?

“Master Dick?” Alfred’s at the door. I didn’t even hear him come in. I glance up, my hands absently toying with a bottle of cologne, which is horrible, by the way. Alfred sighs when he sees me, his mouth twitching, but his eyes are sad. “We are waiting for you downstairs.”

Is it time already? I set the bottle down, nodding. Thankfully, the smile that comes isn’t forced. Because it’s time. I’m going to do this. I am. For Bruce and for Babs. Just watch me. “Alright, Alf. I just finished.” I try to roll my shoulders, but only manage to get myself stuck. “Ugh. I hate suits.”

“I am quite aware, Master Dick.” Alfred stands aside to let me go first, but I wave him on. I’m not quite ready. Not yet.

“You go ahead, Alf. I just need to grab something.” I wave a hand, trying my best not to look suspicious. I may be a good liar, but Alfred is almost impossible to fool. Still, he nods crisply and strides out of my room, disappearing down the hall. When I’m sure he’s gone, I race over to my bed, sliding to my knees, my hand reaching into the void underneath.

Kids think that monsters live under their beds. Well, I keep something that kicks monsters' butts under mine. My hand fishes around in the darkness for only a second before I grab something and pull. A duffle slides out, old and black. Plain. No one would look at it twice.

But inside holds something more precious than anything else I own. My means of escape. My Robin suit. I can't stop my grin, even when that sick feeling surges. I push it down, tucking the duffle under my arm, and slip out of my room, making my way down the halls. I'm going to do this. For Bruce. For Babs.

When I step out of the front door and onto the porch, Alfred's waiting for me, Bruce already in the back of the limo, on the phone, his voice easy and laughing. The Bruce Wayne the public sees. He's probably talking to one of the planners. Alfred raises an eyebrow at the duffle, but I give him a shrug, patting it with my free hand. "Just in case."

Alfred isn't one to shrug, but he might as well have from the look he gives me. I let out a small breath when we both walk forward toward the limo. Alfred isn't going to say anything. Now, all I have to do is pull this off without Bruce suspecting anything. Bruce... who is Batman... who's the world's greatest detective. Oh man, I'm in trouble, aren't I?

I climb into the limo, slipping the duffle to the side but in view. It can't look like I'm trying to hide it from him because then he would definitely know what's going on. No, it has to look like I'm keeping it out of sight of the paparazzi who would try to sniff out a story.

As I sit, I keep my hands busy, drumming on my legs, feet dancing on the floor. No, this isn't suspicious. It would be more suspicious if I sat still, to be honest. As the limo begins to pull forward, I crawl over to stick my head into the driver's cab, ignoring Bruce's phone conversation right next to me and instead focusing on chattering to Alfred as he drives us toward Gotham.

Everything's normal. Yeah... normal.

Bruce finally gets off the phone halfway through the ride, but doesn't say anything to me. Not about the bag, what happened, not even thanking me for coming here instead of Homecoming. Nothing.

So I ignore him too. "—Honestly, though, I don't know how they got away with that!" I laugh, the sound releasing some of the tension gripping, paralyzing my shoulders. Alfred doesn't say anything, but one eyebrow quirks up, his mouth twitching like mad. Stories of lunchtime school antics will do that to you, I guess.

I stop talking when we enter Old Gotham, the streets strung with dancing lights, cleared out, and blocked off for the party. A stage is set up right where the Joker's was, only this one has cloth hangings declaring that this is a Wayne Charity Event, and the colors are soft, not the bright, painful greens and purples. People mill around on the swept asphalt, the rich complaining about having to be down here on the street, in an underhanded way, of course, and the citizens are socializing with everyone, talking to the media, probably telling the stories of what they saw that night.

Alfred pulls to a stop, parking the limo in a long line of cars, out of sight from the main party. Perfect. You'd almost think we planned it. And no, we did not. Unless he knows more than I think he does, Alfred doesn't know what I'm going to pull tonight.

The door to the driver's cab slams, and Alfred walks around, opening our door for us, stepping aside for Bruce to emerge, instantly greeted by the media and cheered on by the crowd gathering on the sidewalk. I step out behind him, smiling, waving, talking, and honestly, I don't regret a second of it.

Even as I'm swept away into the party, away from Bruce, and away from Alfred, I don't regret it. Because I want to be here. These

people, well, I saved them. My heart leaps as children rush by, their carefree laughter filling the streets.

The party is awash in soft lights, soothing music, and the chatter and honest laughter of good people, a far cry from how it was only days ago. Then there were screams, fire, and malicious cackles. Now there is joy. Life.

This is why I fight.

“Excuse me, Mister Grayson?” A woman walks up to me, a young mother, her son clinging to her, glued to her hip. I smile at him, winking. He ducks further behind her, but I can see that tiny grin slowly growing.

“What can I do for you, ma’am?” I shove my hands in my pockets, which isn’t proper etiquette while in a suit, but Alfred’s across a sea of people talking to the servers since this is a Wayne event. Besides, I have to be somewhat approachable.

“My son is a big fan of yours.” The woman smiles, her soft hazel eyes giving me a knowing look. Flying Graysons. Of course. Even after all this time, I still have my fans. And a Flying Grayson never turns away their fans.

I crouch down, trying not to think that the motion might just rip my pants. I look into the boy's eyes. They're light hazel, just like his mother's. I know this boy. No, I don't *know* him, know him, but I've seen him before. My heart stutters, but my smile does not. He was one of the kids I scooped up in all the chaos the night the Joker attacked this very street. Warmth floods my chest. "Oh yeah?" I reach out and ruffle his hair, laughing.

The kid's grin grows, finally moving forward, stepping up, and glancing at his mom. She nods to him, giving his back a little push. "Go ahead and ask him, Sweetie."

I see a paper rolled up in his hands, the gloss glistening in the fairy lights strung overhead. I rest my hands on my legs, refusing to rock on my heels. "What'cha got there, Champ?"

"Can you—" the boy's voice trembles, his eyes as large as saucers as he holds it out to me. "Can you sign this, please?"

I take the rolled-up page, unfurling it to see a Flying Grayson poster. The latest one. The last one. My family and I are posed against the backdrop of a big top dressed in our bedazzled green leotards, soaring through the air. I raise my eyebrows, looking up at him. "Just sign it?"

"Ye-yeah?" The kid cocks his head to the side.

“What’s your name, Champ?” An idea forms, and I stand, pulling a marker out of my jacket—yes, I keep one in there. Don’t judge.

“Max.” The kid straightens, loosens up just the tiniest bit, smiling, his two front teeth missing. “It’s short for Maxwell.”

“Well, Maxwell,” I quickly scribble *‘To Max. Keep smiling! —Dick Grayson’* in the corner, signing my name with a flourish. I hand the paper back to him and tap the page with the marker, my eyes twinkling with mischief, “Do you want to see a trick?”

“Really?” Max looks from his mom to me, his eyes wide, sparkling more than any of the glistening silver platters carried by the servers. My heart surges in my chest. This kid is alive because of the work that I do. This is what makes it worth it: to see their faces.

And Batman thinks I’m selfish.

“Really.” I shrug off my suit jacket and pull off my bowtie, holding them out to him. “Can you hold these for me, Champ?”

“Sure!” Max grabs them, squeezing them to his chest along with the poster. I look up at his mom. She was another one of the people I helped. Now, her eyes are no longer frantic. Now, she no longer has to worry about her son’s safety.

I can't put a price on her smile, only her eyes telling me more than words, the interviews, or the paper. Thank you is never enough, not that I would ever ask for thanks. But that look in her eyes? Even though I know she doesn't know I'm the one who helped her?

That's enough.

"Alright, Max." I warm up my arms, stretching the fabric, hoping against hope I won't embarrass myself and rip my suit. Now that would be quite the headline. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah!" Max bounces, nudging his mom, making sure she's watching. She is, along with other people who've gathered around.

I take a deep breath, raise my arms, and launch myself off the ground, leaping into a string of flips, going higher until I dare to do a quadruple, the world twisting around me, the faces of the crowd blurring.

I land solidly, my knees absorbing the impact, and I jump up, holding my arms in the air, grinning at the crowd. I quickly take stock of my clothes. My shirt, pants, everything's intact. Perfect. But that thought's lost completely when the people around me explode into applause, Max jumping and screaming, pointing to me, and trying to talk to his mom over the commotion. Other kids rush forward, their words

garbled, but I don't mind. I laugh, patting their heads, answering their flying questions, my heart soaring.

This is what I'm meant to do, I remember. I'm not meant to sulk in graveyards or hide away in a mansion. I'm meant to bring joy and wonder to people as Dick Grayson... and as Robin. So I enjoy a party for the first time in a long time. I occupy the kids, telling them stories about the circus, acting out some things, and drawing more than just the young crowd. Making everyone laugh until all our sides ache.

I forget about Bruce and our fight. I'm glad he made me come. Not that he would've had to make me come anyway. Because I love these people, not the elite or wealthy or powerful, but the ordinary, everyday man of the streets. The families and friends. The people I fight for.

I'm so wrapped up in the party that I don't even notice the time. At least, not until I catch the blinking hand of someone's watch ticking. My heart stops in my chest, and my hands go cold. It's all I can do to keep myself from smacking my forehead.

Me, who hates being late to parties. Me, who always wants to be on time and ready, am late picking up Babs for Homecoming.

I quickly glance up and around. Bruce is in the middle of his speech on stage, boring, you know, the typical snooze fest. Honestly, I

think speeches should come with a complimentary blanket and pillow.

He's there, occupied. And Alfred's across the crowd, separated from me by a mass of people, busy getting the dessert trays ready to circulate.

Perfect.

It doesn't take much to slip away through the crowd, smoothly ducking between elbows and behind backs, careful to keep out of sight. I might have hated crowds when I was younger, but now they're my best friend. The perfect cover.

After the bright, safe atmosphere of the night behind me, the Gotham streets seem dull and dreary, the empty roads dark, the trash skittering across the walkways unhindered, the streetlamps flickering sadly. Shadows cling to the buildings, wrapping the alleyways in their grip. It's almost like Two Face's hideout, one side pure, full of joy and laughter. The other side rejected and wrapped in darkness.

I shake myself and sneak forward, walking down the trail of cars, leaving the murmuring and booming drone of Bruce's voice behind me. When I reach the limo, I slide a small lock pick out of my suit, again, don't ask, and sigh as the door clicks open, swinging to the side without a sound.

I slip inside, wiggling out of my suit as I go. Dick Grayson said he would pick Babs up at the house, but he never said he wouldn't surprise her with a special guest. I grin as I loop my plan over and over in my head. Robin swings to Babs' house, delivers a note from Dick Grayson, and takes her to the school where he's waiting. Babs gets to the dance safely and gets to spend some time with her second favorite hero at the same time.

What? I'm realistic about my placement on the list, okay?

When my mask presses against my face and my dress suit and a civilian emergency stash of cosmetics, you know, comb, hair gel, that sort of thing—is carefully folded into my duffle, I slip out of the car, careful to make sure that no one is watching. I mean, Dick Grayson entering a limo and Robin leaving it would be pretty obvious to anyone. Like a colossal sign pointing and saying, 'This is Robin, the Boy Wonder.'

When I'm satisfied that no one's watching, I slip my grapple gun out of my utility belt, my duffle secured over my shoulders like a backpack. With a click and a whoosh, I'm flying through the night, away from the party, to another one.

It's time to give Babs the night of her life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE LAUGHTER ON THE WALLS

The swing to Babs' house is one of the best I've had in a long time. Soaring through the city by myself, with my heart pounding in my chest, my arms and legs pumping as I race across rooftops, my stomach lurching with that dropping sensation as I leap off the edge, the ground rushing up to meet me.

Finally free.

Free from the uncomfortable chill of home. Free from the churning in my stomach. Free. I'm not worrying about Batman or Bruce right now. I refuse. All I can think of is the night I'm about to have with Babs and the look on her face when Robin comes to pick her up.

I wish I had a camera function in my mask because I want to preserve that moment forever. I can just see it now. Robin will land outside her window and give it a little tap. She will jump and turn, ready to lecture whoever dared knock on the window. Then, she'll see me, and her face will lift in surprise. Then she gets that cool, collected look whenever she wants to appear calm but is really freaking out on the inside.

I can't help the dumb grin that teases my lips or the laughter that follows me as I swing, waving and catcalling civilians, who cheer as I pass.

I can see the relief on their faces, even from here. I know they were worried about me. I mean, if criminals are asking me if I'm okay, you better believe that the citizens of Gotham noticed their youngest vigilante was being awfully antisocial for the past few days. Babs even ranted to me about it, her purple pen racing through her journal furiously as she chattered on about Robin and why she thinks he's been quiet lately. She thinks it's him struggling to adjust to life back in Gotham after being away for the summer, trying to get back to being Batman's partner after his run with the Teen Titans.

She doesn't know how close to the mark she really is.

In fact, she got so close to the truth that it was all I could do not to ask her to change the subject, to keep quiet, and let her keep on talking. Really, how does she do it? How can she pick me apart so quickly without even knowing it? Honestly, it's a miracle she hasn't figured out the truth yet.

I pause a few blocks away from Babs' house, going over the plan again in my head. Robin has to be sure to act like Robin, not Dick

Grayson. That is very important, even though I'd love nothing more than to pull off my mask and tell Babs who Robin and Dick Grayson have been this entire time.

But I know I could never do that. I know Babs would probably be able to keep my secret, despite her nickname actually being 'Babs' as in 'babblor' as in talks too much. But Bruce would never forgive me. Well, at least for a while.

So Robin will be Robin, and Dick will be Dick. Different, separate. Well, good luck to me, I guess. One slip-up could mean... Well...

I take a deep breath, eyeing the clouds building up overhead suspiciously. They boil and stew, dark and dangerous. Really, if it rains, Gotham will officially be the worst city in the world. I mean, what, it chooses now, with an outside party behind me and a nice swing through the city ahead of me to possibly rain? Figures.

Well, it's a race against time now, I guess. I rap my knuckles absently on stone, crouching down, giving the street a good once-over. I'm already late, but if Robin is out, he should keep an eye out.

Thankfully, all I see as I sweep the roads below are people going about their business, stepping in and out of the street lamps, rushing

home in groups, cars zipping across the roads, stopping at the red and racing forward at the green.

Normal. Safe.

Perfect.

I leap off my perch, my grappling hook shooting out, leaving me swinging, flying. The cool, wet autumn air kisses my skin, blowing my hair back. Windblown and a far cry from Dick Grayson's. Even more perfect. So what if it rains? I'm sure Babs will forgive me. In fact, I think it would be kinda fun. A little adventure that she can tell Dick about when she arrives at the dance: besides, I can't keep this smile off my face. It's going to happen. It's about to happen. I have to shake my head when I accidentally swing past her house, my mind still racing like a bunch of horses.

I laugh when I loop back around, my boots landing solidly on the apartment building that Babs calls home. It's strange to be here. I haven't been here in a while. And it hasn't changed a bit.

The stately brick still reaches toward the sky, one of the only buildings on the block that's not covered in graffiti. Not only that, but it's clean, or at least cleaner, the window boxes cleared of weeds, the

windows polished and shining, and the alleyways cleared of trash and debris.

Below me, the lights shimmer warm and bright from the different windows, the laughter of families at dinner drifting through the air. It's not a penthouse, but it isn't the run-of-the-mill Gotham apartment, either. Homey, safe.

I drop down off the side, my feet landing squarely on the first fire escape level with a clang. What? I'm not about to try and swing down there.

I clamber down the steps, taking five at a time, flipping through the railing, my cape sliding behind me as I count the floors. Third one down and—there it is! I stop at the level, peering inside the apartment, peeking through the curtains that have been carefully brushed aside.

I'm expecting to see Babs bustling around, her shadow cast from the bathroom onto the hall, or sitting at the table eating a quick snack before I arrive. Or even pacing in front of the door, ready to call me.

Instead, I see nothing. No sign of anyone, Babs or otherwise.

My eyes narrow. Something isn't right. She should be here. A shiver creeps down my spine, the hair on the back of my neck prickling. She could be in her room or out of sight, but... No. Something's wrong.

My mind quickly switches into gear. I'm definitely not Dick Grayson anymore. Because now Robin's eyes are sweeping the room, searching, analyzing. Taking in every detail.

Before me, Bab's apartment spreads out, the living room, the kitchen behind, and a hall leading to hers and the Commish's two bedrooms and one bathroom. Only things seem like they've shifted. Not in a way that careful hands would have done intentionally, no.

It looks like a war zone of an extreme pillow fight.

Pure aggression has shoved the couch to the side, leaving scratch marks on the hardwood. Violent hands have moved those books from their shelf onto the floor as if hurled like boomerangs. Someone toppled the coffee table, shoving it forward to make some sort of barricade; the wood split in half, splintering as if kicked through.

Either Babs had an extreme tantrum because I was late or...

My heart freezes when my eyes catch the glint in the walls. The glint of knives stuck there like someone was playing the deadliest version of pin the tail on the donkey. They wink at me, taunting me, kitchen knives from a block tossed haphazardly to the side, empty.

Then I see the batarang impaled above the knives, about the height of an average-sized man's head, something stuck under the sharp, smooth edge.

It was a good shot, but the implications crash into me like a ten-ton weight.

I don't hesitate. I smash through the window. And when I say *smash*, I literally mean my boot snaps out and shatters the glass with an ear-splitting crunch, sending the tiny sparkling shards scattering onto the floor and clinking down the fire escape. A drop of water splashes onto my nose from the heavens. Two, then three, until the sky cries, but I don't care anymore.

I dive into the room, my bō staff clicking out, my eyes darting around, finally able to see the state of the main room. The kitchen is a mess, and not because someone forgot to clean it up. Cabinets and drawers are thrown open, vacant of knives, pots, pans, and plates, now bent and littered on the floor in the living room like a monkey came in and started to play with them. Chairs are kicked over from the table, sad and dejected; their legs broken and battered.

The TV screen spits in the living room, a book lobbed with the power of a cannon lying splayed on the ground, and the couch, shoved

back like a wall, lies abused, the cushions slashed, the stuffing strung out over the floor, trampled and forgotten.

But the worst thing by far is the batarang. A few steps closer, and I know exactly where it came from. The scuffs, the polish, everything matches the batarang I gave Babs as a gift. My stomach plummets, churning, my skin going cold, numb. My breath hitches as soon as I see what's stuck under the batarang.

A couple of chunks of bright green hair are impaled into the wall, accusing. Taunting. My heart stops, my bō staff clattering to the ground. The world spins and warps until all I can see is that batarang. All I can hear is mad, maniacal laughter.

And Babs' echoing screams.

No... no... I was late and... no, NO! I snatch my bō staff off the ground and spin around in one motion, my teeth set, my eyes whipping around the apartment, searching, pleading. *Where are you, Babs? Oh no, no, no! This can't be happening!*

Outside, the rain pounds, mocking me, laughing at me, the rapid *tink* of droplets against the fire escape like a rapidly ticking clock. It blows in through the broken window, chilling me to the bone.

No... no... no... how did this happen?

I finally see the front door, forced open, smashed in, hanging on its hinges, creaking in the whipping wind. The drafts of wet air send chills racing up and down my arms, skittering like ants. My mind pounds, my heart in my ears.

How? Why? No... no... Babs!

“Miss Gordon?” I’m Robin right now... Robin... I can’t say her name. I’ve never met her. But my mind whirls. I stumble forward into the kitchen, searching, searching, searching. I slam open the pantry door, hoping against hope that a red-headed girl will be hiding there, waiting. Nothing. Only boxes of food and cans of vegetables stare back at me, tsking. Taunting.

You lost her.

“Miss Gordon! Are you here?” My voice is far away. It can’t belong to me. It’s too calm, too deep. Besides, I don’t think I can speak. Not now.

No... Where is she?

My feet trip, teetering as I race out of the kitchen and across the way to the hall. Maybe she’s hiding in her room or in the bathroom. I slam open the bathroom door. Makeup and hair products sit dejected on

the counter, sparkling in the bright light above the mirror. Two steps, and I yank the shower curtain back. Nothing.

No... no... no... I try the Commish's room next, flinging open his closet and tearing back his bed sheets. Nothing. Nothing.

You lost her. No, no, NO!

“BABS!” The scream rips from my throat without warning. Batman would kill me. But I don't care. I stumble into her room, slamming her closet door back, rummaging through the clothes hanging guiltlessly on their hangers, tearing through the bedsheets, and ripping back her curtains.

No... no... no... You lost her.

But how?

“Babs!” The cry is weaker. It squeaks through my throat unwelcome, my eyes burning, and my chest clenching tighter. I wander back into the living room, my hands clutching my head, my fingers wringing my hair. Gone, gone, gone.

But how? When? Why?

Clues, Grayson! I scold myself, pounding a hand into my forehead. The world tilts as if something's shoved it off its axis, sending it careening through space. Just like my own little world. *Look for clues!*

It doesn't take long. I mean, how could it?

An entire wall spray-painted with smiley faces and 'Hahas' isn't exactly hard to miss. I freeze in front of it, my blood fire in my veins, the gaudy colors pulsing in my vision, blurring, warping. No... it can't be him... he wouldn't go after her...

A killing joke is coming.

No... he's after Robin. He threatened Robin. Not her... not Babs....

He's chaos, unpredictable.

Babs...

I reach out a careful hand, the fingers of my gloves brushing the haphazard paint, wishing it away, wishing everything in this apartment back to normal, with Babs standing here, geeking out over Robin, ready to be taken to Homecoming.

The wind howls, whistling through the window behind me. Cold... dark... Gone, gone, gone. *Snap out of it, Grayson!* I take a step back from the wall, shaking myself hard. Babs is gone, missing, kidnapped by the Joker. I can't just stand here. I can't wait any longer.

I have to find her. I have to do something.

So I look. I read. I quickly bring up my holo screen from my gauntlet and snap a picture, my hands racing over the jumbled mess of smiles, ‘hahas,’ and... words? I squint at the mess on my screen, then back up to the real thing. At first glance, you wouldn’t see it, only managing to see a random pot of letters and freaky smiling faces painted red and dripping, only paint, don’t worry, but on closer inspection, there are words hidden in there, like a puzzle.

Joker sometimes has a reason for his madness, which is honestly more terrifying than if he had no intention at all. If he just kidnapped Babs because he could, he would probably let her go, having gotten bored waiting for the Commish or Batman and Robin to teach him a lesson.

But if this was planned... I shake my head hard, trying to swallow past the lump in my throat and the bile surging from my stomach. Plans aren’t his thing. But when he does plan... well...

I turn my attention to piecing together sentences from the nonsense on the wall. And what I find taunts me, grins at me. *‘Save. Her. Robin. If. You. Can. No. Batmen. Allowed.’* The world stops for just a moment. Planned... planned... a killing joke... wanting me to come after... distraction, a distraction!

I smack my forehead hard, not even bothering with the pain. Joker saw how Kitten distracted me that night, how that almost got me killed. It would've gotten me killed if it weren't for Batman. I'm a teenage boy. He wouldn't know that I actually know Babs. All he knows is that a) she's the Commish's daughter, b) He already killed her mother, and c) she's a girl and, therefore, will be a distraction to poor ol' hormone-stricken me.

So, he's going for the damsel in distress trope, huh? I manage a small laugh as I eye the room again. She sure gave him a run for his money if I'm reading the room right. "Good job, Babs." My voice still feels strange, coming out of my mouth in a high-pitched whistle, but I still smile. How could I not? I mean, you picture a fifteen-year-old girl chucking pots and pans and batarangs at a mad clown, not smile and come back. Then we'll talk.

But the image fades when I remember that she did get taken. That she is missing. And I have to find her. I take a look at the wall again. Clues... clues... clues. If he hid the message and he wants me to come, he shouldn't make it too hard to—

My thoughts screech to a halt, my eyes locking on something. Something behind all the laughter, all the words. I grab a piece of paper

and rip it off the wall. There's a purple smiley face spray-painted on, winking at me. Winking, because under that, still visible, is a flyer for Gotham Academy Homecoming.

Not safe... not safe...

If my blood burned before, now it freezes, icing over, the slow, halting beating of my heart the only sound I can hear. Bruce was right. I wouldn't have been safe. What if I came here as Dick Grayson, and we were followed to the dance? What if... if Dick Grayson and Babs were taken, instead of just Babs?

But then... what if Robin had gotten here sooner? What if I...

The paper flutters out of my hands. Homecoming. GA... I have to get to GA. If Joker's there, if he has hostages... My hand catches the wall, my eyes squeezing shut. Bruce... I need Bruce... Bruce...

I reach for the call button on my comm and stop. No Batmen allowed. I grit my teeth. Bruce can't come. No, no, no.

I need him.

This is a trap. It's so obvious it's a trap. Why do they always have to be traps? I need Bruce. I need someone.

But I'm going to do this without him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE LAUGHTER IN THE HALLS

Without another thought, I dive out of the broken window and into the stormy night. It's amazing how quickly the weather can change. One moment, a clear night, the next a roiling storm, clouds stewing and boiling angrily overhead. As soon as I'm out of the apartment, the wind hits me like a freight train, sheets of rain soaking me, cutting through all my exposed skin. The Kevlar titanium mesh of my suit keeps me warm, but my arms shiver, as soaked as they would be if I just jumped in the pool, my hair plastered to my face.

But what's a little rain? I have bigger problems right now, like getting to Babs before the Joker can do anything unspeakable. Now you might be thinking, 'But Dick! He wouldn't hurt her if he's using her as bait!' um, Joker? Serial killer? Insane psychopath? No rhyme to his reason and no reason at all?

I vault over the fire escape railing, yanking out my grappling gun and shooting it into the blinding torrent, quickly blinking to activate the night vision in my HUD. The city flickers into view through the green filter, pulsing and swaying under the force of the wind.

Green... Green... Green. Green hair stuck under a batarang in the wall. Joker had Babs.

I hope that the charity event was able to be cleared out without much trouble. I would hate for all those people to get stuck in this storm—but I don't have time to think about that. I can't. The gusts catch me, my cape snapping like a flag, tugging me off course. Though it still attaches firmly to the faces of the buildings, my grappling hook swings me wide and dangerously off into the city.

My stomach lurches, my mind flashing to falling. Falling, falling, falling. Joker has Babs.

I grit my teeth, my mouth catching the water, blowing, puffing. I was trained to endure every environment, to respond in every kind of disaster, and rain is no stranger to me, but at the rate I'm going? Well, let's just say no one will be helping Babs if I get my brains bashed out running into a building. Or if I break my back crashing into the pavement.

No time, not time. But I can't risk it.

So I don't swing. I release my line, zipping down to the street, my boots splashing onto the sidewalk, the whizz of the line snapping back

into the gun, spraying my face with extra droplets. Well, what's more water, I guess?

I quickly pull up my holo screen, typing frantically on the small, flickering keys. I can't walk or run to GA. I'll be too late. Too late, too late. So, time for plan B. I click the button, the blue glow a strange shade through the lens of my night vision pulsing on my glove. I start to run.

I know, right? I'd rather fly, covering more ground up in the air. But right now? That would be like asking someone to hold onto a stack of papers in a hurricane. Me being the paper. So I run, my feet pounding into the ground, my arms pumping, my eyes darting to my holo now and then. It's on its way. Not long now... not long.

I don't speak to the people I pass, even though they stare at me like I'm a duck waddling past. So you know, raised eyebrows, wide eyes, and whispers. Really, Batman and Robin, even though the people of Gotham see us every night, are still a sort of urban legend. We hide in the shadows, swing from the rooftops, race through the streets in our cool, high-tech cars and cycles. To see Robin running on the ground like a normal person?

Well, let's just say that it probably looks a little weird.

But I don't care about that. My brain pounds, and my heart races, stuttering, tripping over itself. Babs... Babs is in danger. Babs needs me. I have to get to school. Joker... the Joker... Something roils my stomach. It's not that nervous feeling or the feeling I get around Bruce now. It's something else. It pulls at my heart. It sends my head spinning.

You can't lose her. If she dies—

No. I don't want to think about that. I can't think about that. Just having anyone near the Joker is a bad sign. If it's someone you know and love, it's even worse. But if they already have a history with the mad clown? Well...

I shake my head hard, my hair wagging like a wet dog, my feet catching on a raised part of the sidewalk, my arms whirling to keep my balance. Yeah, Mr. Acrobat over here. I can't fall. I can't. There's no time for that.

The city presses around me, green, glaring. A Joker night. An Arkham night. It taunts, it points. I forget that it's just the night vision filter from my mask. No, it's the city covered in Joker Venom, laughter everywhere, pounding like the rain around me, seeping into my skin, worming its way into my head.

It's as if the weather is against me, keeping me from going faster, the wind in my face, the rain slamming into me, trying to push me back, pushing me away from Babs. My legs drive forward, my feet bracing against the concrete. Of all the nights to have an autumn storm, it just had to be tonight. I glance down at my holo map and let out a dribbling sigh, the water running down my chin.

It's almost here.

I pause for only a second to look over my shoulder. On the street behind me, weaving through the oncoming traffic on its own is a single white headlight speeding right toward me. I grin, my heart lifting, if only a little, and break into a run, my ears reaching past the pounding rain, the howling wind, and to the coming roar behind me.

Three... two... one... I lash out a hand, my fingers wrapping around something solid. I leap, my legs arching through the air, my other arm coming to grab the other side of my handlebars. The force pulls me forward, yanking me into the seat; helmetless, sure, but I'm sure Bruce will forgive me. It's a small sacrifice compared to everything else he'll be mad at me about. Just add it to the growing pile.

I rev the engine and switch to manual control, letting it go, speeding onto the road, weaving through traffic like a thread through the

needle. I narrow my eyes, scanning the road ahead of me. Five minutes to GA tops. I blaze through a red light, ignoring the honking, the yells, the looming trucks that almost smash into me.

Time is my enemy. Five minutes is too long. What could happen to Babs in five minutes with the Joker? What could happen to my school after five minutes with the Joker? Something burns in my throat, but I swallow it down. I can't think about that... I can't... *Focus, Grayson!* I grit my teeth, focusing on slowing my heart and calming my breath. Calm, calm, calm. What is calm? The dictionary defines calm as not showing or feeling nervousness, anger, or other strong emotions. Yeah, never heard of it.

Wet leaves flop like soaked birds as I skid around a corner, the iron gates of GA finally in sight. Even at this speed, I take in the exterior. Nothing seems wrong. Cars are pulled along the curb, balloons whip in the wind, smacking each other and waving sadly. The posters for the dance are untied, flapping in the wind like handkerchiefs fluttered in farewell.

The lights are on and beaming brightly through the night. I blink off the green filter of my night vision, squinting through the torrent. At first, I thought for sure that the Joker was here and making himself

known, but then again, a green filter on the world would do that to anybody.

I bite my lip hard as I speed toward the gate. The lights glow normally, bright and warm, welcoming. The balloons are the color they should be. No graffiti marks the gate or the sidewalk. No sign of the Joker anywhere.

I don't stop, though. I can't. Because he has to be here. Babs has to be here. So I jump the curb, roaring into the courtyard on my R-cycle, blowing past the bench where Babs and I usually sit. I don't wait to come to a stop. I'm leaping off the seat, the world spinning, my heart slamming. As soon as my feet touch the ground, I'm running, not missing a beat or a step. I fly up the stairs and crash through the door, my gloved hands shoving them both open at once.

I pause for a moment, staring down the halls, searching. *Please... please let her be here! Please... I can't be too late! Bruce, where are you?*

The brick walls stand untouched, all the lockers intact, the floors pristine but dripping, the rainwater sloughing off my suit and hair like its own mini rain storm. The lights are dimmed but steady, and the decorations for Homecoming are simple and friendly. No Joker worked on these. I close my eyes and force my breathing and my heart to slow,

letting the doors swing shut behind me. With a click, the storm is just a constant pattering outside, and I can hear the sounds of the party in front of me. Music booms but not too loud. People chatter and laugh, but it's normal. Normal...

But she has to be here. My eyes open, and I walk forward, sweeping the hall, blinking on the infrared filter on my HUD, scanning each classroom, each nook, and cranny. Teachers patrol the corridors, lugging kids from classrooms, and herding them back to the gym, but other than that, the main group is in the gym, not the gymnastics gym, but the basketball and P.E gym.

I slip into the shadows, wincing at every squeak from my boots and every swirling pool I leave behind. If I was trying to be stealthy, I'm doing a horrible job.

"Hey, you!" A flashlight beams in my face, and I squint, trying to peer at the owner. I make out a hulking shape, like the younger brother of the sasquatch, and I know. And I don't quite know how to take this. "Yes, you! I see you!"

The squeak of tennis shoes approaches, the beaming light not able to hide the whistle glinting over a white T-shirt and a clipboard. Coach Drewitt, head of the boys' gymnastics team, walks right toward me,

clipboard waving like a weapon, eyes glittering in triumph. “Yeah, you know—hey— wait—”

I open my mouth to say ‘hi, coach,’ but snap it shut as quickly as it opens. Only now do I realize that I have not interacted with anyone I know well as Robin, except the Commish. Not Babs, not anyone from school, well, except Kitten. And even then, I almost blew my secret identity. Wow. You’d think I wasn’t a professional or something. “Excuse me, do you work here?” I shake myself, planting my hands on my hips, shooting him a winning smile. It feels like a lie written all across my face. Babs is missing. Babs... I need to find her...

“Y-you...” Coach runs a hand through his thinning hair, the flashlight dropping, the clatter echoing down the hall. I blink hard, trying to clear the spots from my eyes. “You’re Robin!”

“That’s right.” I turn to rap my knuckles against the lockers, the echoing boom traveling down the hall right after the sound of the clipboard. I really don’t have time for this, but Robin doesn’t cut straight to the chase. Robin isn’t Batman. But Babs... I don’t have time. Time, time, time. So I point at Coach, tilting my head as if I should recognize him, but don’t. “And you’re—?”

“Coach Drewitt,” Coach smacks his clipboard to his forehead like a salute, his face, even in this light, bright red and shaking, “I—I work here.” He laughs, holding out his hands, motioning to me as if I’m the greatest thing since indoor plumbing. “You... wow.”

“I need your help.” I force my smile to stay and my voice to remain relaxed, light, and casual. I run a hand through my dripping hair, careful not to slick it back in the style that I wear to school, and instead tousle it more, so it sticks all over the place. I deepen my voice too. Bruce trained me for everything, down to changing the cadence of your words and your speech pattern to throw people off. You can never rely on a mask alone.

At the notion of Robin needing his help, well, Coach might’ve just passed out. His voice is breathless, gasping as if he were the one who was just out in the rain instead of me. “Su-sure! Anything! What do you need? A towel? A warm shower? A—”

I cut through his ramble smoothly. Yeah, smooth. Calm. I’m calm... Babs is missing. Babs, Babs! My mind races, my eyes darting around the hall, my ears twitching at every noise. She has to be here! “I am looking for a girl. Barbara Gordon.” It feels weird saying her full

name. She introduced herself as Barbara, but no one ever calls her that. No one would dare, except maybe her grandma. “Have you seen her?”

“Gordon?” Coach’s face drops, and so does my stomach. It’s not concerned or sad, not worried, just... confused? His bushy eyebrows furrow, his clipboard tapping on his leg, a rhythm that matches the pounding of my heart. “Someone said she was coming with Grayson, but I haven’t run into either of them yet.” His eyes narrow slightly. Realization sweeps his face. His eyes meet mine, the smile gone. “Why? What’s wrong?”

I wave him away, although I want nothing more than to grab him and demand that he check every inch of this place, getting everyone else to help tear it apart to look for Babs. Babs... who’s not here. Babs, who was taken by the Joker.

Did the Joker lie? Did I go to the wrong place?

There’s a stone in my stomach. It sinks, no, it *plummets* to the floor. My vision throbs as I turn away from Coach, a strained hum squeezing through my lips. What if I am too late? What if— “Nothing’s wrong!” The words are light, not too soft or cheerful like they’re forced, no. It comes out like a normal sentence, devoid of anything that pounds in my head or stews in my stomach. It’s scary how I can lie with such

ease. Really, what's Bruce teaching me? I swing my arms, turning halfway back to Coach, grinning. "Just checking up on the Commish's daughter. Routine, ya know?"

Coach nods so quickly that I think his hair just fell out, his cap sliding down on his shiny forehead. He clears his throat, taking a step back, his lips trying so hard not to tease up in a smile. So, he really hasn't seen anything wrong, anything off. Either the entire school faculty is blind, or the Joker really isn't here. "Oh yeah, yeah, well, have a good night, Robin!"

"You too, Mr. Drewit." No one ever calls Coach 'Mr. Drewit' but I think Robin can get away with it. I dash off, my boots squeaking in protest before Coach can ask me for an autograph. Really, I could already see the question on the tip of his tongue.

Instead, the declaration that echoes after me is painfully obvious. "Hey, she's not here! The exit's that way!"

Not here, not here. No, she has to be here! Somewhere. I ignore Coach, running away, running through the halls that are supposed to be safe and a place where Babs and I can just be kids. That was already shattered once, in the locker room by a man with dual-colored eyes and a goon with a gun, but I thought... well...

Who cares what I thought? That was then. This is now.

Now, when I'm tearing through classrooms, tossing aside desks. Now, when teachers who are not expecting a teenage vigilante to come hurtling past, smacking them with a wet cape and yelling an apology from down the hall, call after me.

I ignore the questions and the looks I get. I'm looking for one person and one person only. My hand finds the door to the gym, and I slowly open it, peering through. The lights are dim, colorful accent lights sweeping the floor, setting the balloons and streamers aglow. A DJ works his magic in one corner, filling the room with music. It pounds, but not too loud. It's upbeat, the kind that makes you want to bob your head and cut a rug.

But to me? It's far away.

On one side, a long table stands with snacks and punch, inviting. My stomach growls so long and loud that I'm sure everyone in the room hears it. And by everyone, I mean the entire school. Kids dance on the open floor, mingling and jamming, some as couples, some in laughing groups, goofing off. Others stand quietly on the sidelines, either by themselves or chatting softly with friends.

I look at each person carefully. All people I know, whether a little or a lot, but no Babs. I let the door slip closed through my fingers, the click like the last nail in a coffin. I press my forehead against the door, clenching my fists, my whirling mind trying to pull the pieces together. Writing all that over the Homecoming Poster could've been a coincidence. This could be a dead end. It's the Joker. Anything's possible. Anything could go. He doesn't make plans. He doesn't *do* plans.

But then, what is this? What is a 'killing joke'?

I should go back to the apartment. I should call Bruce. He's probably done with the party and looking for me anyway. He might even be on his way here, ready to ground me for life to scrubbing the Batmobile's tires and dry cleaning all his suits.

But I can't wait for him. Babs doesn't have that much time. Babs needs me now. But where would the Joker have her? Where?

"Where *are* you, Babs?" I know she won't answer, but I squeeze my eyes shut. *Just like your parents*. The thought hits me hard and out of nowhere. Unwanted. Unwelcome. *You lost her, just like you lost them*.

No... no! She's not gone... she's not... I brace my hands against the door. Not gone... not lost... not gone. This is Babs we're talking

about. Babs, who can wolf down an entire pizza on her own. Babs, who keeps a journal about Batman and Robin in her pocket at all times. Babs, who messed up her apartment to give the Joker the fight of his life. I imagine her fighting, tossing knives, kicking butt, her mac'n'cheese hair wild, her green eyes snapping.

Babs is smart. I try to tell myself. Babs would find a way... Did she leave any clues?

I pull back from the door, about to turn, and walk back toward the exit, back into the rain still pounding outside and onto Babs' apartment, when I hear a noise. It's such a small thing. It could be anything. A stray noise from the party, the sound of the building settling. But then I hear it again.

It's like a hiccup, a catch in breathing that patters off into more hitched gasps. My eyes widen under my mask, my feet stumbling forward into a run. That's not just a noise, no.

That's the sound of someone crying.

It could be anyone, really. A girl who just broke up with her boyfriend. Someone who wanted to dance but was never asked. Someone who just fought with their friends. Honestly, it could be someone who

just got a call that their dog died. But as I get closer, my heart leaps forward. It is definitely a girl. A girl crying, sobbing, really.

I walk faster. It's foolish to hope, stupid. But... "Ba—Miss Gordon?"

I catch myself again. If I call her Babs, even if it isn't her... I round a corner, stepping into a hall that leads past the locker rooms, scanning for any sign of life.

I find it.

She's sitting up against the wall opposite the girls' locker, her knees pulled to her chest, her head buried in her knees, her shoulders wracked with mostly silent sobs, gasping, shaking.

At first, my heart soars. But then it sinks when I take a step closer and really look. It's not Babs. Her hair isn't a mac'n'cheese orange; it's a glistening blonde, curled into perfect ringlets falling over her bare shoulders. Her silky, hot pink dress sparkles in the light, cascading over the floor in folds and ruffles.

I cover the distance between us, raising an eyebrow. Okay, so a random girl's crying. So what? It's not Babs, but I'm here. Besides, she already heard me. Her shoulders tense, her sobs stutter, and she shifts, turning a glistening blue eye up to see me. I stop in my tracks.

Oh no... not her... not her!

Kitten shoots to her feet, her face lighting up brighter than the Bat-signal, the only sign of sadness the tears still tracking down her cheeks. She swipes at her running makeup, lips spreading into a too-wide smile, revealing her perfectly white teeth. “O-oh!” I brace myself, my feet itching to move, no, not to just move. To turn tail and run the other way. Really, I don’t have time for this right now. “Oh! Robby-poo!”

I blink, and she slams into me, the force knocking me back, sending my feet skidding, my arms windmilling to keep my balance. Her arms wrap around and squeeze my neck, her legs kicking out, trying to pull me around into one of those spins you see couples do in the movies.

Again with the ‘Robby-poo,’ I mean, really. Why? “M-Miss!” I choke, her arms squeezing, strangling me, tugging my neck painfully. Oh boy. Of all the people I could run into tonight, it had to be her. If I was Dick Grayson, it would be no big deal. But as Robin? Well...

Kitten slips back down to earth, giving enough slack for me to tug back but not to pull away without hurting her. Her arms wrap in a deadlock around my waist, her carefully done-up face only ruined by the trails of mascara smearing around her eyes and cheeks, making her look like the walking dead. I’m sorry, but it’s true! Her blue eyes sparkle like

ice, her lips shining red over her smile. “I knew you would come! I just knew it! Finally!”

Her voice is too loud, too screeching. Her arms hug me too tightly, like clamps around me. My heart pounds like a drum. Too close. Too close. Babs... I need to find Babs! I don't have time for this. “So sorry, uh, Miss.” I try to pull away gently, my hands reaching out to grab her arms and peel her off me. She smells like roses. “But I have something I need to—”

“Oh, come on, Robby-poo!” Kitten pouts, her lips puckering into a frown, her eyes getting big like a puppy's. My eyes widen. Really, is this girl for real? “You just got here! We should at least share a dance!”

Nope. No offense to Kitten, but I have another girl on my mind. One who needs me more, who needs me now. So I redouble my efforts to get her off me. She retaliates by hugging me, pressing her head into my chest, arms wrapped around me tightly, strangling me like a snake. Red burns my cheeks brighter than my suit, hotter than chili peppers. I cough, lifting my arms up and away.

“Erm, no—” I push, and yes, I'm being gentle! Really, when someone's life is at stake, and I wouldn't want to dance anyway—I have every right to be straightforward! “Now—” I try to push her away,

stumbling, spinning us around. It's like trying to get tape off. Or styrofoam. My face burns so hot that you could probably fry an egg on it for sure this time. Really, supervillains I can handle. Fighting? No problem. Girls? Oh gosh, no. "Please, Miss, I have a case—"

"It's that Gordon girl, isn't it." Kitten suddenly pulls away on her own, the release nearly sending me crashing onto my butt. But that's not what's surprising. What's surprising is the sudden venom in the girl's words, like she's gone from a puppy to a spitting cobra.

I carefully look her over again. Her eyes are hard, so cold and sharp that she would really give Bruce and run for his money. I take an involuntary step back, an alarm bell blaring in my head. If I didn't have red flags before, I do now.

"It's always the Gordon girl!" Kitten snaps, pointing right at me, accusing, her face twisted up as if she's just smelled something rotten. "She's soooo cool with her Batjournal or whatever, spewing all that crap about loving Dick Grayson when really we all know the truth!"

"Excuse me?" Something cold settles in my stomach. Nope... nope! Time to go, time to leave. But my legs won't move. Why would Kitten hate Babs? What's 'the truth?'

“She likes YOU!” Kitten stamps her foot, her face flushing red as her lips, something ticking under her eye. Her voice screeches like nails on a chalkboard, her finger shoving into my face.

Robin, who she’s only met once before. Robin, who she has a shrine to in her locker. Something crawls along my skin like ants scampering. I don’t understand. I mean, I do because I’m charming and quippy and a kick-butt hero, but... how can someone get that obsessed? Kitten isn’t done. Oh no, not yet. “She has a crush on Robin, and she asked you to the dance and is ditching Grayson!”

I take another step back, holding up my hands, motioning down as if that could help at all. Man, I’ll never, ever understand girls! “Really, Miss, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Miss Gordon is missing, so I’m looking—”

“Of course, you’re looking.” It’s like a switch has been flipped. The smiles are back, the sparkles and small bubbling giggles. She’s right in my face in seconds; really, how can she move so fast?—and grabs my hands. Even through the gloves, my fingers curl and shiver like I just stuck them in a bowl full of jello. I don’t like this. What does she mean, ‘of course?’ Why is she smiling? “And I’m glad you’re finally here!”

Kitten looks down, then up at me through her lashes, reaching up to play with the R emblazoned over my heart. I stiffen but refuse to let it show on my face. “Joker promised not to kill you if you manage to survive, and then you can be mine!”

The world stands still. My brain pauses, trying to understand what she just said. It’s gibberish. It doesn’t make any sense. The Joker...

Adrenaline shoots through me. Babs! Distraction! Trap! I yank away, my feet ready to jump into a run, but I don’t leave. I left myself open. Vulnerable.

I kept my back to the locker room doors.

Something heavy and wooden cracks into the back of my head. White sears the world, then black spots that pulse and grow. *Mistake... mistake... I’m falling, the ground rushing up to meet me. Pain slams on the back of my head, pulsing, throbbing. Mistake... mistake... I’m sorry, Babs. I’m sorry, Bruce.*

I made a mistake.

“Uncle Jay’s gonna be so thrilled ta see ya, Birdie Boy!” Two colors blur and swirl in my vision, red and black, before being completely swallowed by the darkness as my eyes slip shut.

I failed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WELCOME TO THE MAD HOUSE

My head throbs, the dull ache pulsing through my body in time with my heart. It's as if someone's knocking on it like a door, asking if I'm home.

Well, I'm not home, thank you very much.

My arms tingle, raised past my head, pain shooting through my shoulders. It burns and aches as if they have been in that position for way too long, pulling at my armpits, straining my muscles. My feet brush against the bumpy ground, barely reaching. The grit and grime are sandpaper under my toes, digging into my skin. My breath hitches, only a little, when my mind zooms back to consciousness. One minute, I'm underwater, floating in blissful, painless sleep. The next, it's like someone's dragging me back to the surface with a rope, leaving me gasping, all feeling rushing back with a vengeance, slamming into me like a ten-ton weight.

Where am I? My mind slogs awake, pouncing on every possible question. What happened? Oh, why does my head hurt?

I keep my eyes shut, assessing, as always. I don't have time to panic. There's never time to panic. You either get with the program and get out, or you get into a worse pickle. Just a fact of the vigilante life.

Thick rope strangles my wrists, almost tight enough to completely cut off my circulation, digging into my skin, the fibers rubbing, biting. Yes, skin. My heart lurches in my chest. My gloves, with their lockpicks and extra hidden accessories, including a way to contact Batman, are missing.

But that isn't the worst part. I mentally run down everything. The whopping goose egg on the back of my head pulses, and from how the pain warps the world, I probably have at least a mild concussion. My sides ache like there's no tomorrow, probably bruised ribs. A missing utility belt—*no... oh come on!* My stomach sinks. My waist feels naked without the golden arsenal fastened around my hips. Whatever this is, whoever took me, they're smart. They know. I keep going. My legs are fine, except for the lack of my boots, which also had hidden tools. So, no gloves, no shoes, no belt. And no socks, but that isn't as important. What's important is I'm hanging from the ceiling like a birthday piñata, my feet on tiptoes to keep the strain off my arms, which, quite frankly, feel like they're about to pop out of the sockets. At least my mask's still

on, but the HUD display fizzles, glitching out, buzzing like a nest of angry hornets in my ear. I keep my eyes shut, though, ignoring the drone, and turn my attention to the room.

It's large, well, larger than standard room size, with wind moving through in irregular drafts. So, we aren't in a normal building. The creak of wood, groan of metal overhead, and concrete that scuffs the bottom of my feet spell it out for me. A run-down building, probably near the docks, from the smell of fish permeating the air. Maybe an old warehouse? Typical. Really, can't villains come up with better hideouts?

There are people in here, six other than me, if I'm reading the room right. Three are closer to the ground on my left, probably sitting, and the others are walking toward me. I refuse to tense as footsteps pad and clack closer.

Heavy breathing for two of them, sporadic and light wheezes for the other. Two big guys and one smaller guy. I tense my muscles. If I can slip out of the ropes, I can take them. Pain slices through my concentration, pulsing in the back of my head and creeping down my neck. I try my best not to grimace, but my breath hitches. That's right... I was knocked out. I have a concussion. Was I drugged? It doesn't feel like it. Wait—how did I get here?

I try to steady my breathing as the men come closer. Remember... I have to remember. Remembering is important. I'm too young to forget things this quickly. Blurry images swim in my mind's eye. Babs' apartment. The school. Coach Drewit. Kitten. Then... the smudge of red and black, that sneering Brooklyn accent.

My blood runs cold. No. Bats is going to kill me. Right after he grounds me for life.

The Joker. Harley Quinn... Kitten? But how and—

“Oh Birdy-by!” The sliding voice rakes at my ears, clenching my chest. The smell of rotting circus foods, funnel cake gone stale, candy apples gone sour, and popcorn burnt to charcoal assaults my nose. Something hits me in the stomach. I wheeze, my legs curling up off the floor, my arms screaming in protest at the sudden strain. I refuse to open my eyes. Maybe if he thinks I'm still unconscious, he'll give me more time. Maybe—

A small hiss of protest comes from one of the three people sitting on the floor. If I thought my blood chilled before, now it's ice in my veins. I know that hiss. I've memorized that hiss. My eyes fly open, the bright lights assaulting me, blinding me.

To my eternal shame, a groan slips out of my lips. What? My head's basically a drum right now, like one of those big ones for a rock band. I squint at the white face shoved into mine. He's here. This is happening. Joker stands right in front of me, his wild green hair unkempt, his purple suit ruffled, his tie askew. Busy, then.

His bloodshot eyes are wide, glinting with maniacal glee, his lips stretched in that ever-present smile. So I smile too.

“What time is it?” I keep that grin on my face, challenging. Not scared. I'm not scared. I've been in worse situations. Only... he has me here. Joker has me, and Batman doesn't know where I am. Not scared. My comm? No, I didn't put my comm in tonight. I thought I wouldn't need it. Trackers on my suit—? No, Joker has my belt, probably tossed it into the ocean for all I know. Bruce probably put a tracker on me, I mean, this is Bruce we're talking about, but I left my dress suit behind with my duffle...

Which I left at Babs' house.

Mistake... mistake...

“Well, I would say it's past your bedtime, Boy Blunder,” Joker pulls back, giving me room to breathe, “But really, you've been sleeping

for a while!” While Joker laughs, my eyes sweep the area quickly, soaking in every detail.

I was right. It’s a run-down, ancient warehouse, my rope attached to one of the many rusted metal beams overhead. Windows line the roof, letting in drips of rain through broken glass, the wind howling like a rabid dog. Moss and weeds choke the cracked concrete, tangling around fallen boards.

It looks... strangely familiar. Yes, just add fog, and it could be like the old, creaking building in those dreams I had, minus the songs, but not the creepy voices or laughter. Two doors stand on opposite sides, one hanging open limply, clattering in the wind, guarded by two people I didn’t hear or account for. The other door’s closed, unguarded, unbroken.

Not an exit, then.

Two goons flank the Joker, leering at me through thickly slathered clown makeup and the frilly ruffles of their polka dot shirts. To my left sit three women. No, not three women. One woman and two girls. A red and black harlequin outfit adorns the woman’s shoulders, the ruffles puffing white and bright in the glaring, flickering bulbs overhead, the leotard tightly fit, almost like the costumes Mom would wear at the circus, but without the softness or sparkle. Harley Quinn is Joker’s, I don’t know,

girlfriend? Partner? I honestly don't know what they are to each other. I mean, I know for a fact she's in love with him, but as for Joker? I don't think he can really love anybody. At least, not in a normal way. All I know is that Harley looks... different than she usually does.

I mean, most of the time, her face's painted a glaring paper white, her lips shimmering a dark red, small diamonds carefully applied under one eye and above the other. But now she looks, well, almost *human*. Her face has been scrubbed clean, the layers and layers of gunk peeled back to reveal normal skin tone, her smooth features done up with simple makeup: a light pink blush, glossy lipstick, with the brown eyeshadow making her cool blue eyes pop.

I cock my head to the side. That kind of makeup application looks familiar. How—?

Then I know. Because Harley isn't alone. The two girls, one chained to the floor, one free and clear, sit next to her. The free girl holds a small box, generously applying more lipstick to her already stark cherry lips. Her blonde ringlets and hot pink, if not a little dirty and rumpled dress, give her away. Kitten, or rather, my classmate Katherine Walker. My mind spins. Why would Kitten do this? Why would she work for the Joker? Why would she even go near the guy, especially if she is a Robin

fan? Or maybe Harley came to her first? I have to fight back a cringe. Really, does she like me that much? Or does she hate me? Because this right here does not seem like something you would do to a person you were obsessed with.

But I don't worry about Kitten for long. At least, I almost forget about her as soon as my eyes catch the other girl. She's chained to the floor, her ankles sporting thick, clunky manacles bolted to an iron ring at her feet. Her hair falls over her shoulders in thick waves, windblown and frizzy, making her look like she just got one of those big fans full in the face. A simple purple dress falls past her knees as she sits, torn and soaked and filthy, her bare arms covered in bruises and scuffs.

Someone grabbed her. Someone hurt her.

I growl, the sound so deep, so rumbling that I might as well be Batman over here. I didn't even know I had that in me. Oh well, you learn things about yourself every day. Everyone looks at me in surprise. Even *her*. She turns her head, her green eyes snapping onto mine, her jaw clenched, that mane of mac'n'cheese hair falling into her face. She makes no effort to blow it out of the way, leaving it to hang like a curtain. A very poofy curtain. I don't think I would've recognized her if it weren't for the eyes and hair. Layers and layers of thick, white face paint cover

up her freckles, her cheeks haphazardly slathered stoplight red, her mouth painted up into a smile that she definitely doesn't share. So, I guess she did Harley's makeup, and Harley did hers. I don't know how I feel about that.

But that is hardly important. Because when I meet her eyes, I see it. There's a question there, so loud and strong she might as well've spoken it out loud. Okay, so several questions. 'Why are you here?' Her eyes say, carefully sweeping me up and down, a mix of determination and... hope, I suppose. 'Did you come for me? How did you know I was missing?'

"Hello! Yo-hoo! Boy Blunder!" *Crack!* Something hits my ribs, and I grunt, my eyes peeling away from Babs to glare at the Joker. But I force my smile to stay, though it's fierce, more of a snarl. Bruises. Cuts. He better not have hurt her more than that. My vision pulses red. Something burns in my chest, something I've never felt before. Robin might not frown, but whoever said Robin can't be threatening? If looks could kill, I would've just broken my rule. Joker grabs my face, squeezing my cheeks, his nails biting. "Your Uncle Jay's talking to you!"

“Oh, really?” I let my grin grow, straining against his hands, ignoring the pain biting into my skin, or you know, ignoring the pain *everywhere*. Who has time for pain? “I didn’t notice.”

Joker sighs, letting go of my face, patting my cheek as if I really am his nephew. Well, worst Uncle ever, I guess. My skin crawls where he touches me, and I get the sudden urge to wipe my cheek on my shoulder. “You are always no fun. No fun!” Joker begins to pace in front of me, shaking his head, shaking a finger, just like a parent with their child, like he’s lecturing me. I mean, really? Not even Bruce paces when he does that. “Always in the way, always stealing the spotlight. Always taking all the good punchlines.”

I listen carefully, even as I glance from Babs to the door, to the goons standing behind Joker, keeping their eyes on me, two baseball bats clenched in their meaty hands, ready to turn me into a real piñata. “And then there’s your atrocious manners!” Joker pauses, placing a hand over his heart. I resist the urge to snort. Really, I could, but I’m not just risking my ribs over here. “Really, I was so offended! Wasn’t I, Pooh!”

My eyes dart back to Harley. She, Babs, and Kitten all look at me, and their gazes couldn’t be more different. Harley grins, her eyes sharing in that mad Joker-like glint. She rocks on her heels and leaps up, popping

onto her feet like a jack-in-the-box. Kitten stands too, slower, daintier, but instead of crazy, her eyes gaze at me as if I'm the greatest thing alive, like a cute puppy she wants to cuddle. She clasps her hands to her heart, her smile just as wide as Harley's. White teeth sparkling under red lips.

But again, why am I trussed up like a chicken over here if she likes me so much? Really, I'll never understand girls, especially not the crazy ones.

Then there's Babs. And really, she looks like she's about to give them all a good talking to, complete with throwing the makeup box and paints into their faces and maybe nailing them all with that mean left hook of hers. But behind the stern and the determination, her lip trembles, her eyes pooling. Most people wouldn't see, but I do, and my heart plummets down to my bare feet. Babs... man, I can't stand to see girls cry. But she has every right to, I mean, Joker flat out murdered her mom, and he has us, me, the hero, strung up with nowhere to go, her chained to the floor.

I have to look away. I can't do this. I can't. She's here, trapped just like me. Babs, my best friend. Babs, my more-than-friend. Babs, who should be safe at home when I come out into the streets of Gotham. I was

late. My head swims, the world tilting in front of my eyes. I did this. I messed up. I put us both in danger... I have to get us out. *Get out!*

“That's right, Mistah Jay!” Harley chirps. She skips over to us, looking so alien with that regular makeup, which is strange because you'd think she'd look, I don't know, nice? But no, apparently, psychos with standard faces are worse than psychos with painted faces. Take it from someone who has to deal with people like that all the time. “The Bird Boy needs some mannaahs!”

“Quite right, Pooh.” Joker lifts his head, his hands straightening his suit, which doesn't do any good. His grin spreads too wide, his eyes bulging, one eyebrow ticking. Just a couple thousand feet short of sanity. Is that how that saying goes? “The boy needs correcting! And I've decided to give ol' Batsy a break and take care of you!” He claps his hands, his laugh snapping through the room. I don't want to know what Joker's idea of ‘taking care’ of me is. My mind churns, my fingers feeling around the rope that bites and rubs away at my wrists. I have to get free. “Won't that be fun?”

I keep my grin, well, it's more of a smirk, on my face and shake my head. My mind's a tizzy of ideas and warning bells. Manners have nothing to do with this. Stealing the spotlight might, though. I mean, it's

the Joker. Something as simple as taking attention away from him is asking for trouble. And haven't I done that ever since I showed up? I mean, he really has never forgiven me for existing. A 'killing joke,' which, to be fair, all his jokes can be taken as deadly, taking Babs, using Kitten, there's a plan here. And it's never good when the Joker has plans. "Naw, I'd rather sleep in. Besides, we all know it's not my manners that get you, Jokester. What? Are you so sad that I'm back?" I force my voice to be calm, to keep the shaking away. I have to stay in control. For Babs. And for me. "You're overrated. Is that it? You can't stand that Batman likes me more than —"

Crack! I grunt again, my ribs singing in protest. Well, there go all my bones. Maybe I should keep my mouth shut. Then again, trading jabs with the Joker is what I do best. Harley laughs as I swing around like a piñata, Kitten squeaks, and Babs hisses again. What a first impression I'm making over here.

Joker's in my face, his eyes glowing red, or at least, that's what it looks like in this light, his head tilting to the side like a child. His breath is hot on my cheek, sending shivers sliding down my back. "You have no idea, Birdie." His voice is too deep, too cold. It doesn't sound right. My blood freezes, my forehead slick with cold sweat. I want to close my eyes

and turn away, but I hold his gaze, my smile locked on my face. It feels wrong. “No idea. You are a pain, a nuisance. But,” Joker sighs, his hand snapping up, ruffling my hair, before gripping it tightly, pulling on the thick, wet strands. It steadies my spinning, but it pulls. It yanks, sending agony shooting from my throbbing bump and spots in my vision. But I don't grunt, I don't break. I can't. I have to be ready.

I have to get Babs and Kitten out.

“But the Bat cares about you. I've seen.” Joker's voice slides up again, Harley coming up too close, her head resting on his shoulder, leaning forward, her blonde pigtails, one tip dyed red, the other black, swaying in front of her, her wide blue eyes eyeing me as if I really am a piñata that she wants to take a swing at. “And if he knows *I* took you, well... let's just say it'll be a party to DIE for, Birdie Boy!”

“He doesn't care about what you do, Joker.” I snicker, but the sound's hollow on my lips. Hollow, empty, cold. Danger. I have to get out. I have to get us out now! Plan... I need a plan! My fingers wiggle, but the ropes are too tight. Maybe if I—

“Don't interrupt me when I'm monologuing!” Joker pouts, which looks so strange with a smile. I don't think I like it. His hand twists in my

hair, pulling, yanking. The world explodes into white spots. I'd never beg. I won't ever beg. But... is it too much to ask for this to stop?

“Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were done.” My mind whirls, faster, faster, my temples pounding, spinning, everything spins. Everything hurts. My head... no, I've had worse. I can handle this. *No mistakes, no distractions. If you make mistakes, you're dead. No mistakes in Gotham. If I can get out fast and get the girls and get out—*

“No, I still have an entire speech!” Joker shakes my head hard, sending it slamming around like a life-sized bobblehead. The world spins, my stomach churns, bile surges into my throat, threatening to spill all over the floor, and spots do a jig across my eyes. I can't throw up. I can't be weak. Not in front of the Joker. Not now! “But it was all about how Bats will think of nothing but ME when I KILL you and all that!”

It takes a moment, but then it hits me harder than any punch or bat. The world stands still. My heart stops. I steal a glance in Babs' direction, then look at Kitten, not caring how the motion pulls my hair, stretches the bump... no, not just a bump, the gash on the back of my head. While Kitten seems oblivious to the Joker's declaration, I think Babs just got a shade paler under that white, caked-on makeup. Her fists

clench, and even from here, I can see her muscles tensing like a viper ready to spring.

A killing joke.

For once, I don't say anything. I'm mute. A *killing* joke. I thought all his jokes were meant to kill, but then again, he was just having fun, wasn't he? Playing with us? Toying with us? It was all a game to him. Well, maybe this is too. A different sort of game. My whole body goes numb, which you would think would get rid of the pain, right? Nope.

I'm going to die, aren't I? He's going to make sure of it. But no, I can't. Dying isn't allowed, at least; I think that's one of Bruce's rules. And if it isn't, it should be.

I grit my teeth, the only sound in my ears the slamming of my own heart in my chest and the laughter of mad clowns that seems to come from far away. I got us into this. I have to get us all out breathing and preferably in one functioning piece. But even that doesn't stop the voice that slithers through my head. What if Babs and I had just gone to the charity event instead?

“What's that? Boy Blunder has nothing else to say?” Joker and Harley laugh long and loud, matching the howling wind that still rattles the bones of this old building. My skin crawls. My heart stutters back to

life. “Such a shame! Well,” Joker slips a small container out of his jacket, the label ripped roughly off. I stiffen. What now? Is he just going to kill me now? Without a show? I mean, he could, you never know with—

Something white and goopy slathers over my face. I clamp my mouth shut just in time. Paint or something slides down my forehead as Joker smears the stuff on my face, humming a cheerful, wheedling little tune all his own. I close my eyes. The stuff’s cold and wet, but it hardens like mud on my face, cracking with every stretch of my skin. Fingers sloppily trace a smile around my mouth and run something like tears under my masked eyes. A clown... he’s turning me into a clown.

“There we go!” I open my eyes but not my mouth. The world’s obscured by the paint that drips into my eyes, a white film warping everything like I’m seeing them through a fogged-up mirror. It itches, tickles, and I tremble with the effort not to wipe it off on my cape. It’s so dry now that it probably wouldn’t work anyway. Joker claps his hands on my shoulders, feigning a serious tone. I tense under the pressure. It isn’t like Bruce. This isn’t comforting. This is a mockery. “You are ready, Boy Blunder.”

“Le—” I hack and spit, gasping against the dry paint clinging to my lips. Goons and clowns alike hoot and howl with laughter. Really, I

don't see what's so funny. Then again, someone always seems to enjoy my misery. I manage to clear my mouth of the paint, but not the taste. Well, then. Gross. "Let the girls go. They have nothing to do with this."

"Oh, ho-ho! Is that what you think?" Joker skips over to Kitten and Babs. I might as well have passed out from how still my body goes. I'm a statue. I'm frozen. My heart stops beating in my chest, standing still. Then I'm struggling, lashing against the rope, only managing to send myself swinging like bait on a string. I need to get out! I need to get to them!

Joker puts a hand on Kitten's shoulder. She stiffens, but she still smiles, beaming up at me, though her eyes are too wide, too nervous. "This little lady here likes you, Bird Boy!" Joker pats her shoulder like an approving Uncle, his eyes locked on mine, challenging, daring. I growl again. Kitten perks up, her smile widening. I'm paying attention to her. Apparently, that's worth all this. Well, now... that's really messed up. "She agreed to help me if she could have you after!" Joker sighs, closing his eyes and placing a hand over his heart. "Ah, young love! So cute! So pure!"

I have to bite my tongue hard. Now isn't the time to toss out insults or quips. But now I really growl when Joker moves past Kitten to

where Babs is still chained to the floor. She shoots to her feet, her hands clenched into trembling, dangerous fists. Now I can really see her. Her dress is rumpled like crepe paper, the purple a dulled brown from being dragged through this warehouse, soaking from the rain that drizzles outside. Her knees bleed, painted blue and green from her bruises, but other than that, she looks alright.

“Now this girly,” Joker tries to come closer, but Babs steps away, her body tensed to spring. Maybe she'll nail him with one of her pain-inducing punches. Now that would be a sight to see. Joker’s unfazed, though, dancing around her, circling like a vulture. I’m like an arrow drawn back on the bow, ready to launch and fly at him. If he dares even to lay a finger on her— “Is an old friend, in't she? I knew her mommy's screams very well.”

I growl again, and Babs makes a choking noise, her lips trembling violently. Joker throws back his head and cackles, turning around as if basking in the misery of us, in the chill that races through this room. “Ah! So you see, Boy Blunder. Let them go? No, no, no! AHAHAHAHAHAHA! They have just as much a part of this as you do!”

I have to make my move—Joker's over there, all four goons, and Harley are looking at him. I have to do it. I have to do it now! *Move, Grayson!*

I flip my legs up, reaching toward my hands, folding my body in half. My legs push up, my hands slip down, the sweat running down my skin enough to slide them through. Just like oil on a rusty hinge. Is that how that works?

The ropes slip away, and I fall, twisting around and landing on my feet, crouching like a cat. *Yes!* Adrenaline pounds through my veins, and I take a step forward... and fall.

The world whirls like a top around me, my head spinning, my vision pounding, bile surging, burning. My head screams as if someone just cracked it open. But that isn't the problem.

I catch myself on my hands and knees, heaving, gasping, my head dipping toward the ground. Every breath sends pain through my ribs, spots making permanent residence in my eyes. The world sings around me. Laughter, screams, singing, pain, people coming. Joker, Babs, *Move! You have to move! Get up! Failure is unacceptable!*

I try to push myself to my feet, but I'm grabbed, hands clamping on my arms with an iron grip, digging, holding me. I don't fight back.

The world's a merry-go-round on hyperspeed. A hand seizes my jaw and lifts my head. The Joker's face swims in front of mine like he's in a warped mirror. I blink rapidly, but it does nothing to clear the paint or the spots.

“Hmmm—“ Joker inspects me like I'm a patient and he's a doctor. Ugh, he would make a horrible doctor. “Ready for the fun, I see! Perfect!” He pats my head, ruffling my wet hair again, his smile filling my vision. “Let me welcome you and Miss Commish Jr. to my humble home away from home! You will both have a bucket of laughs!”

He lets go, and my head bobs, slapping back down to my chest, my teeth clacking. I bite back a groan. I can't do this. But I have to. For Babs. Even for Kitten.

I glance to the side. Babs is grabbed as well, her chain loose, left curled on the cold, cracked concrete, but her arms are in the grasp of the goons that were guarding the door. She struggles in their iron grip, her eyes locked on mine, concern roiling along with determination and... fear.

Yes, that's what churns in my stomach, what seizes my heart. *Not Babs. Please, not Babs. I can't lose Babs! Mistake, mistake! Bruce!*

“Throw them in.” That's not the last time I'll hear Joker's voice, even though I wish it were. I'm pulled toward the shut door. But I don't know if that's comforting or not. I drag my feet, trying to sink to the floor, to give the henchmen as much trouble as I can. They don't really appreciate it.

The door slams open with a bang, revealing a pitch-black nothingness, like a mouth stretching open, waiting to eat us. I'm pulled back and thrown like a sack, catapulting through the door, sailing through the air—then I slam to the ground, my head cracking hard against the concrete. I stiffen, but only for a moment. Everything's white, hot, searing pain shoots through every part of my body, grasping, clawing. My arms and legs are heavy, wet, limp noodles, deadweight on the ground. The world's gone. I don't even feel another body thumping on top of me, the force knocking the air out of my stomach, or even the door slamming shut behind us, the clang of metal on metal sealing our doom.

All I know is blackness. And pain.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I FINALLY MEET MY BEST FRIEND

—Babs—

How did this night go so wrong? I shut my eyes tight, trying to block out the laughter behind the door that's doomed us to this insane... plan? Joker really doesn't do plans, as far as I've researched. And I've researched a lot about that mad clown in the past... has it already been five years?

My mind drifts back to earlier in the night, before the makeup, the chains, and the madmen, back to when I was patiently waiting for Dick. I can't blame him. I mean, I could, but he's always late anyway. At least this time, it was a good excuse. Another Charity Event, this one for the victims of Joker's latest attack. I didn't go to the attack site myself; Dad would never let me, but I saw those poor people on the news, the horror in their eyes obvious to anyone who looks closer.

I've always admired Dick and Bruce's willingness to help those who can't help themselves. At least, with Dick, I know it's genuine. For

Bruce? Sometimes I wonder if he just throws those events to look good and get all the ladies who flock for his attention.

I really hope Dick doesn't end up like that.

I wince, trying to slow my racing heart, my muscles relaxing as I lie on top of Robin, my head pressed against his. Something solid, something warm. Something that isn't trying to grab me or spray me with knockout gas. I don't know what it is, but somehow the warmth of another breathing body, the presence of a hero, soothes my pattering heart.

A hero... the thought bubbles in my chest. If it wasn't for the kidnapping and impending doom, I would be above the moon right about now. Robin, I'm with one of my favorite heroes of all time. Robin, the Boy Wonder. Robin, the child vigilante. Robin, the first sidekick.

But I can't help the regret that paints my thoughts black.

I could have gone to this one, this Charity Event. I should have suggested it to Dick. Instead of waiting for him to come to me, we could have gone together. Dad was already going, anyway. It would have been perfect. It would have been safer.

But I wanted that dance. A groan slips from my lips, echoing around me again and again. My first Homecoming, well, the first one

where Dick could have come with me. I've always dreamed about my first dance, of course, what girl hasn't?—And more often than not, the dreams were with him. In my dreams, we sweep across a ballroom floor, the lights glistening like stars overhead, the music filling the air with soft, swelling notes. I wear a flowing but simple dress, but strangely enough, every time I picture Dick, he's not in those suits he wears to every party, but in a simple jean and T-shirt combo, complete with those scuffed sneakers he wears with his school uniform. Not at all what homecoming would be, but close enough. But I could have waited, especially if it meant being together all night and maybe being on time for once. At least, I would hope Bruce would be on time for an event he's hosting.

Really, at this point, I'd take anything over the disaster I got. And disaster is an extreme understatement.

I can see us now in my mind's eye, dancing together in the streets under the glow of street lamps, laughing, joking, teasing. Nothing fancy, but it would have still been our night. Our first dance. Besides, Dick can always make me laugh.

My fault. That's what this is. If I hadn't been such a child and actually talked to Dick about our options—I let out a long, gasping sigh, the movement fluttering the stringy hair beneath my lips. If I had been

with Dad, this wouldn't have happened. If I had acted like a mature teenager instead of the stubborn little girl who wants her fairy tale dream, Robin and I wouldn't be in danger. And I would be with Dick.

Dick.

I have to choke back a lump in my throat when I think of him walking into my apartment and seeing the warzone I, or I guess, the Joker, left behind. After everything he's been through with kidnappings and shootings and his parents being murdered, he probably has PTSD, and walking into a place like that, knowing who had me? Well, I can't imagine what he would even think.

Nausea bubbles in my stomach, my eyes squeezing shut. Knowing him, his smile probably fell instantly. I can already see his face as pale as paper in my head. He's probably beside himself with worry, feeling my pain for once. For once, I won't answer his texts. Who would've guessed that the friend of the Poster Boy for Kidnapping would get kidnapped herself? But there's no satisfaction in that.

But at least he's safe. I mean, he's not here. He's probably with Alfred, Bruce, and Dad at the GCPD, working with Batman to try and find me... us. Which leads me to the next and most important question of the hour.

Why is *Robin* here?

I groan from my place on Robin, my head resting on his. The smell of the Gotham streets, trash, polluted rain, and the overwhelming smell of the Joker, which reminds me of the time I burnt popcorn in the microwave, permeates his locks, along with the distinct iron smell of blood. I wrinkle my nose. I would say he needs a shower and a good clean bandage, but then again, so do I. Besides, it would be wrong to say so. He doesn't move, though his heart still beats in my ear. A steady lub-dub that my heart slowly adapts to. Alive, then. Alive is good. Alive, we can work with.

They didn't throw me that hard. At least some bad guys have manners, if you can call tossing someone like a sack 'manners,' and I didn't land on the hard ground as Robin did. But I almost think it would've been better if I were the one injured. I'd still be a liability, of course. I am a civilian without much training, but one that he could take care of and carry around if needed. But if Robin's out for the count... I wince as I remember the crack of his head against the concrete. And he had already been hit there from before when Harley Quinn grabbed him, I think. My mind flashes to an image of Harley's giant mallet cracking down on the back of his head, his cape billowing as he hits the ground.

And, by the warm wetness against my cheek, I know it isn't just a tiny bump on the noggin. It doesn't gush, but if it's warm, wet, and seeping, it isn't clotted either. Not a good start, but again, alive, I can work with it.

Alive is all I will ask for. Yeah, I can work with alive. *No problem, Babs. Just take care of the unconscious superhero you're sitting on.*

I carefully shift, sliding off his back and onto the cold, hard ground, careful not to stir him. My chest immediately aches for his warmth, the feel of another living person close to me, but I ignore it. I have no time to be scared, not with him bleeding out on the floor. I freeze, my breath catching. That's a terrifying thought. *Don't think that way, Barbara! He isn't bleeding out! He's just hurt! Get a grip!*

The rough surface digs into my scuffed knees, aggravating the cuts that I already have. I wince but bite my tongue hard. I can deal with pain. I've broken bones before during gymnastic tournaments, though none of them were that bad, I suppose. That pain was bad enough, but there's something different about aching all over, like your body is one giant bruise, your only clothes a soaked-through, grimy dress that just... Well, it just feels wrong pressed against my skin. I feel filthy, and not just because of my clothes. The makeup Harley applied cakes my face thick

and lumpy, like I played in a garden box right after watering. I don't mind makeup at all, but this is too much. My hair falls around me unhindered, a frizzy rat's nest that probably smells worse than Robin's.

But that doesn't matter, does it? I mean, when it comes down to it, I would love a hair tie to pull it out of the way, or a nice hot, steaming shower, but Robin takes priority.

Such a strange thing to think about.

I scan his prone body carefully. His legs look fine, nothing bent weird that would indicate a break, same with his arms, though I'm a far cry from a medical professional. His cape slips to the side, revealing a heaving back, his breaths irregular, sporadic. I cringe, remembering the echoing cracks and grunts of pain. A crowbar to the ribs would do that to anyone. I hope nothing's broken, and I don't feel like prodding and poking around to find out. With my lack of medical experience, I would probably end up hurting him more.

I fight back the pressure in my eyes, carefully swiping his thick black hair away from his face. It's hard to tell with that mask if his eyes are open or closed, but from the way he breathes and doesn't move or speak, I'd say he's out cold and hard.

I bite my lip, my fingers reaching for that mysterious mask. I've always wondered who Batman and Robin could be. I mean, people who are so selfless that they would give their lives to protect the city? You don't just come by people like that, at least in Gotham. There are definitely some in the Firefighters and PD and so on, but many of them are self-serving scum bags—again, this is Gotham, not Metropolis or Central City—and few and far between would dare to do what Batman and Robin do. They give everything and are so good at their job; I thought they were superhuman at first.

My heart races as I finally touch Robin's mask. It's made of a material I don't know, probably a mix of several components, perfectly molded to his face. He looks so... human from up close. In pictures, he's this mysterious figure, always laughing, always in some dynamic pose, the captions praising his feats in battles, his quips, and his spirit. In fact, up until tonight, I thought he was incapable of something other than a smile and a one-liner. But that growl from earlier? The determination in his voice? He sounded so much like Batman it was unsettling.

But that was then, when he was still smiling, still putting up a fight. Now? I scoot closer to him, one hand still touching his face, the other reaching toward the lump on the back of his head, the thick tangle

of blood and hair. It's stopped bleeding, but that doesn't mean anything. I turn his face to the side, inspecting.

Human is an understatement. He looks... well, *normal*. Other than the sloppy clown paint trying to hide his face, he looks like someone who could go to my school, a kid around my age. His mouth is slack, not smiling or frowning, just an undisturbed, peaceful expression. He reminds me of Dick, that classical handsome that most people would label a 'pretty boy.' Not rugged or boyish, but something between the two.

Though I drop my hands, I still gaze intently at the mask. What are his eyes like, I wonder? Large or small? Round or sharp? I've always thought they would be brown or gray; blue is such a rare color for black-haired people. I know one who has them, Dick, of course, with those stark, vibrant azure eyes that have all the girls giggling, but his, especially that bright, gem-like shade, are not at all common.

I would never take Robin's mask off to find out, though. That would be a breach of privacy and trust, though I don't think he has any foundation to trust me in the first place, other than his relationship with Dad. As I've always said, those who hide their face hide them for a

reason, and I would hate to betray one of my favorite heroes before we officially meet.

I shake myself. Here I am, wondering about his eyes and his mask when he's still unconscious from head trauma and a beating. *Way to go, Barbara!* I quickly grab the hem of my dress, ignoring my trembling fingers, and start to rip. It was already short, barely scooping past my knees. What's a couple more inches? I pull all the way around, leaving me with an uneven strip of fabric. It's dirty, probably crawling with germs, but it'll have to work. It's better than nothing.

I set the strip to the side and rock forward, grabbing Robin around the shoulders, my hands gripping his cape. As soon as I tug, I know I'm in trouble. I'm strong; I am a gymnast, after all, but though Robin's lithe, his muscles are rocks, weighing him down. How much does he weigh? More than me, that's for sure. Plus, his cape and suit alone are heavy enough with that thick, sturdy fabric. I let out a long breath, blowing strands of my orange hair out of my eyes. Of course, this has to be complicated. Because being trapped by clowns and being thrown into a maze isn't enough.

I try again, my arms giving a quick, sharp yank, my bare feet digging into the ground, pushing. Robin slides into my lap, his head resting against my leg, eyes still closed. Breathing, yes, but hurt.

I wince at the blood that rubs onto my skirt. I have to get his head wrapped. I snatch the cloth off the floor and quickly wind it around the bump, carefully making it tight enough to keep pressure on it but not too tight. His breath hitches, a furrow of pain passing over his features, and I pause, biting my lip.

Am I doing this right? I sure hope so. When I finish, I tie it off like a bandana and let myself fall back with a long sigh, bracing myself with my arms behind me. The room is quiet, too quiet after the insanity of the entrance room. It's almost entirely dark, one bulb flickering overhead, casting sharp shadows on the plain walls. The metal door we came in by is in front, barred shut, but I don't see any other sign of an exit.

Nothing to do then except wait. So I scan the rest of the room. Tiny black dots, which I'm probably safe to say are cameras, sit high up in each corner, no bigger than ants, at least from this distance. More lights stay shut off above us like they're waiting for their moment.

I shift my weight under Robin's head, wincing when a groan slips out of his lips. A *groan*... he *is* human, just like me, like all of us. He feels pain. He can die. My stomach surges. Maybe that's what I really admire about him and Batman. They aren't invincible like Superman or fast like the Flash. They can't fly, they can't heal, and they don't use magic. They rely on their human-given gifts alone.

And they suffer pain and injury and death like every man.

And that doesn't make this any easier. I start humming, my hand finding its way into Robin's hair, brushing it back off his face, smoothing the makeshift bandage. Or at least, I try to hum, but the sound warbles, my voice still thick.

Another groan escapes the boy below me. I turn down, my hand freezing, my heart stopping. The white lenses of his mask blink rapidly before squinting at me, one eye shut tighter than the other. "M-Miss Gordon?"

—Dick—

The world cracks, darkness swallowing me, eating me whole. Swallowing... like the door I fell through. I fell..., right? I can't

remember what happened; tell me to point up or down, and I'll embarrass myself. The pain catches up to me as I slug toward the real world.

While my body aches like one big bruise, my head splits and splinters like a log. It sings, reminding me again and again that something's wrong. The last thing I remember...

What is the last thing I remember? Everything's cast in a haze, a fog that swirls around me, dancing away. I remember swinging through the rain, laughter painted over a poster, swinging through the rain again, finding a girl in a glittering pink dress, and then... what?

There should be something. I know there's something else, a lot of somethings I'm missing. But the agony in my head won't allow me to grasp anything, keeping me in the dark.

But not for long.

Slowly, painstakingly, I try to force my eyes open. But it's as if someone's put a sack of bricks on my lids, keeping them squeezed shut. Even though my eyes refuse to open, every other sense shoots back to life. My back's pressed into something hard, my bare feet and arms exposed to the cold air, though it's stagnant, unlike the howling wind before.

Before... yes, wind howling through windows like a pack of rabid wolves, howling with the psychos. The psychos. Slowly, the memory of being strung up like an oversized superhero piñata slams into me.

Joker, a killing joke. Slathering paint on my face, taunting me, threatening Babs. Going behind Bruce's back.

Not my finest hour.

I turn my attention back to the room. Breathing echoes off the walls that press close, two people. Me... and someone else. Someone who sits behind me, no... not behind me. My head isn't lying on something hard like the rest of me is. It's elevated slightly, pressed against something that shifts, like fabric, and something not hard, but not soft either.

My head's resting on a person's leg. Something's tied around my forehead, wrapped tightly against the throbbing pain in the back. So, someone who cares. Not the Joker or any of his goons. At least, not unless I'm suddenly in a different universe where they're the nicest people alive. So yes, not them. Their breath is soft, even, but choked like a frog is stuck in their throat.

I freeze. I know I'm not in danger, at least, not yet anyway, but the memories finally slam into me at full force, like a semi ramming me

on the freeway. Joker, Babs, Kitten, Harley Quinn—everything tumbles, a jumbled mess that swirls into a collage of images, each bit demanding my attention. Babs... I remember now! Babs and I were thrown through a door into—what did Joker call it? His ‘home away from home?’ Don’t know if I want to find out why. I mean, what is his actual home, his cell in Arkham?

But where are we now? In some sad little house? In a living room? Are we in danger? I try to move and shift my weight, but everything’s so sore and cold and aching that I stop. If we’re in danger, I hope Babs will make a run for it and leave me behind. A horrible thought, but it’s true. I’d rather have her save herself. Then again, she probably wouldn’t. I can see her now, scowling at me, telling me that that isn’t how it works. That she can’t leave me behind.

She’s just amazing like that.

A hand strokes my hair. I stiffen, ready for the pull that came after Joker ruffled my hair, but it doesn’t come. Because Joker isn’t in here with us. The hand’s gentle, passing through, smoothing, untangling the knots without a catch. It rubs over my bandage, brushing the strands off my forehead, leaving my skin exposed to the sweet relief of clean, cool air. It soothes the hard, cracked paint, touching my skin underneath.

My muscles relax, if only for a moment. Not in danger... safe. Babs... I know it's Babs who has my head against her leg. If not for the hands that are so soft, so gentle, but also the fact that they're not all over me like I'm sure Kitten's would be, and also the smell. Lavender and pizza. The strangest combination, but purely her own. Purely Babs.

Someone, Babs, of course, starts to hum. I don't recognize the tune, but it pulls the rest of me back from the drag of unconsciousness. Though the hum stutters, choking, it's so good to hear her voice that I stir again and groan. The pain shoots through me like a knife. Not safe. Definitely not safe. No... what was I thinking? We have to get out of here.

The humming stops, and so does the hand, freezing on my face. Babs tenses below me, her breath coming in sharp and quick. I force my eyes open. It takes more effort than it should. I blink rapidly against the glaring light, squinting up at a shadow that leans over me.

No... not a shadow. Not Babs, either. It can't be her. The creature that leans over me has pale, perfect features, waves of glistening hair falling over her shoulder like a curtain. A halo glows softly around her, setting her ablaze with white light.

It can't be Babs. It has to be an angel. An angel... am I dead already? No, just concussed. Because as soon as the angel shifts, I know it's her. Soft green eyes that ask me a million questions at once, bright orange hair flowing free around her shoulders, and a face, though painted and smeared, that I would recognize anywhere.

So... An angel, then. Wow, when did I become a hopeless romantic? I blame Bruce.

I open my mouth to say her name, but stop myself just in time. Because Robin can't know her nickname. Because Robin has never met Barbara Gordon before in his life. I might as well be a complete stranger to her. So instead, I try again. "M-Miss Gordon?" A stupid question. It feels weird coming out, but I'll have to make it work. Because I'm sure that no matter how much I try to change my voice if I say her nickname, she'll know it's me. She might already know it's me.

"Yes?" She shifts underneath me, which jars my head. I bite back another groan. I can't be weak. Not now. Besides, though she's putting on a brave face, she can't fool me. Her eyes water, her lips shake, and her voice trembles, if only the tiniest bit.

"Ah... good... You can talk." I force myself to sit up. I do it way too fast, leaving the world spinning, a blur of color and light. Nausea

surges up from my stomach. I force a laugh. I force my voice to be different. “For a moment there, I thought you only hissed and hummed.”

“You shouldn’t be sitting up.” She’s an orange, tan, and purple blob next to me. I put a hand to my head. Only together for a couple of minutes, and she’s already chiding Robin. Is that a good sign?

“Eh, I’ve had worse.” I give her a thumbs up, refusing to let my smile shake. I have to be strong for both of us. Strong... protect... When the world stops spinning, I give her a once-over. Nothing else seems battered or bruised. She looks the same as she did chained to the floor, except she’s no longer hissing or clenching her hands into fists.

“I’m sure you have.” Babs pulls her knees to her chest, revealing black shorts hidden under her dress. I blink. Huh, yeah, that doesn’t surprise me, actually. But I’m glad she has something other than a dress on, especially with all the running we’ll have to do. “It’s nice to finally meet you, by the way.” Those green eyes are on me, her smile small, shy for once.

I try my best to keep my mouth from hitting the floor. She wasn’t even shy when she first met me, I mean, Dick Grayson *me*. Does she admire Robin that much? “You too. Commish talks about you a lot.” I manage to get my feet under me and stand, but my knees suddenly turn to

jelly, my bare feet aching, curling in protest against the cold, hard floor. The world spins again, but I don't stumble. I stand stock still, staring straight at one of the walls.

No falling over. Nothing that would make the Joker laugh. Because I know he's watching. One glance around the room is enough. Cameras and speakers hide in every corner, recording our every move. The walls are smooth, except for the one that holds the door we were tossed through.

Hmm... high tech. That and the hacker that cleared the Arkham database definitely adds up to someone helping from the outside. But who? Who would have the funds and motivation to help the Joker do this? Whatever *this* is?

I have to be careful what I say to Babs or Miss Gordon, I suppose. That's a problem. Now, you might be wondering, 'But Dick, what's the big deal? You're already acting differently around her.' Well, yeah. But from the way she's looking at me, trying her best to hide the fear that swirls in her eyes, I know that she needs someone.

A friend.

And because of the cameras, Dick Grayson can't be that friend. I pause, turning back to her. But maybe... maybe Robin can. I cross the

distance between us, and even though my head still kills me, my steps grow stronger every time my feet hit the ground. She looks up at me, and though the fear's there, I see it. That take-charge look that always comes when she's made up her mind.

Protect. I thought I could handle it... I thought I would be fine. I ran a superhero team. Surviving until we get out of this whatever-this-is should be a piece of cake, right?

But Babs isn't another superhero. She isn't Starfire, Bumblebee, Cyborg, or Kid Flash. She doesn't have powers or weapons or intense training. Though she puts up an amazing fight and has a terrifying left hook, when it comes down to it? Well... she's a civilian. But that doesn't really matter, does it?

Because more than that? She's my best friend. If something happens to her—

Mistake, mistake. Bruce... where are you?

I shove those thoughts away as hard as I can, though it doesn't do much good. So instead, I grin, holding out a hand, my bare fingers reaching for her. Will she recognize the feel of them? But no, as her hand slips into mine, though that familiar tingle of warmth spreads through my palm, nothing resembling recognition lights up her face.

Instead, she returns my smile and allows me to pull her to her feet, carefully steadying her when her legs wobble just the tiniest bit, like a baby learning to walk. At least we have that in common. We stand for a moment, hands clasped, staring at each other, me wanting nothing more than to burst out that I'm Dick Grayson, and her with that same smile that spreads across her face, her emerald eyes sparkling in thanks.

Then, we drop each other's hands like they're on fire. What am I thinking? What if she ends up liking Robin? I mean, liking me, sure. Who doesn't like Robin? Except for the villains, of course. No, I mean *liking*, liking Robin. For one, *ouch*, because whatever happened to Dick Grayson? And also... weird, because well, it's still me.

"So..." I draw out the word, planting my fists on my hips and tapping my foot. "What does he expect us to do now?"

I'm not expecting an answer from the ceiling, but I get one anyway. Laughter fills the room, raking at my ears, sending my head spinning again. Speakers... of course. They're watching us like this is a game, like a survival show. The room around us begins to shake. I grab Babs to keep her from falling, but really, she helps me stay upright too. We both take a step back when the walls all come down, or you know,

slide down into the floor to reveal three more doors, each with its own design.

Dust cascades from the ceiling in poofy drifts, and more lights flash on, the first bulb flickering out. They paint the room green and purple, really, so original, Joker, and twirl in patterns as if someone's just announced what's behind door number one.

“Choose your fun!” Joker's voice crackles through the speakers, coming from everywhere. “Which door? Which door? Pick your poison! Welcome, my little Birdie and Girly, to the MAZE OF MADNESS!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I GO ON MY FIRST RIVER RAFTING TRIP

Options are usually a good thing. I mean, chocolate or vanilla? Option. Rock or Pop? Option. Cold or hot? Another option. But choosing between doors that all lead to a crazed clown's idea of a good time? Yeah, not really good options there, Joker. I stand close to Babs, taking in the design of each door. The door to our left is splattered like something out of a horror movie, covered in knives that stick out like the quills of a porcupine, the beat-up wood painted with red, child-like designs, the handle a thick, dangerous-looking rope.

Okay, so probably not that door.

I turn to the one in front of us. It's made of what looks like the pieces of a boat, haphazardly nailed together, dripping with water that comes from... somewhere, barnacles clustering in the corners, shark teeth outlining a massive bite mark. The handle is the wheel of a ship.

The one to our left isn't any better. It's pitch black, shining in the rotating lights overhead, but when you look a certain way, a screaming ghost face catches the light. There isn't even a handle on this one, just an empty hole where it should've been.

“How does he have the time to make all this?” I grumble, shaking my head, my foot tapping absently on the ground. Which one? Darkness with screams, Water with sharks, or the promise of medieval torture devices? Which way to die? No... not to die... I can't think like that. I set my smile in stone. Get Babs out. Get her safe.

Survive. That is the goal.

So... which one do I want to try to survive?

“I've always wondered that too.” Babs' voice jolts me into the present. The present where she stands next to me, arms crossed, her eyes darting from door to door. “Do you superheroes and villains have malls you go to?”

I blink at her, my eyebrows shooting up. Hey, that's what I thought! “Uh, not that I know about?” I laugh, the sound echoing around us. It definitely doesn't sound right in this prison run by the King of Giggles or whatever he'd want to be called, but it feels good. Something lifts in my chest. Something about being around another person in the middle of this, well, I usually don't get kidnapped with someone else.

Not that that's something to strive towards.

“Hmmm.” Babs finally turns to me, her lips pressed. They look strange, painted that gaudy red that tries to make it look like she's

smiling. I grew up around clowns. I knew them. I watched them put on that makeup all the time. But this... just seems wrong on her face. I have to fight the urge to swipe at the red circles on her cheeks, to wipe it away to reveal the freckles underneath. Then again, I probably look way worse than she does. “What do you think? Being the professional?”

Me, the professional? Ha! Actually, it is true. Between the two of us, I’ve fought the Joker since I was twelve, but she’s no pushover, either. She probably has pages and pages about him in that Batjournal of hers. But again, Robin doesn’t know that. “Being the professional?” I hold up a finger before dropping it, shrugging. “Definitely not the prickly door.” What? I have no idea.

Babs gives that one a glance and nods, her nose wrinkling. “Yeah, I don’t think so. So that leaves two.” Her arms hug her now, more than crossing. “So... screeching ghouls or sharks?”

That’s an excellent question. My mind churns, the pain taking a backseat. I don’t have any tools, any weapons. All I have is a cape, a suit, and a mask that isn’t working. I couldn’t use my infrared on those doors even if I wanted to. No bō staff, no medical supplies... nothing. I’m empty. My training and skill that’s what I have to use to keep us alive. I hope against hope that it will be enough.

I steal a glance at Babs. She has nothing we can use, at least, not that I can see. I know she's a gymnast, strong and fast. That will help. "Do you have anything on you?" I shake my head as she looks at me like I just asked for a parrot, cracker, or something. "I mean, a bobby pin, a pen, anything?"

"Oh." Babs reaches toward the folds of her skirt and, from seemingly nowhere, pulls out that thick bound book with the bat symbol sharpied on the front. The papers still jut out, almost dropping to the floor. I raise my eyebrows again. How did she get a pocket in her dress? Did she do it herself? "I have this. And—" She reaches into the hidden pocket again, pulling out a purple gel pen, "this."

"Wow." I force surprise onto my face. Or at least more surprise than I already had from her pulling the thing out like a rabbit out of a hat. *Remember, you've never seen that book before, Robin.* "I mean, Commish said you were a big fan, but—"

"Oh!" If Babs' face wasn't covered by the paint, I'm sure it would be beet red. "Yes. Well, when your Dad's the commissioner, you make a point to know what's happening in your city."

"I see." I keep my voice light, holding out my hand. She can keep the journal, I mean, I would love to read it, but that's not what I'm

interested in. “That’s cool, though! I should have a journal like that.”

When she hesitates, I realize that she thinks I want her to hand it over. I give her one of my winning grins. “I just need the pen.”

“Right. Yeah... sure. Here.” She presses it into my hand, her fingers warm against my own. Something fuzzy spreads through me again, but I can’t let it show on my face. I’m Robin. I just met this girl. I can’t be distracted. There isn’t any room for distractions in this game.

So I turn my attention to the pen. It’s high quality, something I’ve seen in her hands countless times, almost out of ink, though. But the tip is sharp enough that it could be used as a weapon or a lock pick if I take it apart. “Can I hang on to this?” I wiggle it between my fingers.

“Of course.” Babs tucks the journal back into her pocket, smoothing the pleats of her dress back in place. “Whatever you need. I heard you and Batman can find ten ways to escape a single room. Do you think you can get us out?”

Batman... The thought slams into me again, unwelcome. *Mistake, messed up. Went behind his back.*

“Think? Miss Gordon, I’m the professional, remember?” I put a hand to my heart and wave with the other, keeping the churning in my stomach down. She doesn’t have to know that I’m an excellent liar. I

mean, sure. She's not wrong about the rooms. We are escape artists, and I can make a lot of tools out of a bobby pin, but some people know that. Some people, like whoever designed this room, know to have cameras at every angle, cordless and smooth surfaces I can't climb. "I know I can get us out. Through there." I point to a door. I don't know when I decided, but I'm sure about the one I chose. Maybe.

Babs follows my finger, her shoulders sagging. Not in disappointment, no. But I can see, not only from the sagging of her eyes, that all she wants is to go home. Well, she can join the little club I'm forming. "Are you sure? I mean, why that one? Why not the others?"

Am I sure? No. Do I have to be? Yes. There's no way to try to open the door behind us. There're no seams on this side, and the bolts are too small for even the pen to turn. So instead, I come closer to Babs, tucking the pen into a small pocket on my thick, green leggings that's regrettably empty. "How good are you at swimming?"

I don't know what to expect on the other side of the door. Maybe the slam of water falling into us, drowning us in an instant. Maybe a flood of sharks raining down from a net overhead. Really, it could be anything. Joker has already shown his dedication to this whole event, and

he doesn't do 'the bare minimum.' So when I open the door, Babs glued to my side, I'm surprised.

Something slams into us, alright, but it's the smell of the sea. Fish, salt water, and more fish. It reeks, but it's bearable. But that doesn't mean I won't complain, if only for the sake of appearances. "Whew! That stinks! Really, Joker? What are you going to do? Hit us with fish?"

I get no answer, which is surprising. I know he's watching us, probably plopped down in front of some TV, eating a bowl of popcorn, waiting to watch us die for his amusement. My stomach rumbles without warning. I didn't eat anything at the charity event. I bet on the snacks I would have at Homecoming, then dinner afterward.

But now isn't the time.

Babs nods to something just inside the door. "Can we cross it? Or are we going along with it?"

I didn't notice it, which is strange, especially after the relative silence of the room behind us, but inside this room, something roars and pounds. No, it's not a room. It's a tunnel. A tunnel that starts at our feet and quickly goes around the corner, out of sight. When I step over the threshold, my bare toes don't step on concrete, oh no. They dig into the grain of rough planks, like the door resting in my hand. Planks... of a

dock. Because under our feet, under the gaping holes of the board and racing out in front of us, frothing with small white caps, is a river. Well, not a huge river like the channels of Gotham; this is more like a lazy river that decided to get moving. Tied to the dock, bobbing in front of us, is a rowboat, just like the door. It's old, creaking in the current, covered in barnacles like they're a part of it. But there's no sign of oars or anything to steer with.

Typical.

Beyond the river is darkness, the only lights lanterns hanging from the stalactites overhead, reminding me of the Batcave. A pain shoots through my chest. The Batcave. What I wouldn't give to be home, even with that horrible chill between Bruce and me. I would take that over anything Joker could do to us.

But I can't think about that. Not now. I have more immediate problems. Crossing this thing? No. I don't think that's what we're supposed to do. Babs is right. "We have to play along." I step aside, letting Babs carefully tease the boards ahead with her foot before walking out onto the dock. I let the door close behind me. It clatters shut, the rusted, dripping hinges groaning, but the sound's lost in the thrashing of the stream underneath us. We could try to find where the water's coming

from, swimming against the current, under the dock, but more likely than not, there's a steel grate blocking the way, and I don't have my cutters anymore.

Did I mention I feel naked without my utility belt?

The tunnel seems to come alive without the pulsing of the green and purple lights from behind us. We aren't in a building or a maze. We're in a deep underground cavern, though I'm pretty sure we'd see concrete or cinderblock if we chipped away one inch of the stone walls.

Because none of this is real. It can't be. It's just another way to toy with us. But why would the Joker go to this much trouble? Is it because I kept on teasing that he had no more good ideas? That all his stuff was lame? I mean, it was, and I have to admit that this is an impressive piece of work. Just not very practical for a measly little me and the Commish's kid. Unless he really does hate me that much. So, I'm flattered, I guess? No... not really. Because this stinks. Literally and figuratively.

Babs holds onto one of the end posts, peering down into the water at the boat. Though my heart jumps in my chest, I don't tell her to be careful. She would just give me 'the look' anyway, Robin or not.

So instead, I join her, kneeling on the end of the dock, my hands gripping the edge, splinters cutting into my palms. The boat looks all right if a little sad. There's no padding to keep it from smashing against the rocks on the side, though, and without steering... "Do you know how to handle boats?" I can feel her gaze on me, her luminescent green eyes dancing like emeralds in the soft lights.

Do I?

Of course, I do. I know everything. I have to. Bruce always says it's better to be prepared for everything, especially in Gotham. I mean, Mad Hatters, Crazy Quilts, Scarecrows, you never know what you'll get. But handling a boat that's just a hunk of wood without any reason to actually call it a boat other than it floats and has seats? That's a different story. I may be passible with canoes and water skis, but I'm in no way a water master. "Yes and no." I turn to her, our noses only an inch away. She's so close but so far away. Because I can't be here, can I? At least, a part of me can't. But I smile. That's all I can do, isn't it? Keep smiling... keep going.

Protect.

Bruce... where are you?

“You wouldn’t happen to have two oars hidden in that dress, would you?” If she were more comfortable around Robin, I’m sure she would’ve probably punched me, effectively taking out one of my arms in the process. Really, this girl and her left hooks. What I get, though, is just as much Babs. ‘The look’ is at full power, her green eyes just oozing one question, dripping with sarcasm that I don’t even have to hear. *‘Really?’*

“No. I don’t.” She blows a strand of hair out of her face and swings her legs around, letting them dangle off the dock and over the boat... and the dark water. I wonder what could be in there. It is too fast for ocean life, but the smell of fish and salt, along with the spray of mist, tells me that this is, in fact, ocean water. Huh. I wonder if it leads right to Gotham Bay? That’s a good piece of information. Maybe we’re somewhere on Amusement Mile. That’s the biggest space to do all this, and it was too quiet on those patrol nights. “Do you have oars in your utility belt when you have it?”

Was that a jab? Hey, it’s not my fault I lost it! Well, it’s my fault for getting distracted by Kitten, but that’s a low blow!

“Nope.” I swing my legs over the side, too, kicking my feet, the splashes soaking the hem of my leggings.

I'm not afraid of water. In fact, I love water. Swimming in the Manor pool is one of my favorite parts of training. It's so quiet under there, so clear. And, of course, fighting villains like Killer Croc leads to a lot of swimming through sewage pipes, which I would not recommend, by the way, and excursions out into the rivers and bay.

No. Water doesn't scare me. But I don't really like not knowing what's underneath said water. What? You swim on the surface of an ocean fathoms deep and tell me you don't wonder what's swimming just under your kicking legs. Besides, this is something the Joker devised, however out of his league it seems.

Anything could be in there.

"Okay, then." Babs is the first to slide off the dock and into the boat. The vessel rocks under her feet as she drops in, her knees expertly bending to absorb the impact. Her hands shoot out to keep her balance, her face flashing with something I don't care to identify when the rowboat tips too far to one side.

I wait for her to sit down before I join her. Though I don't have far to drop, my stomach still rises to my throat, choking me. My feet land solidly on the creaking planks, and I fall to one of the warped benches before it rocks too hard. "Well, step one complete." I pat the seat with

both hands, the dull rap of my knuckles doing nothing to distract from the feeling of the current tugging underneath us or the water rushing around that curve.

Or the feeling of being watched.

“Uh-huh.” Babs’ hands are on the rope that keeps us in place, fingering the knot. It’s a good knot, tight enough to keep the boat in place but loose enough for human hands to undo without much problem. Again, it doesn’t seem like something the Joker would be able to pull off.

Who helped him? Maybe that’s the question Batman and I should’ve been asking and looking into this entire time. Because if the Joker has help like this going forward... well, Gotham might be in serious trouble.

“So... should we go now?” I shrug at Babs’ question. I don’t see why not. I mean, what else can we do? Only, there is something here we do need.

“Let’s go for it. But, Miss Gordon—” I grab the other end of the rope, the part that attaches to our boat. The rope could be an invaluable tool. I mean, it can be used in rescues. It can be a weapon, yes. I need this rope, “I need you to hold onto that end of the rope.”

End of the rope. Ha!

She nods quickly, understanding what I mean. I know if we weren't being watched or, you know, in danger, she would say something about it. Or about being with Robin in general. I mean, I've been one of her favorite heroes for years. She's talked to me, Dick Grayson, about me, Robin, so many times that it's almost embarrassing. The meeting we got was definitely not what I expected. No fangirling. No acknowledgment of the Batjournal or how much she admires me. You'd think she'd be babbling my ear off right about now. But she doesn't. Instead, she stays silent, quickly slipping the knot free and holding the thick, solid rope.

We're immediately tugged away from the exit, thrown right into the current, bobbing and rocking in the small white caps. I untie the other side of the rope, trying my best not to slide around in my seat, and motion for Babs to let her end go. In no time, the coil is tied around my waist, filling the void that my utility belt left. Great. A pen and a rope.

I can work with that.

We hurtle around the corner, the boat slamming into the wall, throwing us to one side, me with a grunt, Babs with a surprised gasp, but we don't smash apart, and we don't fall out. Around the corner, surprisingly, is the same as the tunnel we left. Mostly straight, with

rushing water. It's like an amusement park ride, to be honest. But there has to be a catch.

I keep my eyes open, scanning the surrounding walls and the water, keeping my hands braced on the side of the boat, now and then looking at Babs. The splash of water has begun to eat away at her makeup, leaving it to run down in streaks on her face, almost as if she's crying. But I know she isn't crying. She's looking around just like me, her body tensed.

At first, I think it's just the roar of the river, the splashing of the boat, or the pounding of my heart, but slowly, out of the darkness above, a song becomes audible. I can't understand the words at first, but with every passing second, I recognize the sleepy tune.

Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream. The song chirps. Merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.

Something freezes in my veins. It's too much like those dreams I had, which I guess now were really nightmares. Children's songs shouldn't be terrifying, but there's something about them creeping along in the darkness, too deep, too slow for it to be normal. It chugs along like... well, like a broken music box. Why does it always have to be broken music boxes?

“Do you hear that?” Babs hisses, her eyes to the ceiling, the ‘ss’ of her hiss echoing like a nest of snakes. “That’s—”

“Yeah. It stinks.” I shift on the bench, eyeing the blackness around us as if something’s going to jump out at us at any time. And it could. Something’s going to happen. I just know it. If the door wasn’t enough warning, this song is. I mean, ‘Life is but a dream?’ Ha, yeah, okay. What does the Joker have planned, though? “You know that song, right?”

“Yes.” Babs’ hands are on her knees, gripping, her knuckles turning white, even under the flickering lanterns swinging over our heads. “My mom used to sing it to me. But never like that. Really, what’s wrong with that guy?”

I can only assume she means the Joker. I mean, one, I’m the only other guy here, and she definitely isn’t talking to me, and two, who else plays super creepy music over a rapid river ride? To which I would say, what *isn’t* wrong with that guy?

“Well, no one really knows.” I wiggle my eyebrows at her, even though I know she can’t see. I lower my voice to a whisper, loud enough for her to hear but mostly for effect. “He changes the story every time.”

“I know.” A haunted look paints Babs' eyes as if she's seeing something she doesn't want to remember. I don't like it. “He told me.”

She might as well have stabbed me through the heart. She never talks about what happened to her mom, what the Joker did to her, but I know that it was horrible... and she hates his guts. What I wouldn't give for us to be back at her apartment, or even the Manor, snuggled up in warm blankets, eating pizza, her favorite, and ice cream, one of my favorites, watching one of those sappy romcoms she likes.

I'd suffer through any movie if it meant she was safe, away from that psycho.

I swallow hard. I don't know what to say to that. Robin doesn't know what to say. Now, if I were Dick Grayson, I would probably say something to try to cheer her up, to get away from the Joker and the memory. Or maybe, I would just hug her.

But Robin can't do either. So instead, I do the worst thing. My hand reaches out and covers hers, where it clenches her knee. The small noise of surprise she makes doesn't stop the worst words from slipping out. “I'm sorry, Miss Gordon.”

I want to clap my hand on my forehead. Well, why don't you just put your foot in your mouth, Grayson? Never enough. Stupid words.

Why did I say that? Why can't there be anything else? How can someone apologize for another person's pain? What do they even say? That it's alright? I mean, 'I understand' doesn't cut it because, even though my parents died horrible deaths, they weren't at the hands of mad clowns who take pleasure in making everyone's death a show.

I'm about to open my mouth to apologize. I mean, I, of all people, know just how painful and hollow 'sorries' can be when Babs' hand shifts around in response, giving mine a small squeeze. Not of affection, please no, that would be weird... but right, but weird. No, it's a small squeeze of... of thanks?

"Babs."

I blink at her. For once, she seems to see me, and I see her. Robin and Babs are thrown together by a mad clown, never having met, but having to work together anyway. Babs. Amazing, strong, feisty, *beautiful* Babs. Heat swells in my chest. It burns in my cheeks like a fire, shooting through every fiber of my body. The way she looks at me, that slight smile on her lips, that sparkle in her eyes, is no longer shy.

For the first time in my life, I've never wanted to kiss anyone more. The thought sends warning bells ringing in my head. I try to tell

myself that it's the stress, the adrenaline, the emotional rollercoaster that people call hormones.

But there it is.

I want to kiss her so badly, I have to bite my lip hard, my mouth as dry as sandpaper. No, it wouldn't be right. It would be weird and so, so wrong. Because I'm not Dick Grayson. I'm not. At least, not to her. I'm Robin, a boy she barely shared her nickname with. Who she's just met. She doesn't know me. She doesn't *like* me, like me, like I like her. She'd probably knock me right out of the boat if I did. Just put, 'He kissed a girl' on my grave.

So I shove that feeling away, digging a figurative grave for it and pushing it in. It gets shoved with the pain in the back of my head and everything else I can't think about. I can't, so instead, I manage to speak. Well, if you could call it speaking. "Wh-what?"

"Call me Babs." Babs' hand's away from mine now, tucked safely in the folds of her skirt. So I jerk mine away, drumming it onto the wooden bench instead. Her eyes are sparkling as if 'sorry' was enough for once. "All my friends do."

I want to call her by her name so bad. I mean, it's Babs! It's on the tip of my tongue. But I can't. "Of course, Miss Gordon." I tease. I

have to tease. I have to make it a joke; otherwise, she'll wonder why. But if Robin calls her something that no one else close to her does, then maybe she'll drop the subject. I mean, it's Robin.

Babs gives a small laugh, but the sound's cut off by the cacophony in front of us. I scramble forward in the boat, joining her at the bow. Only a couple of yards in front of us, the river ends. No, it doesn't end. It plummets down into a straight drop, disappearing into a vast, round tube. I can't even see the bottom from here.

"Well, shoot." I laugh, the sound lost in the raging pounding of water crashing into the pool below. Of course, there *had* to be a waterfall. Of course. So cliché, Joker.

"Paddle!" Babs scrambles to the back of the boat, her hands reaching over the sides, digging into the water. A logical choice, an instinctive choice, but there's no fighting this current. So instead of helping her, I scramble over to Babs and grab her. At the rate we're going, I have seconds.

Ignoring her protests, I shove her to the bottom of the boat, fitting her under the seats, and slide next to her, grabbing onto one of the seat's supports.

“Hold on!” I have just enough time for the words to rip out before we plummet over the side.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CAN'T TALK, NEED TO BREATHE

I have to say, falling is the worst. It's not the sensation itself. I mean, even swinging from a trapeze gives you that plummeting feeling, your stomach weightless, lifting up into your throat. No, what's worse about falling is that sensation doesn't stop. And not only that, you know that nothing will catch you at the bottom.

As soon as the rowboat shoots off the waterfall and drops like a stone, the spray soaking me, the chill setting into my skin, I know we're in trouble. The boat's not falling upright, which would've put something between us and whatever's below us. Instead, it flips over, leaving me dangling from the seat support, my fingers scrambling to keep my grip, the wood biting, cutting into my fingers. I barely have enough time to look across at Babs to see her doing the same before the water surges up to meet us.

It's like hitting concrete. And believe me, I know what that's like. I tuck myself into a straight pole, letting my feet knife in first. I slice into the water and gasp at the shock. It's not warm, like the water in the river. It's ice, numbing everything, leaving my limbs thick and heavy, like

they're suddenly made of solid stone. I don't have my boots or my gloves, so it pierces through skin and bone, latching on, seizing control, leaving me convulsing, stirring the water around me.

Wood drifts overhead, floating only a foot from where I struggle. My lungs burn. It feels like someone lit a fire inside me, but not a nice one that warms you, oh no. This kind of fire burns so hot it eats you alive. At this point? Cold and hot mesh together.

At first, I think it's from the freezing cold water, but now I remember. I gasped. My lungs are empty. The bubbles that left my mouth drift to the surface, mocking me.

Air. That's what I need. I need air.

I force my legs to move, to kick, even though both ankles complain and protest, though subdued under the blazing cold. I spare them a glance, even as I pull my arms down in a sweeping motion, propelling myself up. They aren't twisted or weird, so probably not broken. That's good. But the liquid ice around me is probably keeping them from hurting too badly. But that doesn't matter much now, does it? My head breaks the surface, and I suck in lungfuls of sweet, precious oxygen. Really, you never know how much you appreciate it until you

don't have it. It's like shards of glass going down, but it's better than a kick to the head.

I stare, blinking through my dripping hair, at the room around me. The waterfall plummets at least twenty feet above, slamming into the pool only yards in front of me. And it is a pool. Huge, perfectly round. Man-made. I glance up. Lights wrap around the walls, spiraling up to about the same height as the waterfall, but above that? Nothing. Complete and utter blackness. How far up does it go? What even is this place? The concrete walls are smooth, at least, they look smooth from here. So, no way to climb, even if up was the way out, and no doors are visible. No landings. No docks or boats or anything waiting for us. Just water and walls. What's the point of this room? It's so bland, definitely not the Joker's style. I wonder if Babs and I will have to swim around the perimeter to—

My heart stops in my chest as it dawns on me; no, it doesn't just dawn. It smacks me over the head. My glance around showed me the room, but there wasn't a strand of orange hair in sight.

No...

I whip around in the water, my arms turning me, but I don't flail. I can't flail. But I think I might just sink. Because among the wreck of our

sad little boat are rope, nails, and wood... But no Babs. *Gone, gone, gone! I lost her again!*

Mistake, mistake! Bruce! Where are you?

“Miss Gordon!” The words splutter through the water, spilling out of my lips and surging down my throat. It reeks of salt, but I don’t care. My shout echoes around the chamber-tube thing, but no answer comes. No Babs... no Babs... I’m tempted to close my eyes. I’m this close to diving down under right now to look, but an answer does come. But not an answer I want.

I knew this whole thing was too ordinary. I mean, a trip down river rapids is nerve-wracking without a way to steer, but not that bad. Falling down a waterfall? Oldest water cliché of all time. I mean, really. Every time someone’s in the water, there has to be a waterfall. Fact of life. Freezing water? I’ve had worse. Try chasing a group of escaped trainees across Finger River in mid-Gotham winter, fall in, and you’ll know exactly what I mean.

Wait, this is sad, right? That this isn’t phasing me that much? That I’m so used to life-threatening situations? Did I ever mention that I’m probably just as crazy as everyone else in this city? Oh well.

But this is the Joker. This can't be it. This shouldn't be it. If it were, I'd have to honestly say I'm disappointed. Not that I want anything else on top of all this. But then, there's always a twist.

“Aw, poor little Girly!” His voice fills the chamber. The sliding words echo and bounce. Speakers... he has speakers hidden everywhere. Of course, he does. I listen because this might be the key to our survival, but my eyes scan the water frantically, trying to catch a glimpse of mac'n'cheese hair or a purple dress. Nothing. She can't be gone. *Gone, gone, gone. Gone and drowned. Dead, dead, dead. Just like they are.*

Bruce!

I shake my head hard, my hair slapping me in the face and sticking to my cheeks. I can't listen to that annoying little voice. I can't. *Stay calm, Grayson! Calm.*

“Looks like that fall was too much for her, and it's up to the Boy Blunder to save her! What a twist! What a thrill!” Never before have I wanted someone to stop talking so badly. And never before have I wanted to punch Joker solidly in the nose. I mean, he sounds like he's talking to a rapt studio audience, and from the cameras peeking out from holes in the wall, I know people are, in fact, watching. Kitten and Harley and the

goons, at least. Wait, all his goons? Did he pull them from the streets for this? How many of them are standing between us and escaping?

Or you know, between Batman and me? I'm not sure if I'm tagged; you know if Bruce slipped a tracker on me or not. There's supposed to be one built into my utility belt. Now I'm thinking of putting one in my suit shirt. Yeah, that would probably work.

But... is Batman even on his way? Is he looking for me right now? Did he figure out where I went? Did he find my duffel and then go to the school?

But I can't think about that. Babs. I need to find Babs. Where's Babs? Why isn't she up here with me yet? I know why. Part of my body is still covered with my suit, a fabric weave that regulates temperature and blocks cuts and, in some cases, bullets. But Babs was in a short dress made of everyday fabrics. No protection. No way to fight off this cold.

How long has it been since she went under? How long since she plummeted in and hasn't come up? The answer that pounds in my head isn't helpful.

Too long.

The cold clenches my muscles, slowing my heart. It weighs me down, and tugs me toward the bottom I can't see. But I can't slow down.

I can't sink. My eyes stay focused underwater, searching. She has to be there. She has to be somewhere down there.

Where are you, Babs?

“But why don't we make this more exciting?” Apparently, the Joker isn't done. And obviously, now's the time for the main event. The Joker event. My heart stops at the grumbling of a grate, the screech of metal on metal, the thunk of gears. For a second, I tear my eyes from the water below to the wall across from me. The wall... where the pool's stirring. Then, a dark fin slices the water. “Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen!” Joker's voice fills my head, stopping my heart. “To the Spectacular Shark Tank! Feast your eyes on, well, the Feast of a Lifetime! AHAHAHAHA!!”

The ceiling overhead explodes with green and purple lights. Glitter and confetti burst out of canons hidden in the walls. A spotlight lands right on me, beaming me in the face. “Time to make this little swim more exciting, ay, Robbie Boy?” The walls shine in the lights, strange spirals of green and purple bend and swirl, whacking out my eyes. Pops and booms sound below me, churning the water, stirring the ever-growing fall of glitter and confetti into a sippy, thick stew.

And the music begins to blare. And when I say blare, I mean screech and pound so loud you'd think the speakers will explode. Like feedback cranked up all the way. And what they're playing couldn't be less original. *Baby Shark*.

Figures.

If I wasn't frozen before, I am now. I am a pair of bright green kicking legs in a pool rapidly becoming murkier with glitter and soggy paper. And Babs is under there. Babs, who is probably a beacon of bright purple in the depths. Babs... whose drowning. With the shark comes a rush of warm water that shocks my limbs, sending them tingling. The numbness is now pain; however, that works.

My eyes lock on that dark shape. Gray, hard to define through all this chaos, but—

Baby shark, do, do, do do do do!

No. The build of this creature is stocky and broad, with a flat nose. The dorsal fin is long and low. I grit my teeth, slowing my treading limbs, trying to stir up as little of the water as possible.

Baby shark, do, do, do do do do!

Of course, Joker couldn't choose a goblin shark, a Caribbean reef shark, or a whale shark. Really, I would take a Great White over this one.

Great Whites have more of a reputation, yes, as the biggest killers of the sea, but they usually don't attack unless provoked or if they accidentally mistake you for a seal.

So yes, this is worse.

Baby shark!

Aggressive. Unpredictable. Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls, I give you the *Carcharhinus leucas*, also known as a bull shark. And if that wasn't bad enough, all the pool lights are shutting off, leaving me in a spotlight of mesmerising colors, like food on a platter for the thing.

Mama shark, do, do, do do do do!

For once, I really don't want to know everything about everything. Like all the facts about bull sharks and how they take down their prey. Solitary hunters, opportunistic feeders. Around ten feet long, over two hundred pounds, with a bite force of five thousand nine hundred fourteen newtons. And, for those of you who couldn't care less what that means, very, very strong for its size. Curse my extensive studies on marine biology. I blame Alfred.

Mama shark, do, do, do do do do!

My head whirls. They don't have to be provoked to attack. They don't care if we aren't in their territory or doing anything, really. We're

the only things in here with it. Babs... It's under there with Babs. If she's limp and lifeless—what if it takes a test bite? What if—

Mama shark!

I don't wait anymore. I suck in a massive lungful of air and dive under. The water's warmer, but that doesn't make it any better. The muck overhead stirs down into the water, the flashing lights pulse, and the eerie throbbing music overhead creates an alien world.

And I can't see the shark. My eyes sweep the water, my hands turning me in a slow circle. Dark and murky. Perfect water for hunting. Perfect place for a shadowy predator to hide. I know it won't do much, but I still slide the pen Babs gave me out of my pocket and hold it so tight I lose all feeling in my fingers.

Even though I've practiced holding my breath and can now do at least eight minutes, pushing ten, it doesn't make it any better. My lungs still burn as I surge forward, bare feet kicking vulnerably against the water, my eyes whipping up, down, side to side. Babs... Where's Babs?

I dive deeper, my ears beginning to sing. *Where are you, Babs?* Something moves in the corner of my left eye. I stop, my cape spreading out around me, drifting in the current of something that swims past.

A dark shape passes by, but I can't see it completely. Then, it's gone. Taunting me. That's what it's doing. The stupid shark is playing with me. I keep moving, pushing down, down. Fifteen feet. Twenty. My ears pop and begin to bleed. Well, that's unfortunate. My lungs scream at me, demanding air. My vision starts to darken on the edges. No! I have to find—

Just below me, drifting downward limply, is a purple dress. My heart pounds in my complaining ears as I kick harder, my hand reaching out, snatching onto a skirt and holding it tight. The dead weight of Babs tries to drag me down. I kick my legs and heft up with all I have. She bobs upward, her face coming to meet mine. An open mouth, closed eyes, lax features.

My heart stops for the hundredth time in the last twenty-four hours. No... No... I pull Babs toward me, wrapping one arm around her waist, pulling up with the other, my legs burning as they push. I grit my teeth. Was it always this dark down here? The world swims with shadows, dancing, flickering. Laughing at me. There are little fish all around me—no... That's not fish, is it? That's too green and purple... But they're moving... Like they're—

Wham!

Something smashes into me like a battering ram, nearly ripping Babs from my grasp. Pain erupts on my arm, a wisp of crimson worming its way before my eyes. It's right in front of me, grey and white, beady little eyes, rows and rows of grinning yellow teeth. A slew of bubbles escapes my lips, tickling me, rushing up. I can't stop myself. I suck in, desperate for air. All I get is a lungful of water.

I choke and splutter, but that's no good when there's only water around. Out... I have to get out. That was the bump from the bump and bite approach that bull sharks are fond of. Bump... Now bite. *Bite... Get out!*

I surge up, gurgling, choking, gagging. I'm drowning, drowning—my head breaks the surface with a gasp—only to get another lungful of something that isn't air. Papery mush slides down my throat. I hack, folding up on myself, the flem coming up in gags of water and gunk. The bandage Babs so carefully tied around my head slips down, threatening to cover my eyes. One hand sweeps the water frantically as I hoist Babs' head above the water and multicolored film. No response. Water dribbles out of her mouth, but she doesn't move. She's a pale, limp, lifeless body in my arms.

No, I refuse to believe that. I kick harder with my legs and hold a hand over her mouth and nose. The smallest puff of breath tickles my palm. She'll make it—but I have to get us out of here, and I'm running out of time. It's hard to see in this place so full of confetti and glitter, blaring lights, and pounding music, but I know I see the water stirring to my right. Never before have my bare feet felt so vulnerable.

Swimmer swimming, do, do, do do do do!

“O-okay,” My words come out with another gasping upchuck of water and crepe paper, but I don't worry about that. Not now. “Get out... out...”

“Aw, look at the Little Bird lugging around his corpse bride!” Joker's voice screeches as the spotlights find me again, pinning me down like a bug to a board. I grit my teeth. I'm not surprised, but really, can't he give me a moment to think? “Oooh! And he has company!”

I feel it coming. I know it's coming. I should've seen it coming. It's only a tug, but I know what happened.

Something yanks Babs out of my arms and back under, her hand slipping beneath the stirring pool with barely a splash. My heart pounds in my chest as I slice back down, my eyes blinking open, only to see something I've never wanted to see this close.

The shark.

Its eyes are small beads on its enormous, sleek body. Its mouth dips into a frown, which isn't really the Joker's thing, but I suppose it would be a grinning maw upside down. It's about twice my size—more than that, and it has Babs.

It takes me a moment to realize how it grabbed her. No scarlet stains the water, so it couldn't have bitten off a limb or something, no—its teeth are clamped down around the back of her skirt. I narrow my eyes. Babs is floating, her limbs splayed, her head bobbing wildly as the thing thrashes, unconscious—drowning—she needs me.

I don't think. Fire surges through my veins. It buries everything, pain, fear, everything. My vision pulses red, and I kick, propelling myself forward, right at the shark. The pen is still grasped in my hands. Alfred's words zip through my head like a flash of lightning, *'When encountering a shark, Master Dick, one is to attack its weakest points, namely, the eyes, nose, and gills.'*

Well, why not all three?

I must be crazy because I slam into the thing, my leg kicking up with as much force as I can muster against the water, and drive it into the shark's nose when it comes toward me. The thing stops thrashing,

startled, but it doesn't let go of Babs. Good thing, too, because I also remember kicking a shark in the nose is a sure way to lose your foot. I hiss, bubbles escaping my mouth and drifting up. But I don't care. I zoom around, slamming a fist into its gills again and again. Really, it's like punching someone in the throat. But I'm not trying to kill it. I won't kill it. The water roils around me, a tail whipping dangerously, a head tossing to the side to try and get away from me.

Drop her! The thought pounds through my head so loud I might as well have said it aloud. My head sings, and my lungs blaze with fire, but I ignore it. I don't have time for it. I keep on hitting the thing, but it's not enough underwater. Something squeezes my chest, a pressure that won't let go—a weight on me. Babs...

Drop her! With a bubble-filled yell, I jam the pen toward the shark's eye. A cloud of red drifts around my fingers, tainting the water. The writing utensil is ripped out of my grasp as the creature plunges forward and away, but not before I catch a glimpse of what I did. A mouthful of skirt hangs out of the shark's mouth, flapping behind it like the flag of a sunken ship. The pen is gone, the eye intact, but crimson seeps out of a hole centimeters away from the eye. I missed it—but it doesn't matter.

Babs!

There she is, a bite-sized hole in her dress, drifting away from me. Alright, let's try this again. I grab her and breach the surface. Again, she doesn't breathe normally but sucks in horrible, gurgling gasps. I reach my fingers to her neck, and I feel a pulse, however weak it is.

Alive and sort of breathing. The pressure rushes out of my chest just like the water from my lips. I don't know if it's the relief, but I seem to float easier in the water; Babs is hardly a weight at all. But I can't dwell on that for too long. We aren't out of the water yet, and that shark probably has a score to settle unless it's the sulking type.

But I can't count on 'what ifs' right now. So I blink in the spotlight, trying to figure out how to get out of this pool, away from this room. Because if this thing's a maze, there has to be more than one room, right?

I reach up to shield my eyes from the light and to block my face from the cameras. Really, can't they give me two seconds to—My eyes shoot open. It clicks. Well, duh! Just put, 'He missed the most obvious clue ever!' on my grave. Because the lights! The speakers! The cameras! The canons! Of course!

I swim over to the edge of the pool, away from where the bull shark fled. Hopefully, he didn't loop around and reach the wall.

The wall...Concrete, smooth. Or at least, you would think so, right? But from up close, staring along the walls? I see them. The smallest of handholds from where the cameras and other tech sit, the tiniest chance. Our chance. I take another moment to scan the upward spiral of holes. They are spaced evenly apart. I wouldn't be able to stretch that far—but maybe if I jump, I just might make it.

And really, at this point? Anything is better than chilling in this pool with Jaws down there, nursing a wounded face and ego. I shift Babs onto my back, bobbing up and down as I untie the thick rope around my waist, looping it around both of us, harnessing us together. I wrap her arms around my neck and swim under the first handhold, about five feet above the water level. I narrow my eyes, placing my hands on the concrete. I can do this.

I have to do this.

I launch myself out of the water. It's amazing how things are heavier in the open air. Babs, who isn't that heavy, by the way, and who wasn't that much of a burden in the water, suddenly feels like a sack of boulders tied to my back. And with the numbness gone, the pain of, well,

everything comes rushing back. My ankles throb and yell at me, my head slamming like a good old-fashioned blacksmith's hammer.

And something runs sticky and red down my arm. The shark—it cut me when it 'bumped' me, and by 'bumped,' I mean completely knocked into me. I grit my teeth. *Worry about that later. Worry about the most important thing now. Getting out.*

My hand barely catches the tiny lip that's just wide enough for a foot to stick into. The weight on my back jerks me down, pulling at my arm, the lip cutting into my bare fingers. I miss my gloves. For a moment, I hang there, closing my eyes, trying my best to block out the thundering song and laughter taunting me from the ceiling, in... out. Breathe. Breathing's good. Breathing's helpful.

I plant my legs firmly on the side of the wall and scramble up, ignoring the rough surface that scrapes at my soles like sandpaper. As soon as my foot slides into the hole, I push myself up, standing, braced on the wall. Progress. I glance over at the next hole. Further up and further away. I swallow hard. What if I get halfway up, higher than the waterfall, and fall from there? How far can you fall without breaking something? And if I fall and am incapacitated like the first time, what's stopping Sir Sharkbreath from taking a bite?

I shake my head hard and tense my legs. That doesn't matter because I can't risk going back in the water. Up is the only way out, unless Joker, who I wouldn't trust anyway, says otherwise. Who knows, maybe if I get far enough, he'll let down a ladder or rope or something.

Then again, this is the Joker.

So I do it. I launch myself up and to the side, my hands reaching, my fingers grasping for the next ledge. I find it. I swing for a moment, my shoulders creaking, my muscles burning, but I repeat the process. Work my feet up, stand up, prepare, and spring. All the time, I'm fully aware of two things. Well, okay, a list of things. One, Babs' heart is still beating slowly, but it's there. Gasping breaths tickle my neck, and right now? That's really the only thing that pushes me further, faster. She needs help right now. She needs the water out of her lungs, and she won't get it at all if I fall.

Two, the water is really far away. I'm alright with heights. Heights are fine. But falling is not. Every time I make the mistake of looking down, it hits me. A mantra in my head, a sick feeling bubbling in my stomach. *Fall equals death. There are no safety nets, no pads to cushion us. No Butlers rushing to help.*

And three? I really am alone. I mean, I felt alone before, when it was just Babs and me, because she isn't the same as a superhero team or a partner like Batman. But she was still there, still talking, still helping. Now?

Well, now everything is literally resting on my shoulders. But I got this. I can do this. Yeah... yeah... I got this.

I leap again; how long have I been doing this?

My hand misses. My heart jerks into my throat as I plummet, my other hand scrambling to snatch my only hope. Because now? I'm way above the water level. Now? If I fall?

Game over. Thank you so much for playing.

My left pointer finger manages to curl around the ledge, but before I can get my hand all the way in, a horrible, echoing *snap* shoots through the room. Everything goes white, even when my hand's firmly pressed against the stone. The water may be soaking me, but now I'm slick with cold sweat. It beads on my forehead, sliding down my arms.

My arms tremble and shake in spasms, threatening to let go. *Make it stop!* They seem to scream at me. *Make it go away!*

I'm back in the Manor on the couch, curled up in a warm blanket next to Babs, sipping hot cocoa, shoveling down buttery popcorn, and

watching a movie. For a moment, everything's alright. But then I remember where I am. And that my hand's slipping. I scramble up, spots pulsing in my vision, everything too bright, too loud. As I stand up, I press my head against the stone, one hand bracing against the concrete, the other coming to find Babs' hands. Limp and cold. My heart stops—really, how many times is that going to happen?—and I concentrate on her breath and her heartbeat. It's there... but the gurgling wheezes are louder. You don't have to be in the water to drown.

My head whips over and up, searching to find the next handhold, but lands on something better. The breath and pressure rush out of me. A landing. A landing with a door!

“And there it is, folks!” Joker's wheedling voice follows me up as I jump, reaching for our hope, for Babs' hope. “Robin has found a way out of the Shark Tank! What a twist! What an upset! The little birdy still lives! AHAHAHAHAHAHA! Look at him go!”

As soon as I'm up on the platform, I let Babs slip from my grasp, flopping next to her, wheezing, gasping, my hand in agony. Everything's agony, really, but when do I ever complain? I cough up more water, expelling the last of it from my lungs, my mouth tasting like a wonderful combination of salt, paper, fish, and glitter. I have no time for that,

though. No time, never enough time. I crawl up to Babs' prone body, exactly as I left her.

Her legs are fine, and so are her arms, all limbs present and accounted for. Cuts and bruises still color her skin, though, but that was from before. It's horrible, seeing her so pale, so limp. Her hair plasters over her face and shoulders, her dress a mess, revealing the long shorts she wore underneath. She looks like death, battered and bruised, but that's not the worst part. No, there's something worse that happened. There's water in her lungs, and she has to get it out. Or rather, I have to help her get it out.

Carefully, I tilt her head back, one hand cradling her head, fingers burying themselves in her stringy hair, my other hand lifting her chin. I close my eyes. Okay... I know how to do this. I've done this before. I practiced on Bruce. I pinch her nose shut, which feels weird since the only times I've ever done that are when I teased her, quite ineffectually, that I 'got her nose' when we were twelve.

But this isn't the weirdest part. Oh no, no, no! Because CPR isn't just pumping your hands against their chest or pinching their mouth shut. I lean forward, my lips hovering over hers. Oh no... no... I shake my head hard.

“You aren’t kissing her, Robin.” My voice is almost drowned in the hysterical laughter around me. Ha. Drowned. That’s not funny.

“You’re saving her life. It’s called mouth-to-mouth—”

I swallow hard and go in for it. But just when my lips are about to meet Babs’, she coughs. Water spews into my face like a geyser, and I scramble back, dripping, my hands flying from her nose to wipe my face, her head slapping onto the stone.

Oops.

Babs rolls onto her side, convulsing, hacking, coughing, more water gushing from her lips into a pool on the landing. She’s on her hands and knees, shaking, gasping, then—she takes a long, deep, gurgle-free breath.

I collapse onto my knees, a sigh whistling out between my lips. Babs is alive and breathing. But then she turns to me, her green eyes amused, her eyebrows raised. “Were you about to kiss me?”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THIS IS WHY I DON'T LIKE ARCADES

It takes me a minute to process what she said. I mean, I was expecting something like ‘What happened?’ or ‘How did we get up here?’ but then again, priorities, I suppose. Besides, I couldn't be happier that she's still smiling after all of this, that even though that fear still lingers, she's putting her best foot forward.

Something stirs in my chest. I know she's amazing. But even now, sitting in a puddle, her dress dripping wet and bitten and wrinkled, her hair stuck all over her face and shoulders, a tangle of rich orange curls, the clown makeup running in mucky lines down her face, finally revealing clusters of freckles- even now with that broad smile, her sparkling eyes...

My cheeks are on fire. No, scratch that; my whole face is on fire, burning to a crisp. Maybe I have a fever. This fantastic girl just about drowned, got attacked by a shark, and she's handling it like an absolute boss. And she's teasing me. *She's teasing me.*

I thought that was my job. I force my voice to be steady, not Dick Grayson's, oh no, because that would be bad. No, I force my voice deeper, to be more... Robin.

"No. That's called mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Miss Gordon." I can't help but smile. "Besides, I was saving your life. You're welcome."

"Oh yes, thanks for that." Babs grabs fistfuls of her hair and starts wringing it out, sitting across from me. Her smile still lifts her cheeks, but I can see her eyes churning with questions. "What happened, by the way? I mean, I held my breath for as long as I could, but I still blacked out." Her lips pucker into a frown, her eyes darting over me. I get that same feeling when the Commish looks me over. She's searching for injuries, taking stock. Like father, like daughter, I suppose. "You're bleeding. And your finger's broken."

I laugh, a wry, humorless laugh, only to quickly grit my teeth. You don't say? I'd ignored the pain up until this point. There wasn't any time for pain. But now? In this quiet moment? In this little calm before our next storm? It really hits me. And when I say 'hits,' I mean, smacks me full across the face.

My ribs, my finger, my head, my arm, really everything hurts. I glance down at my hand, taking in the ugly bruise and swelling that distorts my poor little finger, bent and skewed.

Not the first time I've broken a finger. But then again, all those times before, I've had medical supplies. "I'm fine." The words slide out easily. Too easy. I settle back down, crossing my legs, smiling at Babs. "Nothing I can't handle."

No... I can't handle it. But I have to. Something twinges in my chest again, but this time, my heart twists painfully, a hole opening up, even as another one is filled. Bruce... I need Bruce. I need Batman. Batman, who would have this situation under control. Batman, who would be breaking down the game plan. Batman... Bruce... always seems to know what to do.

I had moments like that with my team, with the Teen Titans. But now I see what Bruce means, sort of. That was in Jump City with fellow heroes. This is Gotham.

I swallow hard, hoping Babs doesn't see. Because I can't wish for Bruce. Not yet, not now. What was it he said? Something about a team not working if each member had to save the other? But that doesn't matter... does it? Me... it's all on me. Because Bruce isn't here.

You betrayed his trust. You are just as bad as he said you were.

I don't like this. But Babs doesn't have to know that. To her? I am the professional. I'm the hero.

“Here.” Babs grabs the hem of her already trashed skirt and yanks. The sound of tearing fabric echoes around the chamber. I open my mouth, then close it. I want to tell her to stop, but really, when did that ever stop her? When she's done her skirt as a sort of cleaner hem, well, okay, at least the bite mark leveled out, and she holds out two long strips of fabric to me, the silky cloth catching the pulsing lights. “For your arm and hand.” Babs shakes the material, motioning for me to take it. Then something passes over her face, a realization, I guess, her head tilting. “By the way, do you still have my pen?”

“I lost it.” I grab the strips, my fingers jittering so much that I have to try twice to actually get my hands on the cloth. Well, now, so much for a hero. “I used it to fight off the shark.”

Babs' eyebrows shot up, and she glanced at her skirt; you know, where the bite marks still scallop the edge? Then to me. “Say what now?”

So I tell her. About the drowning, the shark, and the climbing. About everything, except for my desperation, of course, because as much

as it is on the top of my tongue, how much I wanted, no, needed to save her, she's a stranger.

A stranger.

A stranger sits across from me, someone I just met. Someone I've known for... how long has it been? A day? A night? Well, not for long.

But...

While I talk, I wrap my bleeding arm, wincing at the gash. I'm not squeamish. Gosh, I wouldn't last long in this job if I were, but no one really likes looking at their bleeding arm, now do they? The bandage works, though the salt-soaked fabric stings, rubbing into my already dripping wound. But I guess in the end, it's worth it. Salt fights bacteria, and I don't think anyone would be too happy with me if I accidentally lost a limb. Infections are such a pain.

After I finish the story, I nod to her dress, my fingers steadier as I tie off my wrap, the pressure stemming the flow, the salt finally losing its sting. Well, okay, sort of. "Sorry about that, by the way. The shark and the bandages. Oh, and the pen."

"That was my favorite pen, and I took a while choosing this dress, but it's fine." Babs shrugs, rolling her hair into a bun and ties it back with another strip. An all-purpose dress, I guess. Pockets and bandages, and

hair ties. Who knew? “Compared to everything else that’s happening? It’s not that big of a deal.” When she finishes, she eyes my finger. I do too. It doesn’t look good. The finger is nearly double in size, the bruise spreading, dark, and blotchy. It sings, throbbing, aching, just like everything else.

Really, I am a mess.

“We need to take care of that.” Babs’ brows furrow, her eyes thoughtful as she crawls toward me on all fours, scooting forward, coming to a stop only inches in front of me, sitting back to rest on her knees. “We don’t have any ice, do we?”

“Fresh out.” I cringe but swallow down a yell as Babs grabs my hand, the motion jarring the broken appendage as her fingers smoothly snatch the last bandage from my limp fingers. “What are you—?”

“Well, we don’t have the pen to brace it, so I’m going to tie it to your other fingers.” Babs gets to work, carefully holding my broken finger between the neighboring ones, looping the bandage gently. Well, okay, as gently as she can. I try to relax; really, I do. Block out the pain, the thumping of my heart, or the sweat and face paint running down my cheek.

But my mind whirls. How long has it been since we were taken? Does Batman have a lock on our location yet? Did he stick a tracker on my suit that I don't know about? Is he coming? I want him here. Again, I surprise myself. One moment we're fighting, and the next... well, I guess mad clowns put everything in perspective. Because I was so caught up with him not listening to me that... Well, here we are.

Bruce... where are you?

“Do you think Batman's on his way?” It's like she can read my mind. Babs' eyes lift from my finger and meet mine. And even though they're masked, she seems to stare right into them. No, not just into them. Through them. Through the mask, through my smile. Through all my talk and straight into all my worries. “You said you can get us out, but... Robin—“

I should be mad. I mean, you'd think she's questioning my abilities, right? But no. I don't see skepticism or doubt anywhere on her face. All I see is concern and hope. All I feel are her soft hands carefully wrapping my finger between the other two, cool and comforting.

She trails off, but I know what she means. I'm hurt. We both are. Even more than when we started. That's sad, and only after the first room? Shameful.

“He’ll be here.” I take a chance. I reach out and touch her shoulder. I force my voice to stay away from Dick Grayson’s, kind but not familiar. Upbeat, but not the same tone I use around her at school. I know this is serious, so I let my voice stay light and casual. “Don’t worry, Miss Gordon. We’ll make it. I mean, I already totally fought a twenty-foot shark, so I’d say we’re doing pretty good.”

Okay, so it was ten feet long, but seriously, I fought a shark. Isn’t that worth exaggerating a little? I mean, wouldn’t you?

Her laugh is a soothing cream on all my injuries, soft yet full, filling the room. I take it in. So different from the Joker’s. So... Human. “You are a wonder, Robin.”

“They do call me the Boy Wonder.” I wiggle my eyebrows at her as she ties off the bandage, giving my hand a gentle pat. But even though I smile, something twists my stomach. Boy Wonder... she has no idea what I’ve done. What I got us into. “Thanks for the medical assist, Miss Gordon.”

“My pleasure, Boy Wonder.” Babs pulls back a little, glancing behind us at the door. The door to the next room in this maze of madness. Wonderful. For a moment, I almost forgot that we have to go through

another one of these things. How many are there, I wonder. “What do you think is next?”

“Really? With that psycho?” I hold my hand carefully, inspecting the wrapping. Wow. Babs did a fantastic job. Apparently, she pays more attention to Health and First Aid than I do. “Anything.”

Babs nods slowly before standing up. She wobbles, listing to the side. Too close to the edge. I launch to my feet, my mouth in my throat, snatching onto her hand, my fingers tight, my breaths quick and wheezing.

“Please don’t make me climb up here again, Miss Gordon.” I pull her away from the side, my own feet teetering, my head swimming, my ankles groaning. “I don’t think I can pull that off twice.”

“Whoa.” Babs takes a step back, running a hand down her face before she turns to me, smiling sheepishly. I notice the sweat, the paleness under the now smeared makeup. We both aren’t in good shape. Wonderful. “Yeah, let’s not do that.”

Once we’re both away from the edge, we inspect the door. This one looks like a small business door, with an open sign swinging and one large metal bar serving as the handle. Only the glass is blacked out,

blocking our view. I glare at it. It's too ordinary. I don't trust it. You can never trust anything as normal as a pencil when the Joker is involved.

"Maybe he'll let us stay out here until Batman gets here." I resist the urge to grimace or make any other expression other than a smile. I'm rolling with that. That Batman's on his way, that Bruce will come, batarangs a blazing, and get us out of this little pickle.

Little pickle? Who am I kidding?

I know that our rest is short-lived. Of course, because two people sitting and talking and taking care of each other's injuries isn't entertaining, especially to people like the Joker.

So it doesn't surprise me, as even when I'm in the middle of my wish, the landing underneath us groans. Babs and I automatically share a look. Whether it's going to fall or slowly slide into the wall, it doesn't matter. Because we can't stay here.

"Heroes first!" Babs is at the door in a flash, her wobbling legs recovering, her hand on the handle, whipping it open. I snatch the rope off the shaking ground, loop the harness back over my shoulder, and force my legs into a run.

Perfect timing, too, because behind me, the landing starts to crumble, like puzzle pieces falling apart bit by bit. I wonder if they're

going to hit the shark below? But that hardly matters, does it? Because I only have enough time to snatch Babs' hand and leap through the doorway before the landing's gone behind us, leaving us rolling on something cold, smooth, and hard.

The door slams shut with a bang, thankfully cutting off the song Baby Shark, which I think I will forever hear in my sleep—thanks a lot, Joker—and leaves us in darkness, the only sound of our rapid breath and beating hearts.

I press a hand to the floor. Cold, yes. Hard, yes, yes. Tiny, barely imperceptible grooves that set apart perfectly square tiles. Tiles... yeah, like you would find in a store or something. I let my hand feel around for a moment, wishing my HUD was working so I could have my night vision. As it is? I can't see my hand in front of my face.

My fingers brush something short, coarse, still hard, but not tile. Carpet... like those carpet squares they, again, have in stores. Just like the design of the door. "I found something."

If it wasn't for the feel of her next to me, the beating of her heart, or the steady cycle of her breathing, I would've jumped when Babs hisses right into my ear, her breath hot on my cheek. Her hand meets mine and

drags it over, reaching out to close over something small and thin, like a ribbon string.

I grasp at it, pulling. It *is* a ribbon string. One of those plastic ones that you can cut your fingers on. It gives, and something bobs overhead. Then the *whump* of something light and bouncy hitting and ping-ponging off something else sounds right above us. I cock my head to the side. Balloons?

Just when I'm about to open my mouth to say something, the room explodes to life. Again, the green and purple lights flash right into my eyes, blinding me, a strange disco ball twirling overhead. We sit on white tile with black flecks, but in front of us, black carpet glows neon in the lights overhead, flashing in the otherwise dark room. Like an arcade or a skating rink, I guess.

To the side sits a vacant counter, void of a line of people, thank goodness, but also a cashier or, you know, anything that's supposed to go there. There's only a bobbing balloon clown waving at us mockingly behind the glass. Man, if I had my birdarangs or batarangs, I would just love to pop the thing.

What stretches in front of us, though, is probably stranger than anything I've seen so far today, which, to be honest, isn't saying that

much, but hey, the night's still young. Because what stretches out in front of us is a sea of bright balloons. Pastels, opaques, and whatever else you call that stuff, waving innocently on white ribbon strings, glistening in the disco light. The walls are painted with bright clown faces, which, from a distance, look pretty normal, but when you look closer, you notice crazed red eyes, grinning yellow teeth, matted hair, and knives glinting in their hands.

You know, all the things to make clowns creepier than they are. I spare a look in Babs' direction. Her careful eyes sweep the balloons and room, and I can see her gaze snapping on things like the cameras in the corners, the floor, and the speakers.

Smart Babs.

“Should we go through it?” Babs' voice is hushed, which makes total sense because more now than ever in this more confined space, I feel the creep of eyes down my back, watching, listening. “Or should we try the counter?”

A good idea. At least, until I look at that balloon clown again. It doesn't seem... how do I put this? Safe. Inviting. Not nice. And behind the counter, well, everything black back there, fading into nothing. Except, it never is just 'nothing' with the Joker, now is it?

An unspoken agreement passes between us. The counter probably isn't the best idea, but neither is wading through a sea of balloons without being able to see anything, or anyone, in front of you. I sneak over, and by sneak, I mean stand up and stroll over, even though my bare feet make no noise as they tread on the carpet. I mean, really, what good does sneaking do when there are literally cameras covering every angle? Someone knows me too well.

When I get to the counter, I peer over the side, past the balloon man clown thingy, and scan what lies behind: A thin, long hall, dark without any lights, everything fading into darkness.

A maze. There isn't any clear path to this, is there?

“Well?” I would have never heard her coming if I didn't have trained ears. No swish of her dress, no sound of feet, only the slightest hitch of a breath. Really, if it wasn't for the pounding of her heart, I would've jumped out of my skin. I turn to her, not able to keep the admiration from my face. She doesn't look at me. All business, peering down the hall. “Do you think there's an exit down there?” She drums her hands on the counter, the clack of her nails like a clock ticking. She keeps her voice hushed, probably to keep it from being heard over their speakers. “This is a maze.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” I match her volume, looking from the balloons behind us to the hall ahead. Decisions, decisions. I close my eyes. What would be better? Balloon sea or dark tunnel? I let out a long, deep breath, my eyes snapping open. I turn my back to the counter, leaning against it casually, my arms crossed over my chest. Whoever said I had to make all the decisions here? “Why don’t you take point on this one, Miss Gordon?”

Babs finally turns to me, blinking rapidly. “What? Really?” Her shock quickly turns into a grin that slowly grows, her eyes sparkling.

I nod. “Why not? I took the point on the last one. I figured we could take turns. I mean, I saw what you did with that Batarang.” I gesture to her pocket. “And that journal is chock full of things Batman-related, right? So you know almost as much as I do.”

Babs laughs carelessly, but her cheeks flush a bright rose pink. “Yeah, no. But thank you.” Embarrassed or not, I can still see that glow in her eyes. The excitement. It’s as if I just handed her the world. And I might as well have. I smile, that warm fuzzy feeling surging into my chest. I might not be able to give her a good Homecoming, but Robin can definitely give her the exclusive vigilante experience.

It’s the least I can do.

Babs turns back to the hall, her eyes closed, her mouth pressed into a thin line, and her eyebrows furrowed. Something buzzes in my chest. I try not to stare too much. Dick might think it's cute when she's thinking, but I don't think Robin can get away with it after he's caught staring.

So I keep my eyes on the balloon room instead, my eyes sweeping the pulsing, colorful forest of silicon to the door we entered from. Joker doesn't speak up. It's as if everyone's holding their breath or holding down laughs, waiting to see what we will choose.

"Alright." I turn back to Babs. With that go-get-'em look in her eyes, it seems like she could tackle Killer Croc head-on. I try to ignore the pounding in my chest or the warmth that spreads, well, everywhere. "We're going down the tunnel."

I push off from the counter and slam a fist into my palm, grinning like an imp, a habit I never will grow out of. And also, ouch. I have to fight off the grimace as my finger yells at me, even though I didn't even hit it. So instead, I let the grin slide into a slight smirk. "Let's do this." I nod toward the counter. "Ladies first, Miss Gordon."

"Whatever happened to chivalry?" Babs frowns, but her eyes still sparkle.

“Age before beauty.” *Smack!* Well, apparently, she’s comfortable enough around Robin to give him a dead arm. I rub the sore spot, my laugh escaping my lips. “Wow! You hit like a girl.”

Bam!

Well, why don’t you just put your foot in your mouth while you’re at it, Grayson? I grunt, my smirk dropping, my eyebrows shooting up. My arm smarts so much that the pain in my finger dissipates for a while. Okay, that really hurt. I think I see spots.

“Point taken. And lesson learned.” I nudge her shoulder with mine, my smile back as quickly as I dropped it. “You have good form.”

Babs’ frown lifts into a coy smile, green eyes glinting in the lights. “I take martial arts. You never know in Gotham.” Truer words have never been spoken. She plants her hands on the counter and leaps, clearing the hard surface and flying through the opening with the agility of a cat, smacking the clown balloon on her way down. A quick, loud pop slaps my ears when she lands on the other side, patting the counter. “Come on, Boy Wonder.”

“Martial arts, huh?” I launch through the window, sliding through the same way, my feet touching down on the obliterated remains of the

creepy balloon clown without so much as a sound. “Nice. That’ll come in handy. And I noticed the leap—“

I already know the answer, but she doesn’t know that I know, you know? I stand up next to her, and the two of us, without having to say anything, might I add, start walking down the hall together, shoulder to shoulder. My right hand brushes the wall on my side, and I can tell from the gliding of fingertips that Babs is doing the same on her side.

“I do gymnastics.” Even though I can’t see her anymore, we’re swallowed up in the pitch blackness over here, the flashing lights behind us narrowing into a tunnel, I know she’s smiling. “I’m slated for Nationals.”

I knew that. Of course, I knew that, only with that excitement in her voice? With that small catch in her breath? And the fact that she told me, or rather, Robin, about it? I don’t know. It just feels... special all over again.

“Oh, man! Good for you!” Our shoulders brush, a reminder that we’re still walking side by side.

Because really? I can’t see a thing. Not the ground in front of my feet, the wall beside Babs, or on my side. The blackness consumes us like a living thing, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Thanks. I—”

“How *sweet!*” I freeze, Babs going stiff right next to me. That’s not Joker’s voice. That’s not even Harley’s. I bite my lip hard to keep from groaning out loud. Someone had the brilliant idea to give Kitten the mike. “Look at that, Gordon! Little Miss ‘I-don’t-like-Robin! You LIAR!” The screech quickly turns into a venomous hiss, sending shivers racing up and down my spine again and again.

“Not her,” I grumble, not daring to move a step. Something’s going to happen. I know something’s going to happen. My legs tense, ready to spring, my arms coming up in a ready position. Babs shifts next to me, her bare toes squeaking on the floor.

“I’m so sorry about her, Robby-poo!” Kitten’s voice croons over the speakers, raking at my ears. Really, what is wrong with that girl? Do her parents know that she’s here? I mean, I know she has parents because she’s rich enough to afford GA, but... why did they let her fall in with the Joker and his gaggle of goons? And also, ‘Robby-poo?’ *Really?* I’m never going to live this down. Ever. “It really should be me down there with you!” Her long, breathy sigh sounds wrong in that crackle of static, but Kitten keeps going. “But I’m not because she—” I wince at the

dagger in her voice. It cuts through the air like a tangible thing, stabbing and slicing at my ears, “Needs to be punished!”

“Really, Kitten?” Babs' voice slides out hard, the cool edge reminding me of Bruce. Really, they could be related. She stands close, her breaths even, but her heart patters faster. “For the last time, I don't like Robin! At least, not in that way.” I'm positive she turns right to me, her eyes apologetic when she says: “No offense, but I already have a boyfriend... sort of.”

I don't care if it's ‘sort of’ or not. My heart just exploded into cheers. I'm so glad it's dark because no one can see the big fat grin on my face. Well, now, Babs. You actually *do* like Robin in that way. You just don't know it. Well, okay, *mostly* like him in that way. Maybe? I'll take what I can get. Besides... Did Babs just call Dick Grayson her ‘sort of boyfriend?’

“None taken.” My voice slides out in a smile, the laughter there, dancing on the edge of my words, but no one has to know why.

“I don't believe you!” Kitten's screaming now, throwing a complete temper tantrum like she's three years old. I can just imagine her in that pink dress with those ringlets, pounding her fists against a table, kicking her legs, flailing like a fish out of water. I have to bite back a

laugh. I don't think that would help much. "Liar, liar, liar! You're going to pay, Gordon! Pay with laughs!"

It doesn't make sense, but then again, this is the Joker we have here, and, as the lights slam on after I recover from momentary blindness, I see exactly what she means.

Oh no...

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

POP GOES THE LAUGH GAS

The corridor's transformed in a second. One moment, we were in a plain, empty tunnel, pitch black, free from any traps or anything crazily insane. In fact, I didn't realize just how much I liked the darkness until it's gone. Again, as is the theme in this place, I suppose, the lights flash purple and green, only this time they alternate overhead, strung in a row above us.

To my left, right next to Babs, is a long counter. There isn't anything over the side of it, though. Just a wall filled to the brim with balloons, just like in the other room. But these have no strings and are strapped to the wall in the center of red and white bullseyes, numbers written over them.

One says five hundred, another ten... Oh. It's like a carnival game, small balloons labeled one thousand, the easier ones to hit with a lower score. A strange sense of déjà vu sweeps over me, taking me back two years, back to the circus, back to those booths we would set up, some with games, some with mini shows. Before I can stop it, that hole, which has already been begging to be filled by Bruce, opens wider in my heart.

Mom. Dad. Uncle Rick. The circus.

But what is a carnival game without anyone to play it? On my side of the hall stretches a long glass window, holes set up at different intervals, leaving the perfect room to throw something at the balloons, but not enough for us to slide through. Goons in their sloppy clown paint line up at the counter, and the counter's lined with darts.

And not just any old darts, oh no. These have wicked sharp points, something green and dripping sliding off their tips. My eyes lock on the end of the corridor, only to realize there isn't an end. Not one that counts, anyway. The hall ends abruptly, leaving no little lip to hide in to escape the darts. I'm turning around with Babs, both of us leaping to run back down the hall, back to the room with all the balloons. I don't know why we even bother. Because to the Joker? We aren't human beings. We're animals trapped in his cage, suffering for his amusement. Is this how gladiators felt in the games?

Slam! A solid metal door snaps shut right in my face. I can't stop my legs in time. My nose smacks against the cool, hard surface, and my only reward is the blood dripping from my nostrils. I sniff hard. Well, that was no fun.

“Robin.” Babs is next to me, pressed against the door, which still leaves us in the line of fire. Trapped behind glass. Trapped... I spare her a glance. Her eyes bulge, but the fear’s still shoved in the background, even though her skin’s as white as death. She’s fighting so hard. My heart squeezes. “I’m sorry.”

She’s sorry? She’s not the one who got us in this mess in the first place! She’s not the one who was late! Then again, she doesn’t know that, does she? And she’s probably talking about coming this way.

“Naw, it’s not your fault. That other room might’ve been worse.” I wave a hand, giving her an easy smile.

“Hey, Bird Boy!” My head snaps over to the goons. What’s that on their faces? I don’t have time to take a closer look at the bulky things over their mouths because one of the guys brings back a dart, his eyes glinting with such joy, I wonder if he shouldn’t be locked up inside Arkham with the Joker. “See if you and your little girlfriend can survive this!”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” The words slip out automatically, joining two other voices, only switch out ‘she’s’ and ‘boyfriend’ for ‘he’s not my boyfriend’ and ‘she’s not his girlfriend’ that rings out from the speakers. Of course, Kitten’s still listening in.

But then, I don't have time to worry about my relationship with Babs. Or rather, *Robin's* relationship with Babs. Because the lackey throws the dart.

"Get down!" The words rip through my throat without so much as a thought. I drop to my stomach, my ribs yelling at me as soon as I smack into the hard tile. Babs lands next to me, her face still white, though a red flush stains her cheeks. Darts whizz over our heads like hundreds of giant, dangerous bees. Some fall short and rain down on us, tiny metal cylinders with green plumage and 'Ha-Ha' written on the side in sloppy red letters.

Well, isn't that so original, Joker. Wait, did he hand-paint all of these? Talk about obsessive.

It isn't that long before the first *pop* sounds right above our heads, the pieces of an exploded balloon falling limply onto the ground. But it doesn't stop at a muffled bang, oh no, because as soon as the hiss reaches my ears, I know. *Pay with laughs*. Very original, Kitten. Maybe she should take a quipage class.

Speaking of Kitten—her high-pitched, screeching giggle echoes around us, quickly joined by Harley's maniacal chortle and Joker's high, raking guffaws.

Babs lets out a choking gasp next to me, her green eyes locking onto the sickly pea green soup that falls down toward us like a deadly fog, tendrils reaching, seeming to laugh with a voice all its own.

Joker Venom. Laughing Gas. Really, it doesn't matter what you call it. My eyes dart back to the goons. Ha! Dart. Not the time, Grayson. Now the bulky things make sense. They're all wearing small gas masks that almost blend with their over-the-top painted faces.

We're in trouble. No, that's an understatement. We're in *serious* trouble.

"Plan?" I have to force out the words past the lump in my throat, past the sickness in my stomach. What? I told her she could run point on this one! She's got this. But... there's no fighting a cloud. There's no punching mist or kicking it in the head. We don't have the antidote, so there's no coming back once we breathe it in. I push away the panic that threatens to surge, trying to slither its way forward in my mind. I miss my utility belt.

I miss Bruce.

"Why me?" Babs' voice is steady but thick, forced. Her muscles tense, ready to spring. "You're the professional."

“I told you you could take point on this one.” I grab a fistful of darts, jamming them into my pockets. I may have lost Babs’ pen, but darts and rope are better than just rope. “Hero lesson one-o-one, take in your surroundings.”

“We don’t have time!” Babs shakes me, her nails pinching my cape, our eyes both locking on the cloud that steadily grows each time a pop echoes in our prison. Our cage. “You already did that! *You* come up with the plan!”

“What did you see?” The words are too peppy. And when I notice myself being too cheerful? Well, just call it a coping mechanism, I guess. But she doesn't have to know that my heart’s beating a million times a minute. She’s got this. I know she does.

“There's a skirt over the counter.” Her words make no sense. Why would a counter be wearing a skirt? That’s ridiculous. I’m about to tell her so when she drags me forward, my head brushing through the fabric, away from the lights, away from the gas, away from the darts, and back into darkness, through a table skirt. The thick pleated fabric acts as a shield between us and the chaos outside. Ooooh... *that* kind of skirt.

She's found us the perfect place to think, to regroup. See? I knew she's got this. Besides, if I could think on my feet at twelve, Babs has this in the bag. I'm sure of it.

"What's the plan?" I lean against the back of the counter, letting my heart slow, my breath steady. In control. I have to be in control. But Dick, you might think, then why are you letting the amateur civilian lead the mission? Good question. Again, I will say Babs has got this.

"No exits." Babs doesn't move from my side. She sits next to me, hip to hip, her hands on her knees, her eyes locked on the slits peeking out of our little hideaway. The gas is coming too fast. I can see her eyes churn, imagining the gears turning in her head as she thinks, talking it out. "Too many balloons. The gas will vent through the openings in the glass. But I didn't see any air ducts." Babs' fingers drum faster and faster on her knees, her eyes wide as she looks at the gas coming toward us. I don't blame her. It's almost like watching a car crash without being able to do anything about it. Only we're the ones driving, about to get smashed. *Smashed... smashed...* "Wait, can you break the glass?"

Can I? Well, yeah, of course I can. I mean, I broke the window to her living room, didn't I? Oooh... yeah, I broke the window to her living

room. I probably should apologize for that. *Focus Grayson!* I smack my forehead, shaking myself. It's a good plan.

"Yes. I can." I meet her gaze evenly, my smile lifting my face. I let my eyes sparkle, even though she can't see them.

Keep smiling. Keep going. Get her out safe.

"Then that's my plan." Babs is on her hands and knees, muscles tensed, ready to spring. The gas is almost on top of us, the spindly fingers of the cloud reaching, grasping for us. "You smash the glass, and we make a break for it. Past the goons, if we can help it, and to the next door."

"A solid plan, Miss. Gordon." And I mean it. Except, now I wish I had taken the time to look at what lay beyond the goons in that room. The next door—did she see the other door? My smile softens. Of course, she did. She's better than she gives herself credit. Besides, that's what a partner does, right? Sees the things you don't? Something warm stirs in my chest. Wait, Babs is my partner?

Green starts to roll under the table skirt, sending a cold draft tickling my skin. *Wow, really, not the time, Grayson.* I suck in a huge lungful of precious clean air. Water, gas, really? Why does everything involve holding our breath? I don't waste any time, though. I launch into

a somersault through the curtain, leaping to my feet. The entire hall is a thick, shifting fog—another world. The whining sound of something whooshing toward me sends me back down into a crouch, the dart passing inches above my head, sending the gas curling in its wake.

The darts—what’s coating the end? Does it even matter?

I mean, yes but no, because I have another objective. I take a running start, my mind whirling. Breaking through glass is dangerous, well, especially without gloves or boots to protect me or a bō staff that can shatter it without me having to risk my fists. But I have my cape. My cape, which is made out of that kevlar titanium mesh.

So, when I sense the panel right in front of me, I launch forward. My feet push off the ground, sending me catapulting through the air. I twist myself midflight so my shoulder, safely covered with my cape, races toward the glass.

CRASH!

The feeling of glass spidering and shattering around me is never one I’ll get used to, I think. The shards fall like sharp ice pellets, tinkling onto the floor. A plume of Joker venom follows me as I smack into a goon, landing on his soft paunch. That doesn’t stop the air from being knocked out of me, though.

And, just like with the water, I know I'm in trouble even before I take in a long, gasping draught of air. Only, it's not air, is it? Because as soon as the lungful enters my throat, my eyes start to water, and something bubbles behind my lips.

No... no! The first laugh's the easiest, almost natural. But it's not natural when it doesn't stop. Before I know it, I'm cackling, the sound ripping from my lips, scraping my throat. It hurts. It claws. But I can't stop. I can't stop.

Tears leak from my eyes, squeezing out of my mask, but it does nothing. My mouth stretches into a too-wide smile, pulling at my cheeks, hurting, stuck in place. I laugh harder, aware that around me, the goons are moving. Crying out, cursing. A figure dashes through the fog, darting this way and that. A shadow in the flashes that occasionally light this world. This world of gas and laughter.

Laugh, laugh, laugh. I howl, trying to get to my feet, my teeth flashing in that mad grin the entire way. But my limbs work against me, fighting every movement, heavy and useless. Useless. It's not funny, but I still laugh. I gasp for air. Just air, only managing to breathe in more of the gas. Gas, gas, gas.

More laughter starts around me. Not the Joker's, oh no, but more high-pitched, desperate laughter. The goons? Why are they laughing? I'm on the ground, clutching my sides. They ache, they sting. They tremble. My chest hiccups as I keep laughing. Laughing, laughing, laughing. I like laughing. But not like this. Never like this.

It burns—my lungs want one thing. Air. To breathe, to just be... normal. My eyes keep scanning the fog, trying to catch sight of that shadow again. Thumps and cries and laughter. That's my world.

“Robin.” A hand grabs me. Only, it's not rough and pinching. It's firm but soft. The voice was calm and light, nothing like the harsh, gasping, barking laughs coming from my lips. Something's pressed over my mouth and nose. I thrash, but only for a moment. The next, with a soft whine, cool air washes over my skin. Air... air! I suck in as much as I can, choking out laughter, sucking in air through my open mouth, then repeat. A mask.

I glance up. Babs, amazing, incredible Babs with her hair knocked out of her makeshift hair tie, her dress rumbled over sleek black shorts. Her hands cup my elbows, pulling me to my feet. I wobble, as helpless as a colt, my knees jelly.

Air still rushes into my mouth and nose, but I laugh, laugh, laugh, my chest clenching, my lungs screaming, my throat raw. I hate Joker Venom.

“Come on, they won’t stay down forever.” Babs’ shoulder’s under mine, one of my arms draped around her shoulder, her arm wrapped around my back, keeping me up. I stumble forward, the tears streaming again. The laughter doesn’t seem real. It can’t be real. Someone else is laughing. Someone else is gasping, trying to get air.

Babs grunts next to me, her breath fogging the inside of her mask. Gas mask— she took these from some goons. So smart. Why didn’t I think of that? Oh right. My chest clenches, my muscles seizing into spasms. I hope against hope that this isn’t the deadly kind of Joker Venom because if it is, I don’t have long.

Then again, I might not have long anyway.

My eyes blink rapidly against the thick soup that permeates the room, soaking every inch of it. It swirls at my feet. It twirls around my head.

“Almost there.” Her whisper is sweet in my ear. Soothing. I close my eyes. I wish I could close my mouth, stop the cackling, stop the howling, stop everything. But I can’t.

A failure. A mistake. Mistake.

But... isn't that what teammates are supposed to do? What's the point of a team if you don't watch each other's backs? A team. A duo... like Batman and Robin. A team...

My head bobs, pressing against Babs' shoulder. Her breath hitches in my ear. It hurts so much. My chest is going to explode. I can feel it.

"No, Robin! Hold on!" The grinding of stone against stone assaults my ears, hurting, demanding all my attention. My eyes blink, but I see nothing. Nothing except darkness. Stone against stone? What's that supposed to be? "Hang on, Boy Wonder." She's far away, even though she's so close. We're walking through something dark, something cold. The grinding sounds again, and we're in darkness. Silence.

Her arms slip from me, and I'm on the floor. I cackle, grasping my stomach, wheezing. I've inhaled Joker Venom before, but the effects have never lasted this long. Air—I need to breathe!

Hands remove the gas mask, and a skirt fans away the plumes of the disgusting stuff before they can get to us. There's the fumble of hands, then a light clicks on. A light? I squint. It's not a natural glow like someone just lit a torch. But it isn't light from overhead either. A soft,

brilliant, concentrated beam hits my face. A flashlight? Where'd she get that? "Alright, here we go—" Something sharp slides into the fold of my arm, pinching. I wince. Wait, I wince? My cheeks relax, sore and aching, and my laughs putter out until I take a huge lungful of air and sit up, nearly banging heads with Babs.

"What?" I wheeze, blinking rapidly against the light that still beams me right in the eyes. "Miss Gordon?"

"Oh, thank goodness!" Arms fly around me, hugging me tight, squeezing all the air I just inhaled back out again. I stiffen, but something like fire explodes in my chest. Okay? Babs pulls away, sliding her gas mask off and slipping it into her pocket. Her grin shines a brilliant white in the light. "I thought that you were going to laugh forever!"

"What happened?" I gasp in a couple of lungfuls, landing with a thump on my butt, my eyes about to pop right out of my mask. "You got—?"

Babs grins like a Cheshire cat, twirling something that looks like an EpiPen between her fingers. "The guards probably figured we'd attack, so they came prepared."

I might've thought I was done with smiling for a couple of weeks at least, but I can't stop the dumb grin from cracking my face, even

though it hurts. My laugh's scratchy, rubbing my throat wrong, but it still feels right. Real. "You're full of surprises, Miss Gordon." I give her a playful shove on the shoulder. I mean, really? The girl totally kicked butt and snatched a few gas masks and an antidote? And carried me out? Champion.

She's just like Bruce—the thought freezes my heart. It stops my lungs in their tracks, leaving them screeching to a halt. Something chokes inside of me. I made a mistake. I... I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, the smallest, briefest moment, so fast I'm sure Babs doesn't see.

I should've talked to him while I had the chance.

"Why, thank you, Boy Wonder." Babs doesn't notice my face. Instead, she picks my gas mask up with a frown, turning it over in her hands. "Your mask is contaminated, though. I wouldn't recommend using it again." She tosses it away, leaving it to clatter behind her. I don't blame her.

"What else did you land?" I scoot closer, nodding to the flashlight. "Is it too much to hope you got some grade A burgers and fries tucked away in those pockets?" As if on cue, our stomachs growl, joining in harmony. I pause for a moment, biting my lip. But I can't help it. And neither can she.

Whether it's a fact they did it together, or the stress of the fight, or relief that we're both still alive and breathing, I don't know. All I know is we both burst out laughing. Genuine, full, clear laughter that echoes off the stone that's only slightly hysterical. I close my eyes. Babs isn't just a civilian, I realize. She's the best person, besides Batman himself, or any other superhero, that I could be stuck with now.

Batman... Bruce... what've I done?

“No burgers.” Babs gasps, finally done with that sweet laugh that rebounds like tiny bells off the walls. “But I got the flashlight, the mask, another injection of Joker Venom antidote, and this—”

My eyes catch the glint of the silver steel. Clean, polished, sharp, and dangerous. I'm on my knees, my fingers gliding gently along the flat of the tiny knife. Finally, a weapon other than rope. “Look at you go.” I wink at her as she hands it to me, turning it over in my hand, testing the balance on my finger. “You really are a fan.”

Babs shrugs, tucking her legs into crisscross applesauce, her smile sheepish. “You could say that.”

I flip the knife and tuck it into my other pocket. A knife, some poisonous darts, a rope, a gas mask, a flashlight, and a single shot of anti-Joker Venom. Not a bad haul.

“You know, you wanted me to take over on that one.” I give her a small salute. “But you did great, Miss Gordon.”

Babs waves a hand, pulling out the Batjournal from her pocket. “It’s nothing, really. I mean, you’re the one who smashed the window. I could’ve never done that.”

“But you saved me.” I reach out and put a hand on her shoulder, causing her to look up at me. What? She hugged me! Besides, a hand on the shoulder always calms my nerves. “You saved us both. You did great.”

Babs nods but doesn’t say anything. Her lips tremble, her eyes watering. My heart plummets. Is she going to cry? What did I say? “Hey—” I try to keep my voice from cracking. I really do. But it does it anyway, “What’s wrong?”

Babs clutches the Batjournal in her hands. A single tear slips from her eye. She shakes her head, trying to wipe the tear away, but another falls. “It’s just... this is how my mom died.”

I freeze. Her mom. She never told me, I mean, Dick Grayson, about her mom. She said ‘the Joker’ and left it at that. Even on those late nights when we stayed up late, looking at the stars from the top of her

apartment building, when I asked, she didn't tell me what really happened.

I don't know what to think. Should I feel betrayed? I mean, she never told Dick this, but she's telling Robin, a boy she just recently met? Or should I feel honored that she respects Robin enough to tell me? Or is it because I am Robin that she feels comfortable? Maybe she thinks Dick Grayson can't handle the story, even though he's been kidnapped and watched his own parents die.

“What do you mean?” The words slip out before I can stop them. In the silence, in the cool of the large, echoing stone corridor, before our next deadly danger begins, Babs tells me.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

THEY'RE REALLY NOT THAT FUNNY

“I’ve lived in Gotham all my life.” Babs begins, her knuckles turning white from clutching the book in her lap, her eyes staring at the symbol she sharpied onto the cover. “And ever since I was little and saw what my father did to help? Well, I thought he was a hero. I still do.” Babs sucks in a long, deep breath.

I stay perfectly still, afraid to breathe, afraid that if I move, I’ll shatter this moment. Babs keeps going. “It’s hard having a parent in the PD. I mean, you never know if they’ll come back after work, especially in Gotham. But we—Mom and I—always had faith in Dad.” I swallow hard. I know what that’s like, to a point. I mean, I don’t think about it much, but Bruce and I? There’s no guarantee that we’ll come back from patrol. My stomach sinks when Babs’ voice catches, hitching an octave higher. “I never thought it was Mom I had to worry about.”

I grip my knees as tight as my broken finger allows. I remember how she talked to me that night when my parents died. So calm, so kind. She understood me that night. She cared. Why can’t Robin do the same for her?

“Six years ago, when I was nine, before the Batman, there was a man who called himself the Joker. No one knew who he was, and every time he would capture someone, he would tell them a different story.” Babs traces a finger along the Bat symbol, a small smile tugging at her lips, though it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Dad always told me about him when he would get home. He was only a detective then, working the case with the others. Homicides, drug deals, robbery, gang movement, and all with a personal flair. A new mob boss, my dad said. Mom always told him to be quiet, to not tell me anything, but I ate it up.”

She opens the journal. I hold my breath as she turns it to me, showing me the first page. She never showed Dick Grayson the first page. She never showed Dick Grayson any page, really. My mind whirls. But again, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t want to, does it? Because Robin already knows about the Joker, about the horrors. As far as Babs knows, Dick Grayson is mostly a sheltered rich boy who gets kidnapped occasionally but never has to deal with the likes of the Crown Prince of Crime.

On the first page of the Batjournal is not Batman, as one would expect, but a child’s sketch of the Joker, one of his calling cards paper

clipped to the page, hasty writing scrawled underneath. My blood runs cold. And I thought I was special for facing all my monsters at twelve.

Why has Babs never told me before?

“I always knew that Dad could die. But I thought Mom and I were invincible, for some reason.” Something shiny tracks down Babs’ cheek, dripping onto the page, smearing the ink lines around Joker’s face. “Until it happened.” She lifts her face, locking eyes with me. I hate that look, that haunted gaze I see too often in the faces of people in Gotham. In my own eyes, sometimes. It’s always been wrong, but it’s alien on Babs’ face. I want to make it go away. I want to do something.

“Dad was doing well, running the Joker ragged, ruining his operations, backing him into a corner. So the Joker decided to... retaliate.” Babs flips the page. Again, it isn’t Batman. Because Batman wasn’t around. Bruce wasn’t back in Gotham yet, I realize. He was still away, finishing his last year of training. Too late, too late to help. “We were in our apartment eating dinner.” Babs’ gaze is far away, as if it’s happening right in front of her eyes. The horror is still there, but also a flash of happiness that she gets whenever I know she’s thinking about her mom. “Mom made pizza, cheese, and pepperoni with a homemade crust

from scratch. She always made it the best. She'd promised we'd have ice cream for dessert, then we could watch a movie while waiting for Dad."

It feels wrong, Babs telling me this. Well, telling me this while I'm wearing this mask. It's like I'm intruding on myself as if either Dick Grayson or Robin doesn't belong. It's on the tip of my tongue to stop and tell her, but I can't.

I can't.

"There was a knock on the door. We didn't think anything of it. Mom went to answer... just like I did when all this happened." Babs' hands run over the journal pages. Everything there is about the Joker, everything. Cold sweat slides down my face, my heart stopping. Maybe I don't want to know what happened. "It was him. Standing there with that smile, that glint in his eyes. And Mom—" Babs chokes, her eyes swimming. "Mom tried to close the door, just like I did. She told me to run, to get on the phone and call the police. To call Dad. I... I couldn't *move*."

A mistake, I realize. Something that she's had to carry with herself this whole time. Like, well, like me, not being able to catch my own mom. Like me now, fighting to keep us alive.

I don't know what to do. I mean, I know what I want to do. To take it away, the memory, the pain. But I can't do that for her any more than she can do that for me. "He broke in, laughing. I can't remember everything he said to her, but she screamed for help, grabbed me, tried to get to the phone, and he—" Her eyes are hollow. Unseeing. At least she doesn't see me or the darkness around us. She sees something else, something that haunts her nightmares the same way *They* haunt mine. "He shot her."

The whole world stands still. I'd always thought that it was some elaborate attack, some show. Like the gas or something like that. A poisonous flower, a glitter cannon, a punchline fist, something. But that's not what she said when she meant that her mom died like this, did she?

Because her mother died running from the Joker, trying to protect something precious.

And he shot her dead, just like that.

Protect... Like I'm trying to do to her. Like Bruce was trying to do for me. Because that was it, wasn't it? Safe. He wanted me to be safe. I want to close my eyes, to block out that look on her face, or to reach out and pull her in close, to tell her it's okay. But... It's not okay, is it? Nausea stews in my stomach, threatening to come up, burning my throat.

“She fell, still holding me.” Babs finally looks at me, really, truly, as if coming back from a nightmare. “And he laughed. He gloated. He told me to tell my dad that we’d got a visit from ‘Uncle Jay’ and this was a warning to stay out of his business.” Babs’ hand covers the text on the page, her lip trembling, but determination replaces the terror. “He left me there with her corpse.”

“Miss Gordon...” Though the words come out in a hushed whisper, I’m surprised I’m even able to speak at all. My hand reaches out on its own, covering her cold fingers, clasping lightly. Cold. Her fingers are ice in my grip, shaking so much I squeeze tighter, unable to look away from her face.

“I told my dad when he came home. And do you know what he told me?” I can’t say anything. At first, I think she’ll be angry with the Commish. Blame him for what happened. But then I remember. He’s her hero. Still her hero. And there’s no trace of resentment in her voice. A small smile brushes her lips, finally reaching her eyes. “He told me that this is what bad men do. They hate. They kill. They destroy. That’s why we can’t let them win.” Babs’ lips still tremble, but her eyes blaze. “He said that’s why we need good people willing to do the right thing, like him and some of his men. And he promised me....” Babs looks down at

our clasped hands, her breath evening out, calming. She squeezes my fingers back. “He promised me that they’d catch him. Justice, he said. We’d have justice.”

“And?” I know that the Joker’s still around, obviously, but I also know that there’s more. More, she didn’t tell Dick that Batman never told Robin. Because I know that Joker was still around. Until—

“One year later, a black shadow swooped into Gotham.” Babs brushes our hands to the side and turns the page. Batman. There he is, clips from newspapers, blurry photos, a more carefully done sketch of, not Batman as he was, but Batman as Gordon had seen him and described him to Babs. “One year later, He came. And he saved us. Justice.”

“He’ll come, Miss Gordon.” It’s like I see her for the first time. The real Babs, the Babs that she hides from Dick Grayson, the pain she hides behind her laughs. But more than that, I realize just what Batman means to Babs. He’s more than Gotham’s hero.

He’s her hero, too.

And... he’s mine. I always forget, it seems, just what it is that Bruce does, what he stands for. Even though he’s drilled it into my brain, commanded me to deliver on an oath we both took.

—And swear that we two will fight together against crime and corruption and never swerve from the path of righteousness.

Fight together... fight together... what've I done?

“I know he will.” Babs squeezes my hand again, Robin’s hand, and I meet her eyes. She’s smiling now, the tears a distant memory. And it’s not sappy to say that her smile lights up the world. I mean it. “But... I’m glad you’re here, Robin. Don’t think for a second that I don’t think you can’t do just as well as he can.”

Someone just squashed me with a boulder, bashing my stomach down to my toes, collapsing my lungs, and freezing my heart. Heat explodes from my neck to the tips of my ears, and not the nice kind of blush. No. It’s not that. Because she’s wrong. So I laugh. “Miss Gordon, at this point, Batman would have us keep moving, none of us having to worry about being hurt because he would’ve never had his tools taken from him in the first place. The Joker would’ve been decked in the first room, hogtied and ready to be shipped back to Arkham.” The words sting. Because they’re true. If I had looped Bruce in, if I had contacted him, waiting for him—if I had not gone off by myself, well... we might be safe at home in our beds now. But... Babs' words still fill my chest,

soothing, fuzzy like a blanket. They may not be true, but... I give her a nod. "Thanks for the confidence, but he's way better than I am."

"You're on your way." Babs flips through the journal again and, to my surprise, stops on a page with me. Me, carefully sketched out onto the page, me from two years ago in my first Robin suit, grinning, clips and photos and lots of notes surround me in a sort of border, making my eyes swim. I suck in a sharp, quick breath. "You're the first sidekick—"

"Partner." What? I can't help myself!

"—And you are already way beyond Batman in his first year. And you're around my age." Babs snaps the book shut, her eyes sparkling like emeralds. "You've already saved me; I mean, we're still alive, aren't we?"

"Thanks." I don't know what else to say. I mean, she's right, in a way. But the more I think about it, this past year, all this time... well, I thought I was ready. I led the Titans. I led them well. But... I'm not as ready as I thought. Because Babs is right about something. I'm around her age.

I'm still a kid.

“Well! Ain’t that sweet!” I leap to my feet, stumbling back, almost losing my balance, but I right myself quickly. Babs is up next to me, her journal back in her pocket, her fists clenching the flashlight.

I’d recognize that bouncing Brooklyn accent anywhere. Harley Quinn has finally decided to get in on the action. “Tha little Birde and Girly! Aren’t ya two just tha cutest! Makes tha little Kitten jealous!” Kitten... right. I almost forgot about her.

I’m expecting the lights to come on, to illuminate the corridor around us, but nothing happens. Instead, I follow the beam of Babs’ flashlight as it sweeps over the walls. Tall, about twelve feet high, pressing close together. Stone. That’s what they’re made of. Rough-hewn stone with ancient carvings chiseled into the rock. But I know they mean nothing. A bunch of nonsense. Because they’re just for the aesthetic. In fact, the ‘rock’ might just be styrofoam or plaster, for all I know. Moss covers the sides, and small bushes of green fronds push out from the cracks. Ahead of us stretches a long tunnel that seems to split into a crossroads. My heart speeds up into a pattering run. An actual maze?

“Bud! Lou!” Harley’s voice echoes down the maze, cackling, calling to someone, no, *some things*. “Make Mommy and her Puddin’ proud! Eat tha Birdie!”

Bud and Lou? Why do those names sound so familiar? I should know this, but no matter how hard I try, my mind keeps drawing a blank. But I get my answer anyway.

From the darkness behind us, a door creaks open, the scrape of metal on stone echoing through the maze. There's a snuffling, then two distinct 'whoops,' and a drawn-out call of agreement. My muscles tense as I slide the knife out of my pocket, the handle smooth and cold against my sweaty palm. Babs backs up slowly as the click of claws comes toward us.

Then I see them. Two black shapes reach up past my waist, bigger than Ace, stalky, muscular. And two pairs of blinking yellow lanterns flicker in the darkness, bobbing toward us.

Wwwwwhoop. One calls. The other one answers. Then they do it again. Talking. That's what they're doing. Talking to each other.

Babs' flashlight passes over them. Thick, bulky bodies. Powerful fore and hindquarters, long sturdy necks. Large black noses. Flashing yellow teeth over those glinting eyes. Tufts of reddish-brown fur spotted with black. Round ears that flick back, then forward as they come toward us. They laugh. A high, cackling laugh that isn't human. It bounds from wall to wall. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Bud and Lou, Harley Quinn's spotted hyenas. Also known as laughing hyenas. Dangerous, aggressive. Really? More dangerously aggressive animals? My eyes dart from Babs to the approaching pair of cackling—no, they aren't canines. Darn it, that would've been a good one—Her smile's gone, replaced with a determined frown.

My mind whirls, information from all those classes flashing in front of my eyes. Forty miles per hour. That's how fast these things can run. I'd wager about a hundred ninety pounds of force times two, ready to tackle us. My eyes flit to their teeth. Hyenas have a wonderful reputation built around those canines that can crush bones. My eyes dart up at the walls that reach too high. Run... is that really our only option? Running?

"You take point on this one." Babs hisses, eyeing me. "The darts?" I glance down at the darts filling my pockets. The darts drip with a chemical that I don't know. It could be lethal... or not. No killing. That's the rule.

But Dick! You might be saying. They're animals! So? If it comes down to it, I will. But until then— "Run—run!" I push Babs around, shoving her into a run down the hall, leaping into a sprint beside her. My feet stumble, catching on the uneven stone floor. But I don't stop. I can't. My hand's on Babs' back, driving her forward, keeping her steady.

Because behind us, paws thump and nails scrape, laughter following close behind.

I push my legs. Faster, faster, faster. When we get to the crossroads of the maze, I turn right. I don't know why, but I don't feel like going left or straight. I surge forward, my legs pounding. I'm not in a maze lit by the shaking, desperate rise and fall of Babs' flashlight. I'm back at the Manor's gym, on the track, racing Bruce. I'm on Gotham's streets, racing to catch up with a car filled with criminals.

Faster, faster.

"R-Robin!" Babs falls behind. My hand isn't on her back anymore. It's clasped around her wrist, pulling, tugging. No, she can't slow down now! When I glance over my shoulder, I can see them, too close, too close, those bright lamp eyes shining with glee. Laughter, whooping, like they're two teenagers who've been promised a good meal. "I-I can't run this fast!"

No... no one can run this fast, I realize. Neither of us is the Flash. The top human speed hangs around eight to ten miles per hour. Of course, Olympic athletes can sprint faster, but Babs is not an Olympic athlete, at least not in the running category. I always forget. I've been trained for this. She hasn't.

So I do the only thing I can do. In one smooth motion, I pull her forward and hike her up onto my back, piggyback style. The extra weight sends me stumbling forward at first, but I quickly steady myself. No time for mess-ups. No time for mistakes.

I run. I run until my lungs burn and my ankles scream at me to stop. Until I nearly smack into a dead end. Babs gasps from my back, her arms wrapped around my shoulders, hugging me tightly. Behind us, there's a small '*whooo—op*' followed by an answer—and laughter.

Sweat slicks my forehead, dripping down my arms, soaking my armpits. My legs shake. My lungs burn, and a stitch forms in my side. How fast did I run? How long? I think I might just take a nap now. But whoever has time for naps? Not me. Babs slips off my back, and I stagger around, facing the two laughing carnivores. "C-Can y-ou climb?" I bang my head against the wall, motioning up. Babs flashes her light at the wall. Up to where moss and some vines crawl along the rough stone. Up to where safety waits on top. My lungs burn, and my knees are jelly, but I step away from the wall, brandishing the knife. The hyenas laugh at me. Bud and Lou. Yeah, those names really don't fit those dark, skulking specters coming at us in the dark, their slobbering tongues lolling over their teeth.

“Well, yeah, but what about you?” Babs’ hand is already on the wall, already on a foothold. Waiting. For me. I force my heart to slow, my breath to come even, deep, full. Filling my lungs.

I command strength from my legs, which are wet noodles, my arms shaking as I hold them up, my eyes locked on our hunters. “I’m right behind you. Go now.”

She listens to me for once. Well, not just for once, but you know what I mean. She scrambles up like a monkey, finally in her element, climbing, swinging agilely from hold to hold.

I roll my head, cracking my neck, and smile at Bud and Lou. “How are you two doin’? Didja like that run?” I only get laughter, high-pitched and unsettling. I snort. Really, the Joker will go for anything that laughs, even if they’re not funny. “No? Alright. Let’s play a game instead. It’s called ‘Catch Me If You Can.’”

I spring forward, diving into a front flip, my hands touching the ground, pushing me off again, just as the two spring for me. I clear their teeth, sailing over their heads. As soon as I’m back down, I’m up again, launching into a kick that slams into a fury side, a yelp coming from the assaulted hyena, but I don’t care to know which one. “You know, you

aren't really adding to your already less-than-glowing reputation, guys." I laugh, turning mid-air, lashing out with another foot.

Smack!

I dance away from the snapping jaws, commanding my body to fly. To twist, to bend. I slide the knife across the flank of one of them, a small snick that causes another pained yelp. Not a deadly or deep cut. Just enough to tell them that I mean business. They may think that this is their hunt? Well, think again. "Oooh!! You guys are getting served!" I taunt and tease. I'm sure it doesn't matter that much since they don't understand me, but they understand that mocking tone, that challenge in my eyes as I stare straight into theirs. I growl and yip, followed by my own cackling laughter.

They lunge forward to tackle me, hackles raised, paws coming toward my chest to pin me.

I flip away, my ribs screaming at me, and when my hands press against the ground and my head swings up, I'm met with a mouth launching toward my face. I pivot, sliding away, missing those snapping jaws by a hair. I take one second to glance up. Babs is clear from jumping distance. Time to go.

But I took too long. Something rams into me, a hundred ninety pounds of solid muscle. I fly into the wall, smacking my head against stone, right on my bandaged wound. The world explodes into white light. I slide to the ground, gasping, the world spinning. Since when were there four hyenas? Something clamps down on my leg. *Crunch!* The grunt rips from my throat before I can stop it. The jaw of a hyena, Bud or Lou? Does it matter?—closes over my leg, teeth working down through the thick fabric of my leggings. But I know it's already broken if only a little. Pain sears up and down my leg, sweeping from the bite to my hip and down to my bare toes.

I don't have time to think. I throw the knife. It hits its mark, the second, third? Hyena's shoulder. It screeches, stumbling back, trying to nose the thing out, biting at it. But my leg's still being crushed. So I pull out the darts. My hand shakes, and my vision warps, but when did that matter? I throw the first dart. It sticks into fur, and the jaws and teeth are gone, leaving my leg free, teeth marks denting my pants. Nothing broke through the skin, but that doesn't mean nothing broke.

I stumble to my feet, not bothering to look back at the hyenas. Something sings in my upper leg, possibly a minor fracture in my femur.

My femur—gosh, that was lucky. But still, every step sends agony lancing up my leg. Another injury to add to the list.

But who has time for broken bones? I jump after Babs, sailing upward, my cape barely clearing the ground before Bud and Lou snap behind me, laughing, whooping, grunting, howling, yipping in pain. I cling to the tiniest handhold, pressing my forehead into the rock, and take a minute. A minute to breathe. Not hurt. Not hurt. I'm fine. Fine. My bone isn't crushed... But we both just ran our energy out, and if I aggravate the break more—

But who has time to think about that?

It takes all I have to scramble up next to Babs, finally pulling ourselves onto the yard-wide top of the wall. The maze stretches out in front of us, and from up here, I can see that it's shaped like a face. Probably a clown.

I stay on my hands and knees, fighting so hard not to pant, not collapse onto the stone, and ignore the throbbing pain. Everything's gone. Every ounce of energy left drains out of my hands and into the ground. My head hangs, my hair sticking to my forehead, stringy and soaked. My eyes flutter shut. It's too nice. I might not open them again.

But the Joker isn't nice enough to let us rest. Not like the last two brief reprieves. The maze trembles. It shakes. Dust falls from the ceiling, coating Babs and me in dirt and debris. Babs coughs and hacks next to me as we both stumble to our feet, holding onto each other for balance. Ahead of us, lights illuminate a door, the only door, as far as we can see.

"I'd start runnin' if I was you, Bird Boy!" Harley's voice is back, sneering at us from overhead. "Keep runnin'! Or ya'll fall again!"

Shunk!

You've got to be kidding me.

I whip my head around. One of the maze walls is gone behind us. Disappeared. Bud and Lou laugh from below as if they're in on the joke. I look at Babs, then at the gap between our perch and the next. No grappling hook, but—I slide the rope off my back and quickly fashion it into a lasso, eyeing the small hooks strategically placed along the other wall. Someone knew we might come up here. Someone has planned for this.

But I don't have time to wonder how the Joker would know or know that we'd get the rope in the first place. I toss the rope, look at me being all Wonder Woman over here, and it lands on the hook, looping

over it. I yank it tight and turn to Babs, holding out an arm. “Ready to go, Miss Gordon?”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

NOW, WHERE'D I LEAVE MY STOMACH?

I never thought I'd enjoy swinging so much, even with the painful smack at the end. You know, when my ribs bash into the hard stone wall? At least there's moss to help cushion them a little bit. Babs clings to my back like a monkey, her legs wrapped around my waist, her arms looping around my shoulders as I scramble up the rope, glad that my arms are doing all the work, giving my legs a well-deserved break.

My broken leg throbs with a vengeance, reminding me every few seconds that it's there and needs attention that I can't give it. So I tell it to go away. But it doesn't. The stitch in my side lingers, too, clenching, stabbing, taunting me. Now I really know what old people have to go through. Seriously, how can you people live with your body actively fighting against you? It stinks.

Every time I pull us onto another wall, closer and closer to the door, the maze crumbles behind us as if the walls weren't meant to stay up in the first place. Below, Bud and Lou yip and whoop and laugh, scampering through the maze like it's their second home, away from the

destruction. Really, I don't blame them. I have half a mind to follow, but I like my bones the way they are, thank you. Mostly unbroken.

The closer I get to the door, though, the more I don't like it. Because it isn't really a door. It's a large opening in a clown's mouth, its teeth hanging over the entrance, its eyes shut as it grins. *Walk in*, it seems to say, *and have a great time*.

Yeah, as if.

The rope latches onto the last wall, and I pull it tight. I'm soaked in layers, and I mean *layers*, of sweat. My arms scream at me; well, everything screams at me, I guess. My breaths hitch in my chest, getting caught in my dry, scratchy throat. The world spins wonky, out of focus. Well, three solid knocks to the head will do that to you, I guess. I shake my head, pausing, the thick, prickly fibers of the rope digging into my fingers.

I stand there, looking at the wall in front of me; no, the two walls in front of me that go back and forth, fading in and out of each other. I squeeze my eyes shut. Tired. I'm so tired. But I have to keep going. "Robin." Babs' voice is soft in my ear, brushing my cheek. She tightens her hold, but not enough that it hurts. Her chin rests on my shoulder, and I can feel her eyes on my face. "Do you need me to—?"

“Naw,” I let out a short, humorless laugh, forcing my eyes to focus on my target. The wall. The only wall there, “I just needed a minute. All good now.”

Babs hums, and I know she doesn't buy it for a second. Great, she can see right through me. But she says nothing. Neither do I. I mean, what, is she going to lug me onto her back and swing us over? I mean, I know she can support her own weight easily; she's a gymnast, but mine too? I would never ask that of her.

Maybe I need to lay off the morning pancakes.

I leap. My feet push off the side of the wall, sending us out, then dropping, swooping down in an arc that takes us up, up—until we smack against the wall. I grunt, my ribs complaining, and Babs hisses, her hands curling. I glance down. Her knuckles are beaten up after smacking into stone walls, too.

It hurts not to be able to stop right here and now and wrap something around them, to let her take her time to get the pain down. But there's no time. So I climb. Hand over hand, my arms shaking, sweat dripping off the tip of my nose, soaking my suit, slicking my hands. I pause for a second to shake my head like a dog, only to get my hair into my eyes rather than out. Oh well. I keep going. Keep going... Almost

there—My hand slaps down on the top, fingers trembling. I gasp, wheezing, pulling us up and depositing us both onto the platform that leads into the clown’s mouth. I collapse onto the ground, wincing, one hand going to my leg, the other to my ribs. Ooooh... I really need a nap.

“Robin.” Babs is in my face, her hand patting my cheek quickly, her eyes darting up and over, looking back from where we came. “Robin, you need to get up.”

“Yeaaah... just give me a second.” I wave a hand, smiling, even though my eyes droop like someone set bricks on top of them. Something’s pulling me down to the floor. It feels so good against my head, that cool, smooth surface. Ahh...

“No time!” Babs is pulling on me, trying to get me to my feet. “I’m sorry, Robin, but you have to get up!”

I sit up, my mouth open to demand what could possibly be so important that she would interrupt my well-deserved nap... When I see it. The wall, the opposite wall, the one we entered the maze from in the first place, races toward us. And it won’t stop at the platform.

The crunch and growl of rubble being broken to smithereens rattle my head. My eyebrows shoot up, and I’m on my feet, wrapping an arm around Babs. Whether it’s for her benefit or mine, I don’t know, and I

don't care. We barely pass into the clown's mouth before the other wall slams shut, destroying our platform and blocking our way out.

"M-maybe h-he'll l-let us r-rest here." I hate how my words slur, my eyes droop, and my breath comes in desperate gasps. I hate that Babs has to see Robin like this. No, not the strong hero who laughs and mocks the villains who leap into action. I'm the beat-up kid hero at the end of his rope.

Bruce... I'm so sorry.

"Sit down." Babs pushes me down, her flashlight resting on the floor next to us. I squint. It's too bright. Babs grabs my face, her eyes scanning mine. Her brow creases.

"What?" I blink at her, letting my head rest against the wall, my legs stretching out in front of me, and my arms limp at my sides. I could sit like this forever.

"You probably have a worse concussion, but I can't look at your eyes to see." Babs sits back. To my satisfaction, besides her face still flushed red and dripping sweat and her knuckles scuffed up, nothing else has happened to her. At least I have that. "But I'm assuming—"

"The mask stays on." As much as it pains me to say it, Bruce would kill me if I told her now while Joker, Harley, and Kitten are

watching. I tap the side of my face, cracking a grin. “But yeah, I have quite the concussion, believe me.”

“I wish you could rest.” Babs frowns at me. Like me, she looks me over, assessing me. And, unlike me, she does not appreciate what she finds. “And I wish we had something to splint that leg.”

I wave a hand, my voice too cheerful. “I’m fine.”

“No, no, you’re not.” Babs sighs, looking down at the only way we can go. She dips her head, her shoulders sagging, with dark circles under her eyes. “Ready to get going?”

“Y-yeah.” I push myself away from the wall, waving her hand away, hoping to my feet. I don’t wobble. I refuse to wobble. So instead, I plant my hands on my hips and nod at the light at the end of the tunnel, grinning my largest grin. It helps a little. “Shall we, Miss Gordon?”

“You’re infuriating, Boy Wonder.” Babs does the unthinkable. She loops her arm through mine, and even though she braces my elbow, more to keep me steady than a sign of affection, I can’t help but worry. What about Dick Grayson?

“So I’ve been told.” I swallow hard, focusing on one step at a time. Survive. That’s all we need to do. Maybe Batman is already here, fighting his way through. Maybe he’s waiting for us in this next room.

But I glance down at Babs' arm looped through mine, then at her face. That drawn, pale, but still very pretty face. I try again. "I've been told, well... Erm, Miss Gordon?"

"Yes?" Babs looks up at me, her smile small, her worry worn on her face. "Do you need to stop?"

"No. Not that. It's just—" I take a deep breath. "Back... back in the balloon game room, you said you have a boyfriend?"

Babs glances down at our arms, then at my face. One moment her lips are pressed, her eyebrows furrowed. The next, she bursts into laughter, the pure sound not seeming right in this place.

"Is this what you're worried about?" Babs gestures to our arms. She grins, reaching up her other hand to pat my cheek. "You're cute, Boy Wonder. You don't have to worry about getting between Dick and me."

I have to bite back my grin. "Excuse me?"

"Dick. Dick Grayson. Richard Grayson? Ward of Bruce Wayne?" Babs raises her eyebrows. "I know you know about him. You've rescued him a couple of times."

I have to play this right. I let the information settle, showing it on my face. Then a flash of recognition, and I snap my fingers. "Oooh! The

rich kid. Yeah, right!” I wiggle my eyebrows at her. “Look at you go, Miss Gordon.”

“Stop it.” Babs shoves me, but her smile still lingers, her cheeks tinted a rose pink. “We’re not quite official, really. I mean, we’re friends. He just asked me to Homecoming.”

“Soo... baby steps, then?” What? This isn’t self-indulgent! This is important information that will help me when I talk to her later!

“Yeah, baby steps,” Babs smirks. “You remind me of him a little.”

My heart stops in my chest. Did she figure it out? Am I caught? But then, with how she looks at me, her eyes questioning but honest, I know she hasn’t. I’m just too much like myself for my own good.

“Oh yeah? Thrilling personality or charming good looks?” I run a hand through my hair to make it look better, but only manage to get it to stick straight up like a hedgehog’s quills.

“Eh—both?” Babs shrugs, trying and failing to suppress a smirk. “You just seem familiar, I guess.”

“Oh.”

We stop at the edge of the tunnel. In front of us is a smaller hall with no door on the other side. Just two short walkways running alongside—a track? My eyes run along the silver, glistening rail,

following it out until it stops at the door, another clown split down the middle, as if the doors are just waiting to open. At the very back of the tunnel sits a single rollercoaster car, a two-seater, the harnesses looking ready to strap us in and not let us go.

But... there's nothing else to do.

Without another word, both Babs and I slide into the seats.

They're hard, typical amusement park fare. I lean my head against the back of my chair, sighing at the opportunity to actually sit down. I know it won't last long, but hey, I'll take whatever I can get. I pull down my harness. It goes over my shoulders, big and bulky, to keep my head from whipping around. It clicks into place, stuck and pressed against my chest.

Now, you would think that, wow, the Joker cares about safety? Yeah... no. I'm sure this is meant more to keep us trapped in this car than safe. I spare a glance at Babs. She slips the flashlight safely into her pocket. I close my eyes. I don't really want to know what's on the other side of that door. But I don't have much choice now, do I?

"Welcome, Bird Boy and Girly!" I close my eyes against the Joker's sliding voice, not even bothering to stop the groan from slipping out of my lips. I let my head thump against the seat. Really? Again? When can this just be over? "To my FUNHOUSE! Please keep all hands,

arms, legs, and heads outside the car for the entire ride! And please contact your physician if you have issues with decapitation! Enjoy your Ride!”

“Oh, Joyous day.”

The doors clatter open, sending in wild flashing lights. A rush of warm air knocks into me, smelling just like the Joker, circus food gone rotten. And, before you can say ‘boo,’ Babs and I shoot out of the launching room at full speed. Zero to sixty in point six seconds, or something like that.

Babs screams, her hand snatching mine so tight I think I might lose my fingers. No, scratch that; I think I just might lose my lunch. As soon as we shoot out of the doors, we drop. Not a slow, curved plummet like some of those crazy rollercoaster rides, oh no. We drop straight down, the ground rushing up to meet us. My hair whips back from my face, my headbandage gone. My stomach launches into my throat, complaining all the way.

I hate falling.

My hands grip my harness until my knuckles turn white. But then, just as I think our brains will get bashed out on the pavement below us, we zip up. The rollercoaster track races out in front of me, and my eyes

bulge as wide as saucers, unable to look away. Because this isn't just some outdoorsy coaster or a blacked-out themed one. This one flashes with iridescent bulbs that pop and fizz. Signs flicker all around us, blinking warnings, laughter, and promises of a good, fun time. My eyes barely have enough time to glance at them before we pass.

But I have bigger problems than signs.

Giant automaton clowns loom over the track, steak knives the size of school buses clutched in their metal fists, flame blowers belch red-hot gas, and, speaking of gas, pea green Joker Venom puffs onto the track, whisked away in our wake.

Babs' scream, Joker's laughter, and the horrible buzz of off-tune music blare in my ears. Lights, flames, blades. The world's a blur. *Flash!* *Crunch!* A knife thunks down right behind us, impaling the track. *Foosh!* Fire whizzes over our heads. The smell of burnt hair fills my nose, smoke wrapping around us. I choke and hack, but all I can get are more and more lungfuls of smoke.

I smack a hand down on my head, putting the tiny blaze out before it catches more, but immediately snatch my hand away. Bullets rain down on us from overhead, peppering our car and slamming into the

metal. A yell rips out of my mouth as I push Babs as far forward as she can go, out of reach from the deadly shells.

And, of course, all this happens as we hurtle around sharp curves, go up and down like the waves of the ocean, and loop the loop like there's no tomorrow. I want to close my eyes, to make it all stop. To make it all go away.

I'd give anything to be back home. Home, at the Manor with Bruce, Alfred, and Ace. Bruce... where is he? I thought I wanted him before. That dull ache, that hole growing in my chest. But now it rips open all the way, empty. Void.

And, for the first time in a long time, all I want? Is a hug.

A hug from Bruce. A chance to tell him I'm sorry. A chance to... well, to be ourselves again. But I don't get a hug. I squeeze Babs' hand in mine, holding onto it like it's my lifeline. Real. Her hand is real. Steady, if a little cold. It's nothing like the hot, the loud, and the smelly that press into me like a thick fog. It's Babs.

She doesn't scream anymore, but her mouth's still open, her eyes wide and popping, her hand bracing against her seat. Then I realize something and start to laugh. Not because of Joker Venom, though we speed right through another puff of the stuff. No, I'm on a rollercoaster

with Barbara Gordon. A rollercoaster. Isn't that something you do on a date?

So, when she turns to me, her eyes wide, her lips opening to ask if I'm okay, though her words would be tossed out into the wind, I smile at her. A genuine, full smile lifts that stone that's my heart and fills my chest with warmth. I mouth, 'This could be fun, you know?' And she must be able to read lips because, with a sheepish grin, she holds up her hands. Not all the way, because at this point, anything above our shoulders, yes, that includes our heads, sadly, is liable to get chopped off.

But, as we zip through the wild twists and turns, plummet and rises, loop de loops, and so on, we let out loud, long whooping calls, laughing. If I could hear Joker, I'm sure he would either be a) thrilled that we're laughing and thinking we've been poisoned by his Joker Venom or b) sulking because his ride isn't terrifying us.

I think it's option B as soon as I see the end of the track. But it's not a traditional end, like a small station that you can step out onto and collapse onto sweet, solid earth, oh no. It's a literal stop. A drop-off. The end of the road. Babs gives a tiny squeak that I won't ever let her live down, her smile dying on her lips.

I narrow my eyes. If we crash off that at full speed, I start a mental clock ticking in my head. Thirty seconds.

One, two. I notice the screws holding our harnesses in place, locking us in, keeping us pressed into our seats.

Three, four. My hand fumbles for some of the darts stuffed into my pockets, my fingers fighting hard to close around them, shaking.

Five, six. My hand finally closes over two of them. I yank them out of my pocket.

Seven, eight. I grab Babs' hand, pressing one into her fingers. Her eyes meet mine.

Nine, ten. I nod at the screws and lift my dart, shoving the point into the slit and turning, yanking. The bolt unscrews, whipping out behind us into the broken, blazing track.

Eleven, twelve. Babs starts to frantically yank at her own bolts as I keep twisting away at mine, my eyes locking onto each one. One at a time. *Pop!* There goes another.

Thirteen, fourteen. I'm halfway free, the harness shaking and rattling against my chest. I'll take halfway.

Fifteen, sixteen. I wiggle out of the harness, biting my lip hard when we whip around a corner, the sudden change of direction sending

me slamming against the side of the car, my back digging into the hard, cold surface.

Seventeen, eighteen. I can see the end of the track coming up to meet us, laughing. No, that's the Joker. I scramble forward to Babs, whose hands shake around her dart, fumbling, her eyes narrowed, her mouth set in determination.

Nineteen, twenty. I hold up my dart, jamming the needle into one of the other bolts, yanking, gritting my teeth as the barely perceptible groan of metal on metal reaches my ears. It's stuck.

Twenty one, twenty two. Stuck—Babs knows it too. I reach over to the other side, twisting at the bolts, scraping at them with my nails, fighting the surge of sickness bubbling up from my stomach. No—

Twenty three, twenty four. I grab both sides of the thing and pull, my muscles straining, my finger screaming, bracing my heels against the bottom of the car.

Twenty five, twenty six. No! Someone yells. I yank and pull, Babs pushes and shoves, her face as pale as a ghost. Not Babs, please not Babs—

Twenty seven, twenty eight—The harness clangs, bouncing but not giving way. Heat consumes me; it sears my throat, rips the roar from my lips as I yank up, harder, faster—

Thunk!

Twenty nine—Babs slips out from under the tiniest gap, leaping into my arms.

Thirty.

We catapult over the side. But unlike the boat ride and the waterfall, I know it's not water waiting for us at the bottom. My stomach lurches again, and my mind whirls. Even though I know Babs is pressed into my side, an image of her plummeting, screaming my name, flashes in front of my eyes. Mid-fall, I whip out the rope, still looped into a lasso. I only have one shot at this.

My eyes lock onto something, a piece of wooden track jutting out from the rest. My feet push off the plummeting car, sending us into the air.

I pull my arm back and let the rope fly. It snags, barely, onto the post. But just as soon as we soar upwards, we plummet again.

Babs' gasp rips away as we knife through the air. I force my eyes to stay open, to lock on the ground below. *Smash!* The car hits and splinters and shatters into a million mangled pieces.

My hands grip the rope tight, the fibers burning, biting. Come on—

Snap!

We jerk to a halt. Someone screams. White explodes across the world like a million fireworks. Something breaks, and we fall. A shortstop. I slam into cold, cool, smooth concrete, staring up at the burning, shattering roller coaster track above us.

Wow, it looks so cool when it's falling—

“Move!” Her words cut through the chaos, and her voice slices through the din. I jolt onto my feet, snatching up the rope and staggering into a run. Run, run, run. I reach out and snatch Babs' hand, my broken leg howling at me as we dash forward, the rollercoaster crashing down behind us.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

SLEEP'S OVERRATED, ANYWAY

—Dick—

I yank Babs into another dark hallway, a wave of debris and smoldering air at our heels, building up, pushing forward, a roar of flames and smoke. It crashes into us, sending me stumbling, knocking into my back, and burning my exposed neck, arms, and legs, but I keep going. Run, run, run. Keep running. My feet catch on nothing at all, sending me all over the place, from side to side, but forward, forward. Always forward.

Get away. Get out. Out. The words whirl in my head. The pain's gone. Pain, pain, pain. Who cares about a broken leg, broken finger, triple whammy concussion, or anything like that? No, adrenaline pounds through my veins, pushing me forward, onward.

Away.

We exit the hall and enter another room. A room without any design or theme around the doorposts. One step in, and I know it's empty from the echo. But I still don't stop. Away, away, even though a quick

once-over shows no other doors in sight. *Get out, get her away. Safe.*

Run!

“Robin.” Something pulls on my arm, yanking me to a skidding stop. I stand, panting, turning around to see Babs, my heaving breaths echoing off the rounded walls. Soot covers her face, but not even that can hide the concern practically dripping from her eyes, creasing her mouth.

“Robin—your arm.”

I look down. My arm hangs limp, popped right out of the socket. I blink at it. Well, that’s not good, is it? And, as if the sight of my arm hanging like a sad noodle was a pebble on a pile of boulders, everything comes crashing into me. I stagger, a small laugh squeezing out of my lips. Agony, pure and simple. And I thought everything was bad before the maze. What a poor, naive little boy I was. “Ha... yeah... This happens sometimes.”

Is it wrong that that’s true? Yeah, that's kinda sad.

I take a deep, shaking breath, close my eyes, and focus on my breathing, focusing on my heart. Usually, it’s easy to get them to calm down, to slow down. To take even, full breaths. But... well, do you know that feeling when the pain lathers on so thick and heavy that it's hard to

really feel anything anymore? Yeah, well, I hope no one has to. It is both a blessing and a curse.

With a heavy breath, I grab my injured arm, hold it straight in front of me, and yank. Hard.

POP!

The world explodes into fireworks of white and black spots, quickly followed by the sweet relief of my arm back in its rightful place again. I didn't even know I fell until I blink up at Babs, who pulls me toward her, her lips pressed, her eyes swimming like the Manor's pool. Water... how long has it been since we've had water? It must be the insane rollercoaster, hyenas, and popping venom balloons because suddenly I realize my mouth's as dry as sandpaper. I smack my lips but try to ignore them. Just like my rumbling stomach. Just like my singing body. So instead, I cock my head at Babs. Why is she crying? It's not like I'm dead or anything. I'm alright... I'm fine... alright...

"I'mma fine..." the words scratch against my throat. Wow, so convincing.

It hits me. Wait, what about Babs? Food, water... She needs them just as much as I do. How long have we been here?

“Th—” Babs clears her throat loudly, motioning with a finger to the rest of the room around us. Dark. Empty. Quiet. A trap. Or... maybe... small mercy? No, this is the Joker we’re talking about. I’m going with trap. “This room’s empty. I-I think we’re in the middle of the Maze, more or less.”

“Eh, heh.” I sit up and immediately want to be back on the ground, resting my head against the cold, soothing floor. The room blurs into dark greys and blacks, not illuminated by anything except the faint glow coming down the hall. I’ve never been so grateful for the lack of a flashlight before. Really, it’s like someone’s pounding a hammer right behind my eyes. “Well... that’s good news.”

“Robin...” Babs’s hand reaches out cautiously for my shoulder. She bites her lip hard. My stomach lurches. Even after all this, she’s still worried about me, not even bothering with herself. But... It’s my job to worry about her! Not the other way around. I’m the hero, the professional. “Robin, you need... You need help.”

“I’m fine.” I give her a double thumbs up, my smile too large, too happy. It doesn’t feel right. Yeah, I’m fine. Fine. I can do this. I have to do this. *Liar*. That small voice says. *You do need help*.

Bruce... I'm so sorry... please... please tell me you're on your way.

“Stop saying that. You’re not.” Babs’ hand touches my shoulder, but I lean away, humming. We don’t have time for this. We need to keep going— “Robin. *Please.*”

There’s something in her voice that snatches my attention. It’s not desperation; it’s not pity or anger. No. When I look into Babs’ swimming green eyes, all I see is, well, kindness. Genuine concern. My stomach sinks. All this time, I was worried about her safety and keeping her alive. But... My shoulders sag. My smile drops. The motion feels wrong on my face. My eyes droop, blinking slower and slower.

I want Bruce. Bruce, who wouldn’t let Babs get hurt. Bruce, who would also be able to save himself. Bruce, who, at this point, will probably ground me from hero work for life.

And I deserve it.

The long, deep sigh hurts when it squeezes out of my lips, but it feels good rushing down my lungs. All this time, Babs has been holding on to the same hope. That Batman will come. That Batman will swoop in and save us. But she thinks Batman knows what happened to us. She

believes he's on his way. And that while we wait, I'll keep us safe. But she doesn't even know...

"I..." My words get stuck on the lump in my throat. I pull my knees up to my chest, tucking my head between them. The world stops spinning for a minute. "I... I messed up." Just three words. By themselves? Perfectly normal. But together? Well... The river breaks through the dam. The pain's forgotten. Something... maybe it's the horrible slamming in my chest, maybe this sick feeling in my stomach, or maybe the look on her face—but suddenly, everything crashes into me. Just those three words, three measly little words, and everything comes out. I can't stop myself. "I messed up. I got caught—I got us in this mess... You nearly drowned and got eaten alive by a shark—then the gas... and the hyenas... and—" My hands grasp my head, wringing my hair. My head whirls, twirls, spirals out of control. Images of teeth, laughter, and the Joker's bloodshot eyes burn into my vision. I swallow back my own sob.

I can't cry. Robin. Doesn't. Cry.

But...

“Batman and I... we....” I let my head sag. Why am I telling her this? But no, I can’t stop talking. “I know he won’t trust me again after this.”

Babs freezes, her mouth open, probably ready to pester me for changing the subject, for trying to get out of taking care of myself. But the words die on her lips. I can see the slow realization creep across her face. She’s going to hate me now. Because... let’s be honest, this is all my fault.

But, well, I can’t stop the words, even if I wanted to. “I went behind his back on this mission. I didn’t come to find you, not really. I came in as a favor to Richard—you know, your guy?” I don’t know why I’m telling her this. I mean, now Dick Grayson and Robin have to explain everything without her finding out their... my... secret.

But the plug has been pulled. “He wanted to make the night extra special for you, but Bats, well, I mean, it was something for a citizen of Gotham, but with Joker out and everything, he wanted me with him.” Tears smart in my eyes, the pressure building behind them. Trust, trust, trust. I betrayed Bruce. I went behind his back. Some established hero I am. “So I snuck away from him and came anyway. But... when I got to your apartment....” I fold in on myself. Something crushes me, and it’s

not a boulder or something I can touch and see. It settles on my shoulders, pressing down, keeping me sinking, and falling, even as my mind runs wild.

Weak, mistake... You failed him. You went behind his back.

“So... That's how you found me.” I freeze when Babs finally speaks up, her voice hollow, detached. I whip my head up, afraid I'll see cold, disapproving eyes. Gray eyes like a steel wall. Instead, I see full emerald green eyes that glisten with tears. Because... Babs is Babs. Babs isn't Bruce. And... well, even Bruce isn't all I make him out to be.

I know now. I understand.

“Yeah... and that's how... that's why—” I let my head fall onto my knees, pressing into the dirty fabric of my suit's leggings, burying myself. My legs stab, freezing in agony, but I shove the pain to the side. “I'm *sorry*.” The words come out in a sob. It hiccups, it hurts. Robin. Doesn't. Cry. But I can't stop it. I don't know who I'm speaking to, Babs or Bruce. But my voice chokes, and my shoulders start to heave and shake. Pain—but I can't stop it. I don't want to. *I'm sorry, Bruce! I made a mistake! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!*

“Robin.” A hand presses onto my shoulder. Heavy, yet light. Warm, yet soothingly cool. It holds me down, it grounds me, it calms my

shaking. The voice is thick but gentle. Light, yet somehow full at the same time.

Babs.

“Robin... no matter what’s going on between you and Batman—”

A deep breath, a long pause. I wait, not daring to look up, not daring to move, my ears lifting, listening. “Well, as horrible as it sounds, I’m glad you’re here... with me. I know that things would’ve been... easier... with Batman. But I’m glad you’re here.”

I’m glad you’re here. The words surround me. They fill me, they fill the room, echoing over and over again, but I don’t know if that’s just my imagination or the concussion or not.

I lift my head, blinking away the pressure in my eyes, fighting off the burning that threatens to spill over, looking across from me to this amazing girl. This girl, who, even though she knows I let us down, is still happy that I’m here. This girl, who, even after I admitted I’m the one who pulled a stupid, doesn’t look at me like it’s my fault at all, even though it is.

This girl, who doesn’t pry. Who admits that she wants Batman but still... well...

I know it's stupid, but, well, I mean, she doesn't hate me. What more can I ask for?

Her soft smile sends a warm, fuzzy blanket that wraps around me. Her eyes glow in the faint light, green, yes, but not like that sick Joker green. Alive, glistening like emeralds, rich like spring's fresh, new leaves. I swallow hard. What did I ever do to deserve her?

Answer? Nothing. Because I don't deserve her. Babs, this incredible girl sitting across from me. Babs with her deadly left hook and quick thinking. Babs, with her bell-like laugh and dagger-like look.

Babs.

Babs, my best friend who's more than just a friend now, but she doesn't know that right now.

"Thank you, Miss Gordon." My voice passes my lips in a whisper, wisps of words that I'm afraid she won't even hear. But I know she does. Or at least, I know she understands. "I promise... I'll get us out of this."

And I never make promises unless I know I won't break them.

"I know you will." Babs opens her mouth to say something else, but I interrupt her, not with words, but with the motion of sliding off my cape, the sleek, warm fabric leaving a chill brushing my bare arms, and

slip it over Babs' shoulders, wrapping her loosely inside, my own smile softening.

After watching her in that dress, her shoulders bare, her legs shaking, I want to kick myself. This is something I should've done a long time ago.

Babs' mouth opens into a perfect 'O,' her eyes nearly popping out of her head. I pat her shoulders, nodding, feeling like Alfred as I brush invisible lint off the cape. I smile, which sounds lame, I mean, I always smile, but this, if I dare, is the closest to a Dick Grayson smile I've ever given around her. "You gave up your dress to patch me up. Time to return the favor."

"But Robin—"

"Nope, naw—nope!" I hold up a finger, grinning. "No arguing. Get some sleep."

"No!" Babs flaps her arms, the cape billowing like a bird's wings around her. For some reason, she just looks... well, *right* sitting there in that cape. Even though her face scrunches up into a scowl. Maybe she does roleplay as Batman in her room at night, acting out battles. I can't help my grin. She's so cute. What? It's true! "You're more tired than I am! You need rest!"

“I’m feeling better already!” What? It’s not a lie. I am! Because now? Now, her words swirl around in my head. Honest words. Words that still admit I’m wrong, but that she knows what I’m trying to do. The boulder’s been lifted off my chest, off my shoulders. I can breathe again. I am exhausted, but I couldn’t sleep a wink knowing I left Babs to look after us on her own. I can’t do that to her. “Besides, someone has to be the lookout.”

“But—”

I shake my finger at her, slowly rising to my feet, demanding my legs stay steady, slipping the knife out of my pocket. Better to be safe than sorry. “No ands, ifs, or buts, Miss Gordon. I’m still the professional.”

“You’re horrible.” Babs snaps, but it’s weak as she slips down onto her side, tucking her entire body into my cape, disappearing into the folds. Her voice drifts out to me, though, muffled against the thick fabric. “It’s no wonder you and Batman get hurt all the time. You don’t take care of yourselves.”

“Goodnight, Miss Gordon.” I choke down a laugh. That’s the Babs I know.

I don't know if it is night right now or not. I mean, for all I know, it could be the middle of the afternoon out in decent places. But here? In this dark room in the center of the Maze of Madness? Well, I say it's time to sleep.

Well, time for Babs to sleep.

It's only when Babs is wrapped tightly in my cape, curled up in a little girl-shaped lump on the floor, that the room turns on. And when I say 'turns on,' I mean lights flashing, loud noises booming, water spraying down from the ceiling, air puffing up from the floor in bursts of smelling salts and blaring music screeching through it all.

I sag. So, this 'resting room,' as it were, is designed to keep the person inside from sleeping. Oh, how wonderful. Well, at least it will keep me up. Something touches my leg, and I jump, grunting in pain when my broken leg touches down first. Babs winces, mouthing 'Sorry' through the noise.

I wave a hand, and really, even if I shouted, she wouldn't be able to hear me. So I mouth. "Don't worry about it. Tuck yourself into the cape and get some sleep."

Babs frowns at me. For a moment, I wonder if she can't actually read lips or if she only gets the really simple stuff before she mouths, 'What about you?'

I grin at her, shrugging. 'I've stayed up for a week straight before. Who needs sleep?'

Besides, how can I even sleep after a talk like that?

—Babs—

Batman doesn't know where we are.

Well, maybe he knows now, but... I suppose it makes sense. If he came with Robin, we wouldn't still be here, right? Still... well... I don't know what I thought. I suppose it's only natural for heroes and their sidekicks—partners—to get into tiffs sometimes. And now that I think about it, it's probably more natural for superhero teenagers and their adult mentors to have disagreements. I even thought about it before and told Dick about my theory that Batman and Robin were having trouble after he came back from Jump City.

I wrap myself tighter in Robin's cape. There's more to this story. More than just Robin wanting to make my night special, to help Dick out. Which is one of the sweetest things ever. I need to thank Dick after I give

him a good, solid punch if I—no *when* I see him again. Yes, more to the story, but I don't want to try and get anything else out of Robin.

All it takes is one look at him standing over me, illuminated in the mad flashing, strobing lights, drenched in sprays of water, twitching every time puffs of air gush up from below us; that now isn't the time. If I took his mask off, I know he'd have dark circles under his drooping eyes.

My heart lurches in my chest, and a painful ache seizes it, throbbing, not letting me go. I don't care if he's stayed up for weeks before, because now with his injuries? Now, after pushing himself to—no, *past* the limit? He needs sleep more than I do.

I mean, if he's down for the count—if he overdoes it, pushes himself too far—I bite my lip hard, burying my face back into the quiet darkness of the thick, cool mesh of his cape. It's all wrong. Batman and Robin are fighting; Robin is being silent on patrol. Everyone was talking about it. But deep down? I don't think I really believed it was possible.

But then, Robin's human, too. And so is Batman. I shouldn't be surprised. Me, who knows so much about them yet so little. Me, who has seen firsthand what Batman... what Robin does. And the more I think about the two of them fighting like any other parent with their child, like

Dad and me, the more wrong it seems. Besides, who are they to each other, really? Father and son? Or simply mentor and mentee? Now that I think about it, it would be stranger if Robin *wasn't* Batman's son.

I should be angry at Robin and Dick for pulling something like this without telling anyone. I mean, they could've at least told Dad. Dick's smart, and Robin's... well, he's Robin! They both should know better! But then I remember the look on Robin's face. The tears—the shaking words. The look doesn't belong on the face of a hero who always smiles and laughs.

And I know.

I know that no matter what, we both made choices. *Both* of us. Me too. It isn't all his fault, neither of theirs, because I made a choice too. I'm just as much to blame as both of them. Something nasty surges in my stomach, threatening to come up. My hands clench into fists, my eyes squeezing shut. It's all such a mess! Though the cape muffles the noise, the smells, and the lights, I don't think I'll be able to sleep. Not now.

Because I'm not just trapped with a hero, am I? He is a hero, strong, brave, and smart. But human. A boy around my age. A boy who still makes mistakes. A boy at the end of his rope.

I want to go home, and I know he does too. I hug myself tightly under the cape, letting my head rest against the ground, and close my eyes. Home... home to regular Gotham. Away from this insanity, the danger. Back home. Back to the way things were. Dad—

I shouldn't think about Dad. Not now, but I can't stop myself. I see his bushy mustache that always tickles my forehead when he kisses me goodnight. I see his glasses sparkling over his warm eyes and imagine the look of relief on his face when he sees me again.

I imagine rushing forward, throwing my arms around him, resting against his barrel chest as he rubs my back, whispering in my ear. Telling me everything's going to be okay. I wonder if Batman and Robin ever hug like that?

A strangled choking sob squeezes out of my throat.

I hate crying. I hate the feeling of tears building up, getting ready to burst. But I can't escape the pressure building, even if I wanted to. So, when the sobs come, I try to make them as small and quiet as possible. Robin has enough on his plate already. He shouldn't have to worry about me more than he has to. I can imagine vigilantes like him have to deal with shaking, sobbing victims all the time. But I refuse to be one of them. More and more, though, an ache builds up in my chest. I remember the

warmth that surged when we were close in the first room, the relief that came when I hugged him after the Joker Venom, and the steady hand on my shoulder when I told him about Mom.

Mom... who died just like this, at the hands of the Joker. Mom, who would laugh and brush my hair, asking me about my day. *Not helpful, Barbara!* Because now, all I want? Is a hug.

So I hug the cape, pulling my knees up to my chest until I'm curled into a tight little ball. I force the shaking in my shoulders to steady, but there's nothing I can do to stop the wet from slipping down my cheeks, soaking a small patch of the cape's golden lining. I take in a deep, rattling breath; Robin's cape smells like warm spices, like pumpkin pie. Well, sweat and BO too, but mostly like a fresh pumpkin pie, homemade and sitting on the dinner table. Warm, soothing.

I close my eyes, ready to take Robin's advice. Ready to escape into sleep. At least one of us can be well-rested, right? Even though it should be him. But I can help more if I'm rested. Yes, I will sleep. I snuggle deeper into the blanket, nuzzling the fabric, letting a small sigh escape my lips. Ready to sleep.

Until...

I hear a noise. Not the pounding, screeching noises of the room, no. This one's soft, out of place, nearly swept up in it all.

I pull a small piece of the cape to the side and peek through the crack. Robin sits next to me, his profile outlined in the strobing lights. He rests a hand on his knee, his broken leg stretched out carefully in front of him, his head sweeping back and forth, scanning the room. Keeping us safe. Warmth wraps my chest snug and tight.

No matter what he did or what he thinks he did, he's keeping us safe. And I meant it when I said I'm glad he's here. Because I wouldn't be alive without him. But now, as I search for the noise, I realize it isn't just any noise.

It's someone singing. Not the slow, creepy, screechy songs that the Joker played. Not the pounding sounds that rattle overhead. No. This voice rings rich and smooth in my ears. Not deep or high, but a flowing tenor. Angelic, but not in a girlish way. At first, I can't quite make out the words, but it finally hits me when I see Robin's lips moving to the sound of the music.

I freeze, watching, listening, straining to hear the words. The sound drifts to my ears, finally. I keep my eyes locked on his face as I hear: "He rocks in the treetop all day long, hoppin' and a-boppin' and

a-singing his song.” It’s slower and not as peppy, but I know for sure.

Robin’s singing *Rockin’ Robin*. I can’t help the small smile from spreading my lips. Of course, that’s what Robin would sing.

After all this time, all we’ve gone through, he’s singing like we’re sitting safely in some nice, cozy living room in front of the TV, winding down for the night. And it’s not even a sad song, either. It’s not like he’s singing about going home or wanting this all to stop and go away.

It’s upbeat, sending my heart pattering and soaring. But... more than that... he has a fantastic voice. I suppose that’s not so strange. I mean, male robins, the birds, are known for their songs. Is that why Robin is his superhero name in the first place? The words spill over his lips and take flight, chasing away the horrible screeching, laughter, and booms from overhead. I want to ask, but I don’t think that’s the most important thing in the world right now. Just something to jot down in my journal later, I suppose. So instead, I sink back into the cape, keeping one ear at the crack, listening to the Robin sing.

Wrapped in his voice, it doesn’t take long to drift off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

I ONLY GET A LITTLE SCARED

'Rockin... Robin...' The words to my song echo in my ears, soft and comforting. Like the shifting, coarse bed I lie on. I don't have sheets, but it's nice. Nice to sleep in a bed, for once. Nice to sleep without nightmares. Nice...

My mind snaps awake. Awake! No, I was supposed to be the lookout all night! When did I fall asleep? When did the puffs of air and blaring songs stop? Or did I just... drift off in the middle of it all? *Babs!* Is she alright? My eyes pop open, not seeing a dark room with flashing lights and pounding music. Instead, everything's quiet, except for a gentle hiss and the sound of shifting... something. I move my fingers, digging them into what I thought was my bed. But it's not a bed, no. It moves, settles, and piles around me, growing deeper by the second.

Sand.

My hand burrows through the grit. I let the grains fall between my fingers. My bleary eyes sweep the room quickly. No longer is it a nice, dim room with smooth walls and a floor. The whole thing's covered in piles of sand, ever-growing, ever-building, falling from the ceiling like a

thousand hourglasses broke all at once. Or this whole room just got blasted by its own self-contained sandstorm. Either works, I guess.

I try to move my arms and legs, only to feel the pressure of sand on top of them, layers and layers. The motion shifts the stuff, sending a wave rolling down toward my head. I snap my mouth shut and scramble forward, clawing, kicking. While my energy's back, mostly, anyway, my entire body feels like one enormous bruise. Sore, complaining. Aching, stabbing. Poking at me, trying to get me to pay attention to it.

But whoever has time for that?

I kick, and I scramble, slowly shifting my way up onto the top layer of sand, spewing the stuff out of my mouth. Gross. It tastes like dirt and, well, sand. The grains stick to my tongue and scratch my teeth. It clings between my bare toes and fingers. It cakes my fingernails and slides up and down my pants.

Ugh. I hate sand. It's just like glitter. It gets everywhere! Where's baby powder when you need it?

But I don't have time to complain. As soon as I clamber onto a tiny but steadily growing dune, I whip my head around, searching. Babs was right next to me, curled up in my cape. Where is she now? I ignore the pounding in my chest. No sign of her. Not a wisp of orange hair or a

scrap of purple fabric. “Miss Gordon!” I might as well have swallowed sand from the way my voice rasps, cracking. I yell again anyway. “Miss Gordon!”

My heart freezes, and my breath catches in my throat. No reply. I scramble down my dune, trying to find where she would’ve been, should still be. Because she can’t be gone. Joker didn’t take her. He couldn’t. But I know he would. Something nasty churns and bubbles in my stomach. If he took her...

I grit my teeth, clawing at the shifting hills, scooping handfuls at a time, but more just slides over to take its place. *No, no, no!* She could be suffocating down there! I let this happen. I was supposed to be on the lookout. How could I have fallen asleep? Bats don’t sleep! We can’t get tired on the job!

Mistake!

I’m just about to call for her again when something explodes out of the sand like a dolphin from the ocean waves, sending a spray of granules, yes, that is a word, cascading into the air and hissing onto the still-growing sea. A mess of tangled, sand-infested orange curls pops up, completed by a tattered purple dress wrapped tightly in a black cape with gold lining.

Babs runs her hands down her face, spitting and spewing, shaking her head frantically to get it out of her hair. Something knocks into me, sending my heart pattering, relief washing through my body, calm and soothing. Oh, yeah, I probably shouldn't think about anything cool and washing. No water.

A long, sharp breath rushes out from between my cracking lips, I didn't even know I was holding my breath, and I slide down to her, the grains tickling my toes, rolling down with me. When I'm standing in front of her, well, okay, sinking is more like it, I offer a hand. Babs accepts it without question, stumbling to her feet, swiping frantically at her dress, and shaking the pleated silk to get the sand out of the folds. As if that will help. I mean, really, how can people stand living in the stuff?

“What in the world?” Babs pulls back a few strands of mac'n'cheese hair like it's a bedraggled curtain, her emerald eyes round as soccer balls as she takes in the state of the room. I notice for the first time that her lips are dry and cracked as well, her tongue running over them over and over, leaving them a blistering red. I fight off a grimace. I wouldn't trust any water Joker would give us, or food for that matter, but my mind darts to the small water bottle tucked away in my utility belt and the protein bars I stashed in a few of the pouches.

I miss my belt. Maybe I should put a genetic lock on it so no one but me can take it off. I wonder how long it would take to convince Bruce to talk to Lucious about it. Then again, after this? I think he'll be all for extra safety measures.

“What happened?” Babs splutters, clinging to my arm, her eyes darting around the room, scanning the waterfalls of sand rolling down from above. *Ugh... stop thinking about water, Grayson!*

“To be absolutely honest?” I shrug, which hurts, but I do it anyway. “I have no idea. But we need to find a door.”

Without another word, we break apart, scrambling to the edges of the room. I'm glad she doesn't ask if I got to sleep or not, or even if I am feeling better. We don't have time. As soon as I reach the wall, I start to dig like a dog, like Ace digging after a rabbit, hands scooping away the sand, feeling along the smooth, rounded surface for any cracks or knobs.

“Ooooooh, the sand falls like rain! What a rush! What a pain!” I roll my eyes at the sliding voice, at the excited twitter. Joker. Of course. You know, after all this is over, I'll definitely make a point to deck him before he can get a word in edgewise. Beat him to the punchline. Now that would be fun. “But where's the door? Where could it be? Hmm, hmm, hmm. What a mystery! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

His laugh scrapes against my ears, but I don't worry about that. A mystery, huh? And Joker was talking in rhyme. He is supposed to be chaotic and unpredictable. But he usually doesn't do rhymes unless....

I pause in my digging, my eyes narrowing, my head cocking to the side. Sand falling like rain. Coming down. From the ceiling. No door in sight down here. Definitely not on the floor. The door—what if it's—? I whip my head up, scanning the ceiling, looking around the holes for the sand. Where is it—aha! There! My eyes snap onto a hatch, a small loop, and a pull string hanging just above my reach.

Bingo.

“Miss Gordon!” I slog through the sand, trying not to sink. I'm sure it would be up to my waist now if I did. I see Babs across the room, still digging at the edge of the wall. Her head pops up at my voice, and she turns, raising an eyebrow. I point up. “I found it!”

“Coming!” As Babs makes her way over to me, nearly getting buried twice, I leap up, my hand snatching the pull string. On my way down, I realize that this could be a trick. I mean, the sand's coming from the ceiling. What else could be up there? This is the Joker we're talking about. What was I—?

Too late.

I fall to the ground, the string coming with me, the door flapping open. A mass of squirming dark bodies plummets toward me. I scramble away just in time for the wriggling pile of scorpions to hit the sand, hissing, the ladder clicking right on top of them, the rungs taunting me.

Oh... Well, that's unfortunate.

Babs jumps back, her eyes bulging, her face chilling to a horrible white. Even from here, I can see she's shaking like the fall leaves.

“R-Robin?” she stutters, taking another step back. She freezes as the things begin to untangle, skittering across the sand. And I don't blame her. The scorpions writhe in a mass of pitchers and stingers, bulging eyes, spindly legs, and wicked, sharp, segmented tails dripping with venom. Their bodies shine an amber brown, with a darker pattern on their back. And me, Mr. Has-to-be-an-expert-in-everything over here, just has to recognize that these aren't just any scorpions.

They are Arizona bark scorpions, the most deadly little buggers in these here United States. But here's the thing. Usually, they aren't fatal if you clean the wound properly and get medical attention and the antivenom right away.

But Babs and I have access to none of the above.

Shivers race up and down my arms, back, and legs like they're crawling all over me—yeah, nope. Nope, nope, nope. I grit my teeth, dancing away as a stray scorpion scuttles toward me. If I get stung? Game over. Again. So I back up toward Babs slowly, careful not to shift the sand too much. And while I do? My mind whirls.

“You know, I said we could take turns taking point on these things.” I force my voice not to catch, but I don't look at Babs. I keep my eyes on the mass of creepy crawlies. “So—?”

“No.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Babs wrap herself in my cape, still shaking like a little leaf. “Not arachnids. I hate arachnids.”

“Yeah...” I let my hands settle over my pockets of darts. “That's understandable.” There are so many of them—should I waste my darts? I don't even know what they do. Would they even work on the things? But maybe—I finger the rope still looped over my shoulder. Maybe we can climb up to the ceiling from here? But that would mean trying to swing our way over to the ladder without falling because... if we did... I make up my mind. I mean, really, what could go wrong?

“Alright, here's the plan.” I finally turn to Babs, noticing she's already covered in sand up to her thighs. We really need to hurry. “You wrap yourself completely in my cape again. If you—erm—well, it will

block the stings.” I rub my neck. What? I’m not about to say, ‘if you fall.’ Why? Because I’m not going to drop her. “I’m going to strap you to my back with the rope. Like a harness. Then, I’m going to jump for it.”

Babs looks at me as if I just went as whacka-doo as the Joker. Which, let’s be real. That’s an actual possibility. I blame the three knocks on the noggin.

“Are you crazy?” Babs grabs my shoulders, which hurts, but I don’t complain. Until she shakes me. “What are you thinking? You’ll get us both killed!”

“Yes, I am crazy, and no, we won’t die. At least, I hope so.” I set a hand on her shoulder, slowing the shaking. “Besides, do you have any other ideas? I’m open to suggestions.” I start looping the rope into a harness, raising my eyebrows, and taking a step out from under her hands. Really, if she has any ideas? I’ll take them.

Babs opens her mouth, then shuts it into a thin, pressed line. She licks her lips, looking from the scorpions to us. “I—no.”

I deflate just as much as she does. Really, I’m all for crazy, cool, dangerous things. I’m Robin, for goodness sake. But right now? I’m just tired. So I let Babs wrap herself in my cape and kneel down to let her crawl onto my back, sitting in the little loops I made with the rope. When

she's secure, I pull the straps of my makeshift harness over my shoulders, pulling them tight. For a minute, I kneel in the sand, breathing, feeling Babs' heart beating against my back, her breath in my ear, her arms hugging me from behind.

Then, I stand. Or rather, I stumble to my feet. My leg groans, sending a knifing pain shooting from my hip all the way down to the tips of my toes. My breath hitches, but I lock my eyes on the ladder. The scorpions are spreading out, burrowing under the sand. My toes twitch. I really wish I had my thick, sturdy boots on just about now.

Oh well. Beggars can't be choosers.

I don't know when I make up my mind. One moment, I'm frozen, watching the tiny little critters make their merry way between me and my exit. The next? I'm dashing forward at full speed, running through the pain, biting back a scream. Sand kicks up in drifts behind me, sending me shifting and sliding, but I keep pressing forward.

Only a couple more feet and—I jump for it. My feet push off the sand, and I fly through the air, arms reaching, eyes locked on the ladder in front of me. *Don't look down, don't look down!*

My hands curl around the ladder rung, my stomach plummeting as I drop, my legs dangling right over the writhing mass below. I yank up

my legs, wincing, pulling my bare soles as far away from those pinchers and stingers as possible, my heart slamming against my ribs, ready to burst out. Babs whimpers in my ear, her grip tightening painfully around my chest. I resist the urge to throw up.

Crack!

The sound jerks my head up to where the ladder's attached to the trap door above. Attached, but breaking, buckling under our weight. *No!* I scramble up, my hands slipping on the rungs, sweat dripping down my forehead, my eyes locked on the cracking wood, watching it splinter. Piece by piece cracks off, pulling away, tilting us back.

No!

Just as the ladder snaps free, plummeting, falling into the pile of little killers, my hands catch the lip of the opening and hold. I shut my eyes tight, hanging there, swinging, my toes kicking over open air. I've done this before, jumping with Babs on my back. But that wasn't when I had a broken finger and shoulder; I just had to pop back into the socket. Now? Ha! I probably couldn't do a pull-up to save my life.

Which is... scarily on the nose.

"M-miss Gordon—" My fingers shake, my broken one screaming at me, hitting me over the head with a stick, saying, 'I'm broken for

crying out loud! Stop doing this to me!’ My arms burn, trembling. I’m going to fall— e’re going to fall— “Miss Gordon, I need you to climb.”

No answer. Only the shifting of Babs on my back, slipping out of the harness. Her knees settle on my shoulders, bony and pressing down. I grit my teeth, shutting my eyes. My hands are as slick as slugs, slipping.

No, no, no! Hold on, Grayson!

Babs shifts to standing, her feet on my shoulders, her hands reaching out to grasp the edge of the trap door. One moment she’s still on my shoulders, the next, she’s gone. A long sigh escapes my lips, but my grip’s gone—My eyes shoot wide as I start to fall—

Hands snatch mine, gripping like iron. And hold.

I lock eyes with Babs, her face strained, her arms shaking. She gives me a trembling half smile, her fingers scrambling to reinsert their grip on my hand. “Y-you need to lay off the Bat burgers, Robin.”

“Are you calling me fat?” I let out a short, humorless laugh as she tugs me up, high enough for me to get my elbows, then legs, onto the next floor, rolling over away from the opening, away from the evil little creepy crawlies. “Because this is all one hundred percent muscle.” I hold up a thumbs up, letting out another long, deep sigh.

Alive. Still alive. That’s good.

“Well, Mr. One-Hundred-Percent-Muscle, we need to get moving.” Babs’ face pops into my line of sight. Though her face clenches tight and pale, ghostly in the dim light, she smiles, poking me in the arm. “Come on. Another room.”

I let one arm flop over my eyes, groaning. “Ugh. Five more minutes.” I’m turning into Uncle Rick over here. Wow... I haven’t thought about him in a while. My stomach turns, twisting. But seriously. Not even however many minutes—hours?—of sleep I got is enough. I don’t want to move. But I have to, don’t I?

Because we aren’t out of this yet.

“Come on.” I see Babs’ hand out of the corner of my eye, reaching toward me, palm out, fingers beckoning. I latch onto it, allowing her to help me onto my feet, landing in a small hop. She’s still wrapped in my cape, her hair wild, frizzy, and free around her shoulders and back. White as a ghost with dark circles under her eyes and blistering red chapped lips, battered and bruised but still as pretty as ever.

I need to stop staring at her. Robin shouldn’t be staring at her, especially when she’s made it clear she has an ‘almost boyfriend,’ Dick Grayson. Wow. Competition with myself. Is this sad? I think it’s sad.

So instead, I look behind her at our next doom—er—room.

Behind us, per the usual, the trap door slams shut, cutting us off from the sand and scorpions. I mean, I won't complain, but this next room's... well...

Wooden plank floors stretch out in front of us, rough and uneven. But there aren't any walls. At least not in the traditional sense. Because, as far as the eye can see, there are huge, full-length mirrors. They line the walkway, pressing in, reflecting everything in the sparse light, which in this case is Babs' back and my face.

I can't help the little noise that squeezes out of my mouth when I see my face. I have my mask on, yes, but the Joker's face paint still smears parts of my nose and around my mouth with white, black, and red. My hair sticks out like a bird's nest, stringy and tangled. With all my bandages and without my cape, boots, or socks, I look for all the world like a corpse.

And, with the colorful uniform, bruises, and scuffs, I almost look like... Nausea races up my throat, threatening to spill all over the floor. I look like my parents, like Uncle Rick, after they fell. Dead. That's what I look like.

Dead.

But I can't think about that. "Mirrors, huh?" I make a big show of inspecting the mirror, walking forward so I can peer at myself closely. Only, I don't look at myself. I can't. Instead, I look at Babs behind me. To be honest, she looks like she's the walking dead, too, but then again, she's a pretty walking dead. Oooh, she can never make fun of me for looking like a vampire again.

Then again, Dick Grayson can't know about this. Darn it!

"It just keeps going." Babs stands beside me, her eyes sweeping the mirror. "Another maze?"

"Probably. Yay for us!" I tear my eyes away from our reflections and look down the hall. With all the Mirrors, it's hard to tell when the twists and turns take place or even how far this thing goes. So I hold out a hand, a smile turning up my lips. Babs takes it, squeezing my fingers, thankfully, my whole and healthy fingers, tightly. She returns my smile, a small slice of light in this insanity and gloom. What? I reserve the right to be as sappy as I want!

Not a word needs to be said. We just start walking.

Not a sound echoes in here except our breathing and our hearts and the steady *creak* of our feet against the boards. A whoosh sounds

from overhead, like the flap of a bat's wings. Man, I wish Bruce were here.

Looking around is pointless unless you want to jump at your own reflection. The mirrors go on and on and on. Sometimes, it seems our own reflections laugh at us, their eyes, which are our own, glinting with mischief and malice. *You're trapped here with us.* They seem to say, keeping pace with us. *You can't leave. You can't escape. You're trapped here.*

So I squeeze Babs' hand tighter, and she squeezes mine in return. I'm sure she hates holding my hand, clammy, covered in sand, blisters, and bruises. But she doesn't let go. And neither do I.

We go like that for too long, my heart pounding at every sound, every movement, at my own reflection. Nothing. Just mirrors. Until—

Something cold brushes against my ankles. I don't jump, I refuse to jump, but I look down. Mist drifts up from the floor, white and thin, swirling at our feet. It hisses in from unseen vents, quickly rising. Too quick. Not normal. My eyes widen. Danger. "Miss Gordon, put on your gas mask now."

Babs does jump, whipping around to me, then looking around for the threat, her hand slipping into her dress pocket. As soon as she sees the

mist, she fumbles her mask onto her face. A breath of relief rushes out of my lungs as the click and whining suctioning hiss echo through the air, signaling the most important thing. Babs is safe.

“What about you?” Babs’ hand squeezes mine so tight I think I might just lose my fingers. Her voice filters through the mask, clean breath fogging up the plastic. “What is that stuff?”

I think longingly back to my mask, left in the stone hyena maze, now crumbled to dust. Not that I’d want to wear it anyway. I mean, breathing in Joker Venom residue wouldn’t exactly be helpful. But Babs posed an excellent question. A very important question.

What *is* this stuff? What have I just gotten myself into? Really, clear gas can be anything. Anything—

Then a voice starts to speak. Not Joker’s, not Harley’s, not Kitten’s. This one whistles and crackles like straw rattling in the wind. Soft, too calm. It slides into my ears, smooth and unassuming. It could belong to anyone speaking softly to a child at night, getting ready to tell them a bedtime story. But it sends shivers down my spine. I know this voice.

“*Little Robin Redbreast sat upon a tree.*” The voice begins. The mist, no, the *gas* rises, curling up my waist, permeating the air. Babs tries

to take off her mask, to hand it over to me, but I snatch her hands, shaking my head hard. I know what this is. I've faced this before. I can do this.

I can do this.

"Up went kitty cat, and down went he. Down came kitty cat, away Robin ran." The voice surrounds us like it's coming from the mirrors themselves. In fact, I think I see out of the corner of my eye, something shadowy slipping in and out of the reflections, only to disappear. Our evil reflection friends? Or was that just my imagination?

The mist reaches my neck. I let out my last, clean sigh. There's no escaping this, not in a maze like this one. But I can do this—I can—

"Says little Robin Redbreast, "Catch me if you can."

The mist swallows my head. I take in a quick lungful, choking. It slides down cold and airy. Soothing even. But as soon as I suck in one breath, the mist seems to darken, seething with blackness. The floor begins to ooze sludge, mucking up the boards around my feet. A chill swallows the room, brushing the back of my neck like the spindly fingers of a ghost reaching forward to caress my cheek. My heart begins to thump faster in my chest, goosebumps prickling up on my arms.

“Robin—” The voice snarls, hisses. Claws clamp around my hands where Babs’ nails were. They bite, they scratch, they tear. I turn, expecting to see Babs standing there, her emerald eyes sparkling with concern.

Instead, I see a monster, a corpse, frosty, glazed eyes, sagging skin, blood-red lips, and tattered clothes billowing in the howling wind. I take in a sharp, quick breath, taking a step back. The monster’s head tilts, no, lulls to the side, hanging on a limp neck. Teeth sharpened to points smile at me, those large, dead eyes locking onto mine. “What’s wrong, Robin?”

That’s not Bab’s voice... no... no... Terror seizes my chest, and I know.

I’m trapped in a maze full of Scarecrow’s Fear Toxin.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

OKAY, MAYBE A BIT MORE THAN I THOUGHT

It doesn't matter if I know what's going on. Knowing that a crocodile is attacking doesn't make the attack any better. Knowing that you're falling doesn't make the plummet and the hit at the bottom any better. It doesn't matter how hard you train or work to build resistance to something. When it comes? Well, it doesn't really matter how much you've prepared.

Fear toxin or Fear gas. Take your pick. Jonathan Crane, aka the magnum opus of the Scarecrow. His life's work. I mean, really. What does that say about him?

Like with the animals, the knowledge of what's happening to me jolts through my brain in a flash. A toxin that induces involuntary and irrational fear in the minds of its victims, driving them insane. High doses lead to death. Hallucinations... that's what it is.

Not real.

But the corpse clutching my hand, staggering toward me, reaching for me with bony, groping fingers, is very real. Real... My breath comes faster, hitching, gasping. A fist clenches my chest. I shake

my head hard. Maybe this is all a hallucination. But no. No matter what I do, shake my head, shut my eyes tight, it's there. Coming for me.

“Robin, it's me!” The corpse laughs, reaching for my face, curved talon nails dripping with something black and oozing. I smack the hand away, twisting my wrist out of its grip, and stumbling back. The corpse keeps coming. “Robin, it's okay!” The voice whistles; it creeps through my ears, scuttling, scurrying like mice. I try to wave it away.

Mice... terrified little mice...

“Robin, it's Babs!” I stop, and my arms freeze in place. I dare to look at the corpse. It can't be Babs. She isn't dead. Her hands aren't cold, and her arms and legs aren't skin and bones. Those glazed, bulging eyes can't be hers. But... the hair. It's stringy and limp, but that same mac'n'cheese orange. The corpse holds up both hands, pointed teeth clacking. “It's me. See?”

I do see. I see flashes of a healthy girl with rosy cheeks and freckles. Something that's not wasted away into nothingness. But that doesn't make it any better. *You're hallucinating, Grayson.* I try to tell myself, slapping my hands over my eyes and forcing my heart to slow. No such luck. It races faster, fluttering like a rabbit's, ready to burst.

That's Babs. She just looks like that because of the toxin. Not real. Not real.

But it sure looks real. A clawed hand grabs mine again, nails curling over my skin. It grips hard, cold, and clammy, like a fish. I resist the urge to jerk it away. Babs. It's Babs. Not a corpse. Not dead. *Babs.*

"Robin, what is it?" The corpse—Babs—leans forward. In my eyes, the thing smiles, licking its blistering lips, glazed eyes glinting hungrily. And even though I try to tell myself that, in reality, Babs is concerned, worrying about me, I can't stop the catch in my breath.

"F-Fear toxin. Scarecrow." My voice squeezes out of my throat, scratching, gasping. The hand grips tighter, but I refuse to shiver. At least on the outside. Babs... It's Babs... not some walking dead. Babs.

"Y-you're a corpse."

The corpse doesn't move. Instead, the thing—Babs—lets out a long, whistling sigh. To me, it sounds like laughter, high and screeching. But in the real world? Babs is probably nodding her head. The corpse—Babs—pulls me closer. I force myself not to yank away. I try so hard to take a normal breath. No. My lungs heave, my heart pattering faster and faster, seizing in my chest. *Danger!* All my senses blare. *No!* Argues another, smaller voice.

“Okay.” The Babs-corpse turns away from me, staring off into the inky blackness ahead. *Please... please don't make me go in there.* But that's too much to ask, apparently. “I'll lead us forward. Just... stay with me, alright?”

I manage a quick nod. I can't meet those dead eyes. I can't. So I stare at my feet. Mistake. The thick, black ooze surges up from the wooden planks, squelching, latching onto my ankles, and crawling up my leg. I jerk away, pulling hard, stumbling forward. The Babs-corpse pulls me back, a bone hand on my shoulder, dead eyes staring into mine. They laugh, they taunt. Babs... dead. My fault. *Your fault.*

Not. Real.

“Come on, Boy Wonder.” How can that be Babs' voice? That creaking and whistling? That cackling? But I still follow, my feet catching, wading through the muck, following the tug of clawed fingers wrapped around mine.

I don't want to go into the fog. I can already hear them. I know what's coming. I don't want to... please, please don't make me! The Babs-corpse pulls me in. The thick soup closes around me, tickling my skin, consuming me, swallowing me whole. Black. Everything's pitch

black. It wraps around me, a thousand fingers holding me tight. Feet creep up behind me, and a hand reaches for me. *No, no, no...*

“Dick.” I try to squeeze my eyes shut. Maybe if I close my eyes, I won’t see anything. Maybe I can get my heart to slow down. Burst, burst, burst. It’s going to burst. Because I can’t block it out. I can’t stop it. A frigid hand lands on my shoulder. Her voice whispers into my ear.

“Dick... why did you let me fall?”

I strangle the Babs-corpse’s hand, my other clenching, then unclenching. *No... not again. Please, no*—I open my eyes. There they stand, broken, pale. Dead. Dad, Uncle Rick, and... Mom steps around me, standing right in front of me, keeping pace as I stumble forward, her feet gliding over the top of the mire. Crimson smears her once lovely leotard, her hair wild, yanked out of its bun by uncaring hands. Her dead eyes lock onto mine, glazed and void. Accusing. Her pale, cold hand reaches out to me. Her voice wails mournfully, dripping with venom.

“Dick... why didn’t you catch me?”

I keep walking, if you could call it that. Fear, fear, fear. Fear sent them. They aren’t real. But... unlike people afraid of heights or spiders or sharks, well... my nightmares? They are real to me. Because I saw them

happen before my very eyes. Spectors that cling to my dreams, that send me back to that night when—

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” The voice rolls around the fog, parting the blackness, revealing a glittering big top, the stands packed with people. I stop short, staring first at C.C. Haly, who wears that same ornate black, red, and gold suit, his arms spread wide.

No.

My eyes follow a pole up, up, up, up to where a platform towers over the crowd, four people perched on top.

No.

“Robin?” The Babs-corpse’s voice drifts from far away. I might be walking or standing still. Whatever the case, whether my legs move or not, the scene stays just in front of me. C.C Haly’s words boom, echoing around me. Then, Dad jumps. And I have to watch, my feet rooted in place, my arms stuck to my sides. Unmoving, unblinking.

I watch as Dad swings out over the crowd, sparkling in that uniform like a bird flying through the air. Then Mom leaps after him, a swan, an angel, alive, bright. Alive.

I choke back a sob, biting my lip hard. Because I know that I’m not seeing this because my fears decided to be merciful. No... because

this is part of that moment. That moment that will forever haunt me. The horrible tease of a perfect moment before—

Uncle Rick catches Mom, and they flip, fly, dance, and sparkle in the lights. There I am up there, ready to jump—watching. Mom swings toward me, arms outstretched, reaching—

SNAP!

I'm a statue, unable to do anything. Nothing, as Mom screams my name—reaching for the other me who kneels at the edge of the platform. Nothing, as they plummet to the ground. Nothing, even as they rush toward me, except to watch. Then—

Crack!

They're at my feet. Twisted, broken, unseeing eyes staring past me, up to where the other, younger me screams. I don't know if I screamed that night. I don't even know if this is how it really happened. All I know is that they're dead... dead...

“You should fall too.” Mom's hand latches onto my ankle. I try to shake it off, to pull away, but it doesn't work. Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick all snap up, puppets on strings, smiling at me. “Fall with us.” A dark hole opens at my feet, a mouth ready to swallow me. It goes on forever, or at least, it seems to go on and on into darkness.

I'm yanked in.

It's a strange experience, falling when I know I'm still standing, stumbling along behind corpse-Babs. But to my mind, it's real. I'm plummeting down, dropping like a stone toward the bottom. Falling, falling, falling.

'Who, Who, Who?' Mom's voice sings low and slow, haunting me as I plummet. *'Who will talk to me, Who will answer me, Who knows why I sing, who?'*

Please... please make it stop! Please! *'Who knows the reason why I sing this lullaby, Who, who, who?'*

Crack!

I lurch forward behind Corpse Babs. She's ahead of me. I can see her now, glancing back at me now and then, grinning—no, no, *frowning* in concern. I shake my head hard. Gone. The corpses are gone. I'm not falling... not falling. My feet are on the ground. The ground, walking forward. But then, it happens.

“Dick.” No.

No, no, no. I squeeze my eyes shut as tight as possible, trying to block it out and make him go away. Because I know just what he will say. Bruce... Batman. I know what he's going to say. I know, but I can't stop

it. **“You disappoint me, Dick.”** I feel his hard, steely eyes on me, boring into my skull. His voice oozes with hatred, slicing, cutting. **“You are a reckless, stupid boy.”**

I don't respond. If I answer, I know Corpse Babs will say something. I know Scarecrow because this is his fault... will eat it up. But even still... I want to argue. No, I'm not a disappointment. No, I'm not reckless... I'm not. Bruce would never say those things. He wouldn't. Because they aren't true. Not true... Bruce snarls into my ear, his footsteps heavy behind me.

“Is this how you led the Titans? Into death and destruction? Did you let them die like you let Babs die? Like you let your parents die?”

Not real, not real. Babs is alive in front of me. Alive, alive. Not real, not real.

But no... It's real, isn't it? Because this isn't just some fabrication of Bruce, this is the voice in my head speaking out loud, as tangible to me as Babs' hand wrapped around mine. Babs, who is dead. Dead, dead, dead. A walking corpse. Just like my parents.

Failed, failed, failed. Mistake.

“I trusted you. I made you, Robin. And this is the thanks I get? A failure? An arrogant little boy who can't save anyone? Who walked right into a trap?” A hand lands on my shoulder. It's Bruce's, but it isn't comforting. It isn't steady. Instead of the firm feeling of being grounded, it's a weight that pulls me down, that tries to bury me.

Failure. Unacceptable. *Weak.*

I want to say it's not true. That the real Bruce trusts me. That he cares. That he trained me himself and knows what I can do. The only problem is... He hasn't said that in a long time. The last thing he told me was that I'm unacceptable.

“I took you in. I gave you everything. I trained you. Yet here you are, dying.” Bruce's words drip with a venom that I've never heard him use. This can't be Bruce. It can't be... but no. This is Bruce. The Bruce of my nightmares. **“Pathetic little bird. How could I ever love a boy like you?”**

Something rips at my heart, then squeezes tight, suffocating.
No... No... NO!

“Dad—” The word barely squeezes past the lump in my throat.

“Dad?” Bruce's laugh rings in my head, wrong. So wrong. I shut my eyes, but he's still there, sneering. No... Not real.... Make it stop!

“You are no son of mine. Why would I want a failure for a son? You will never see the light until you learn properly. Until I can make you a son I can be proud of.” Bruce looms behind me, his shadow swallowing me completely. **“It's better this way.”**

“No...” I don't even realize I say the words out loud or even that they come out steady, firm, and unyielding, unlike my heart that scampers in my chest. “You aren't him. You aren't real. He would never say that.”

Because Bruce does love me. I know he does. He is on his way. He is going to save us. He knows I messed up—and I know he'll be mad, furious even, but at this point? I just want Bruce. Bruce, who I know loves me. Bruce, who gave me a chance to step out of his shadow.

I would say, ‘go away,’ but I have a sinking suspicion that the hallucinations won't go away. The corpse, Babs, turns to me, laughing. Part of me thinks she says, ‘hang on Robin, it's going to be alright,’ but what I really hear is,

“He’s right. You let us die. What good are you? Useless. Broken. We gave you everything, and this is how you repay us?”

Hands grab my ankles, pulling, stuffing me into the black ooze, yanking me down. Falling, sinking, drowning.

“You left us!” Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick cry, their voices distorted, slithering, snapping. “You left us all to die!”

Bruce yanks me back. I stumble, clutching onto Corpse Babs’ hand, biting back a whimper. I won’t cry. I won’t make a sound. This isn’t real. Bruce speaks again. **“Who do you think you are without me? Nothing. You’re nothing. Robin is nothing without Batman.”**

I shut my eyes tight. The world stands still. Yes, while most people see spiders, sharks, or shadows that stalk them, my greatest fears aren’t any of those things.

But to be honest? I don’t know which is worse. So I cling to a corpse and relive their deaths over and over again. I see Tony Zucco laughing, a knife in his hand, stalking toward me. Joker has Babs by the hair, holding a crowbar over her head, laughing, ready to strike.

Batman looks over me, consuming me in his shadow. **“Failure,”** he growls. **“You will never be ready to leave my side. Failure.”**

And, strangest of all, a shadow stalks me. That wouldn’t be strange, except that everything I see, I know I fear. I mean, my heart keeps pounding faster and faster. I might be hyperventilating, but who cares about that? No, what’s strange about the shadow is that it has to be something I fear. But I have never seen a lithe, black figure with glowing

golden eyes before. It moves like a specter, slipping in and out of the fog, wicked claws glinting.

I shake my head hard. It must be a mistake or some monster my subconscious remembers from a nightmare I had once upon a time when I was a tiny tike.

“Robin, we're here.” My eyes snap onto Corpse Babs. She stands in front of a yawning mouth full of wicked, sharp teeth that snap open and closed, dribbling with thick, goopy drool. I shake my head hard. We can't go in there. That isn't the way out. It can't be. “Robin... It's just a door.”

But it's not just a door. It can't be just a door. I shake my head again, pointing to the... thing. “That is *not* a door. That's a mouth.”

Corpse Babs lets out a long, creaking laugh, though I think it's supposed to be a sigh. She stands in front of me, her hands clasping mine. It's so strange seeing her like this. I mean, I can imagine what she's supposed to look like, but this looks so... real. Not like she just used some Halloween makeup or something. Like she actually died, was buried in the ground for a year or so, then clawed her way back out.

“Robin... It's a door. Please... I know you don't see it, but—”

Clawed hands grip mine. Sharpened teeth grin, no, smile at me. Dead eyes look up at me, leaving me unable to look away.

Babs. It doesn't help completely, seeing flashes of what she's supposed to look like, not this drug-induced hallucination in front of me. But for a moment, just a moment, I'm back home. I stand in the fall leaves, the wind rushing around me, teasing my hair. The sun shines bright and warm on my face, kissing my cheeks. And beside me? She stands there. Dressed as she was when I first met her. Purple sweatshirt, shorts, and tall purple and yellow striped socks pulled up to her knees. Her hair shines copper in the sun, curls spilling over her shoulders.

Unlike in this Maze of Madness, her skin's soft and healthy, a delicate blush flowering on her cheeks, golden freckles dusting her nose. Happy, healthy.

Alive.

For a moment, we stand there, soaking up the sun. For a moment, the rapid pounding of my heart is far, far away. For a moment, the fear's gone. And we're just there. Babs and I.

Together.

Then, Babs turns to me. Her eyes glow and sparkle like emeralds, meeting my own. My heart warms when she smiles. No filed teeth, no cracked, bleeding lips. Just Babs. She holds a hand out to me, free of any scuffs, bruises, or claws. Not bare bones but flesh and whole. Her voice fills my chest, light and full.

“It’s okay.”

So I accept the hand and follow Babs through the mouth.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

CAN I GO HOME NOW, UNCLE JAY?

One minute, I'm clinging to a corpse. The next? I'm stumbling through a wall of something white and wispy. The stuff sucks into my nose, shooting through every part of my body like tiny darts, pinching and tingling. One moment, my heart slams like a little drum in my chest; the next, it stops, standing frozen. One minute, my breath hitches and races. The next, it stills.

Something like calm, ha! What's calm?—washes over me. I freeze for a moment, my body a plank of wood, my mind rushing back. Back to where there isn't any darkness, oozing, or mouths waiting to eat me whole. Back to where there aren't any voices whispering down my back, laughing at me.

But... why? Now, as my heart starts again, sliding into a steady, regular rhythm and my breath passes my lips in ordinary, even huffs, I notice we're at the end of the mouth—no, *tunnel*. The walls are the same plank wood as the floor. I'm standing at the threshold, the mist dispersing, my hand clutching Babs'.

Babs... who isn't a corpse. Babs, who isn't the healthy girl that I saw in my dream, either. Babs, who's still wrapped in my cloak, has dark circles under her eyes and bruises and cuts littering her arms and legs. Her hand squeezes mine, her feet taking a step back. Back? Why back? We're out of the maze of mirrors, out of the fear toxin. Why—?

“Hello, Little Robin.” Oh. That's why. A shadow looms in the doorway, blocking out the light. His face, if you could call it that, is a long burlap sack stretched thin over his head, tied with a thick rope at his neck. The mouth stretches with his words, stitches moving and pulling with every sound. Straw bristles from under a floppy hat, a nest of makeshift hair.

His patched clothes flutter limply in the soft draft of air, a scythe glinting in his hands. My heart slams, complaining, burning. Tired. Scarecrow.

“Hey, Crane.” I try not to think about how scratchy my voice is or how much it takes for it not to shake. I'm not afraid of him. I can't be. But... why would he give me the antidote? “How's it going?”

“You didn't scream.” Scarecrow leans forward. Babs backs up behind me, though I know she isn't scared, at least not on the outside. I

can feel her eyes glaring daggers over my shoulder. Her hand presses warm and comforting against my back. “You didn’t run.”

“Well, what’s a little scare?” I grin. But even when my lips turn up, I have to fight hard not to sag. Sleep. I want to sleep. Didn’t I just get some sleep? Well, it wasn’t enough. Everything hurts. And when I say ‘hurts,’ I mean my entire body is one big, aching, pulsing bruise. My nerves jitter, frayed at the ends. I think I’m going to pass out. But Scarecrow doesn’t have to know that. “Now... are you going to let us in, or—?”

I crack my knuckles, smirking, holding back a grimace. Smirking, even though, really? I just want to close my eyes and sink to the ground. Those planks look really nice right about now.

“By all means.” Scarecrow’s voice still tickles my ear, soft and unassuming, but I can tell, even through the mask, that he’s clenching his teeth. Well, at least I can still give him a hard time.

Babs and I step into the room. Another room, though this one’s large, sporting rusted metal beams, a cracked concrete floor, and wooden walls. Just like... I blink hard, staring.

Wait a second...

There's that rope hanging from the ceiling, a loop dangling feet over the ground, just the right height for my arms if they were stretched over my head. A manacle sits dejected, bolted to the floor. Plants poke up from the cracks, peeking out their sickly green heads. Moss creeps up the walls like mold, and goons guard the doors armed to the teeth, dressed in frilly clown costumes.

And the door, the opening, we just... I blink hard. No... that doesn't make sense. How could this be where we started? How—I turn my head around, squinting at the doorway we just walked out of. The door stands to the side, metal, heavy, bolted. Scarecrow pushes it closed. It swings on oiled hinges, slamming shut with a muffled boom. The latch clicks into place, locking us out of the maze.

Right back where we started.

I can't tell if Scarecrow's smiling or frowning at us. Babs clutches my arm, her voice hissing in my ear. "Robin, this is the same—"

"I know." I turn back to the room, the hair prickling on my neck as Scarecrow looms behind me. I don't want my back to him, but there's someone else, no, several someones, in this room that I want to keep my eye on more.

Clap, clap, clap.

The clapping echoes with the drips of water overhead, the laughter joining with the windy howl. Dark... It's dark outside through the windows. I squint. But how? How long were we in there? "Welcome back, Birdy and Girly!" Joker stalks toward us, as casual as if he were greeting friends who just knocked on his door. Harley saunters beside him, her face painted back to its original ghostly white, her dark red lips spreading wide over glinting teeth. And to her side—

My breath stops in my chest. Kitten. Kitten still stands there, still dressed in her Homecoming gown, her hair still done in golden ringlets, her makeup still immaculate. Her eyes meet mine, and she clasps her hands over her heart. I can't stop the frown from twitching my lips. What? Is me looking like the walking dead really that attractive? What's wrong with girls!

"You can skedaddle now, Scare Pigeon." Joker flaps a hand at Scarecrow; his grin wide and sneering. The doctor, ugh, not like anyone would call him that now, steps around us, his masked face cocked to the side. "Come on, now. This is my revenge. My time. Shoo."

"I am not one of your hired looneys, Joker." Ever soft, ever calm. I hold my head high when Scarecrow looks back at us, staring into those dark holes where his eyes should be. I might shiver, but he doesn't have

to know that. “This was an interesting experiment. And you... Robin...”

The scythe reaches toward me. I refuse to move, even when the bright bulbs glint off the polished steel, even when it taps my chin up, the blade's edge teasing my throat.

Something like a growl rumbles from beside me, though not as deep as Batman's or mine. Babs? I don't have to force the grin. Babs just did her first Bat growl. I'm so proud.

“Robin...” Scarecrow repeats. Respect. I mean, I suppose he couldn't care less about the Joker stalking toward him, a pistol sliding into his hand, his bloodshot eyes glinting. Scarecrow is what the people of Gotham would call a ‘free agent,’ which basically means he's a cuckoo who likes to do his own little thing. Like Poison Ivy and Mr. Freeze. Not big mob bosses with gangs of followers, no. Just crazies trying to prove their own point or be left alone to wreak havoc.

Scarecrow's gloved hand reaches toward my face. And is it just me, or is it shaking? His voice might be soft and tickle my ears like tiny feathers, but I can't miss the excitement. “Robin... the Boy Without Fear.”

I would laugh out loud if it wouldn't cut my neck. So, I do the next best thing. I let my smile grow into a smirk, then stick my tongue

out. What? You all should know me by now. I'm not above antagonizing people who could kill me. I mean, really. It's my job.

But the boy without fear? Ha! Yeah *right*.

A white hand claps down on Scarecrow's shoulder, and Joker leans in on the conversation, turning his head from Scarecrow to me, his dark green eyebrows raised.

"Well, now. Am I interrupting? Yes? Because I thought you were leaving, Crane." Joker's voice deepens into a rumbling bass, rattling my heart in my chest.

The scythe drops from my neck. I try not to take a huge breath and stop the relief from flashing across my face. No such luck. Then again, I don't think either of the two noticed. Scarecrow steps out of the Joker's reach, pulling his weapon back, those stitches still stretching over his mouth. Really, just give him button eyes, and he could be a real live scarecrow, straw for brains and all. "The Boy Without Fear..." that's all he says. Then, he's gone. As if he were never here in the first place. But instead of feeling a rush of calm, I almost want him back. Because if he were here, I wouldn't be the focal point. If he were here, Joker wouldn't turn his sights to me.

“Weeell, Bird Boy, now that he’s gone—” *Wham!* I didn’t even see the blow coming. A punch slams into my gut, the air rushing out of me. I double over, wheezing. Babs screams, but her protests are drowned out in laughter. Mad, cackling laughter.

I grit my teeth. Maybe at the beginning of all this, I would’ve been able to see that coming, to dodge it. Was that the point of all this? To get me worn down enough that I can’t fight back? But no. I have to fight back.

Fight.

I launch myself at Joker.

I don’t do any fancy flips; I just fly into him, my arms wrapping around his waist, a yell ripping out of my mouth as I tackle him to the ground. Behind me, a screech rips through the building. Bare feet dash past us, the whoosh of a cape fluttering my hair. Babs. Babs, running full tilt at Harley and Kitten.

But I can’t worry about her right now. I slam a punch into Joker’s face, biting back a howl as my broken finger makes contact. It doesn’t take much for him to throw me off. I twist mid-air, my body finally kicking into gear, adrenaline spreading through my veins, slamming my heart into action. I run forward, ignoring my leg, ignoring my head. I

spring forward, my hands pushing off the ground, my legs lashing into a split kick. I fly over Joker's head, landing behind his back.

Too slow. He whips around, backhanding me with the pistol. I see spots, staggering. *Too slow, too slow. Mistakes will get you killed.* I duck under his next blow, sliding the knife out of my pocket, flipping it, and catching it in a backhanded grip. Joker laughs. "Aww! Look at the little Boy Blunder's butter knife! So cute!"

"I would have a more impressive one," I dart forward, not allowing my legs to trip, not allowing my eyes to stray from his face, "But a certain someone took my belt. Where is it, by the by? Just curious."

"Ah, ah, ah! It's a secret!" Joker whips around like a rag doll, his arms swinging wildly, dodging every one of my slashes. None of them would be lethal, of course, but painful enough to slow him down. I grit my teeth, ignoring the cold sweat slipping down my nose.

So... tired...

"Well, what about my bō staff?" I launch myself into an aerial cartwheel, my hand whipping out, wrapping around the pistol. My fingers grip, and I tug, yanking the weapon out of his hands. The gun presses cold and wrong against my fingers. Alfred taught me how to

shoot, but Batman doesn't use guns. I throw the thing away, letting it clatter and skid across the floor. "Now, that would make things more interesting."

"Poor little Wonder Boy." Joker ignores the bit about my bō staff, sadly, and instead slides a baseball bat out of his jacket. Not as deadly, you would think, but my head already throbs just at the sight of the glinting wood. "You should have died in that maze."

"No, I shouldn't have." I chatter on, almost as if we're having a conversation over a cup of coffee, or in my case, hot cocoa, I suppose, ducking out of the path of the bat. Too slow. It slams into my shoulder, not enough to knock me to the side, but enough to leave a horrible bruise. Well, bruises I can deal with later.

Besides, I have more pressing matters. Because I know now. I was never meant to die in that maze, no matter what Joker says. Because that's not his style, not his way. He can't just have his voice following someone to their grave because... because... something like ice slides through my blood, chilling me to the bone. I barely catch the baseball bat in one hand, my eyes locking on Joker. He sees it, too, the realization, and his yellow teeth glint as his smile cracks his face too wide.

“You want to kill me yourself.” The words don’t catch in my throat, but they might’s well have from the way I choke. Joker wants me to look him in the eyes when he kills me. He wants himself, that mad smile, to be the last thing I see. And he wants Batman to know it, too.

“No!”

Joker and I both jump at the voice, embarrassingly enough. I’m never going to let him forget it. We both turn to the other side of the warehouse, storehouse, whatever it is, where the girls fight. Harley has her mallet raised mid-swing, her eyebrows raised almost to her hairline, staring down at the girls below her. Babs stands there, heaving, locked in a pretty impressive ready stance, a red and purple bruise flowering on her jaw. Beside her, stamping her foot, her too-red lips puckered into a pout, is Kitten, her fists clenched to her side. Really? She looks like a toddler throwing a fit.

“No! You promised I could have him if he lived through the maze!” Babs hisses but doesn’t move. I keep my grip tight on the bat, staring right at Kitten. What in the world is her problem? I mean, really, for one, why would she even make a deal with the Joker in the first place? And two... What. In. The. World? What is her deal? I mean, I’m

pretty great and all, and I know a lot of people like Robin, Babs, *cough*, *cough*. But... why?

Kitten's expression changes as quickly as blinking, from a pouting two-year-old having a tantrum to a starry-eyed girl who blushes and coos. Something nasty surges up my throat, threatening to spill all over the floor. Ew. "After all, who wouldn't love Robin after all of that! So brave! So strong!"

Babs hisses again, her eyes narrowing. Me, on the other hand? I don't know what to do with myself. I might as well be frozen, trapped with my hands holding the baseball bat inches from my face, my eyes locked on Kitten.

That is, until Joker starts laughing. The bat slips away, clattering to the floor. Before I can move, react, or do anything, Joker's arm's around me, pulling me close, draping around my shoulder, and hugging my neck. He howls and cackles like we're best friends laughing together. He flaps his hand at Kitten. It doesn't take a detective to see her face turn three shades whiter, her eyes widening. She looks from Joker to Harley, almost pleading.

Harley just grins, letting her mallet rest on her shoulder. I squirm, trying to get out from under the Joker's arm, but he pulls me in tight with

inhuman strength; seriously, how can this guy be human?—A hand comes up, grabbing my face and pinching my cheeks. I freeze, my eyes locking with Babs. She looks ready to lunge forward, her arms shaking, her eyes darting around the room.

Until they lock on mine. My stomach sinks at the look on her face. Exhaustion weighs down her eyes. Panic. Fear. Even though her gas mask still settles over her mouth and nose, even though Scarecrow is long gone. But then, it doesn't take fear gas for someone to be afraid.

My heart aches in my chest. I want to be over there with her, or even better, be away from this place entirely, safe and sound at the Manor, or her apartment, cuddling up in a blanket, a bucket of popcorn between us, clicking on a silly movie that has no point other than to make us laugh. *Babs... I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Joker ends his bout of laughter, shaking my head in his grip. The world swims in front of my eyes, dark spots dancing in and out like annoying little flies.

“You won't want him after this, Kitty-Kat.” Joker croons, almost sympathetic, but not quite. This is the Joker we're talking about here.

“Harls?”

“Got it, Puddin’!” Harley snatches Kitten’s arm, winking at the girl. “Come on, tha, Little Kitty-Kat! Mistah Jay has his own way of doin’ things!”

Kitten kicks and screams and claws, massive tears rolling down her face. She hits Harley again and again, but she might as well be a child for the way Harley drags her, skipping toward the door. My heart stops, my stomach plummeting like someone just dropped a boulder onto it. As much as Kitten creeps me out—and started this whole thing in the first place—I don’t want anything to happen to her.

“Let her go!” And apparently, neither does Babs. She lunges forward, grabbing the hem of Kitten’s dress, tugging, pulling. I thrash in Joker’s grip, but his hand slips from my cheeks to my neck, gripping, squeezing, his thumb pressing down against my windpipe. I choke, gasping, trying to suck in air.

No, no, no!

“Get lost, Red!” Harley chirps, tugging Kitten hard, sending Babs headlong into a pair of waiting goons. Babs yells and hisses when they grab her, kicking and bucking, fighting like a cat cornered. Harley slips out with Kitten, disappearing through the broken-down door to the outside. Outside... we need to get out!

I wheeze against the pressure on my neck, my hands snatching onto Joker's fingers, pulling, yanking. *Out, out, out! I need to get Babs and Kitten out! Out and safe.* There's the click of metal on metal, and I freeze. Babs is chained to the floor again, frozen between two guns, one pressed to her forehead, the other to the back of her head.

“Stop fighting back—” The Joker's voice drips venom as he chirps happily into my ear. Too cheerful. It's not right, “Or we'll shoot Gordon Jr, just like I shot her Mommy Pie. What'll it be, Boy Wonder?”

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

APPARENTLY, I'M A PIÑATA NOW

The whole world stands still. It's almost like the entire room took a breath and held it. The water stops dripping, the wind stops howling, and the planks stop creaking. My heart freezes in my chest, my eyes locking onto Babs. Babs, who sits there, stoic in the face of a gun pressed against her forehead and the back of her head. Babs, who stares back at me and mouths, *'Do worry about me. Keep fighting.'*

Babs...

A weight crashes into my chest, knocking out the rest of the air in my lungs. I stop fighting against the Joker's chokehold. Because... I can't do it. I can't keep fighting, even if she tells me to. Because I can't let her get hurt.

No matter how I leap forward or what move I try to make, I wouldn't be able to reach her in time. And I can't let her die. Safe... I have to keep her safe. Safe and sound.

Alive.

Joker laughs when I stop fighting back, his fingers digging into my neck and biting my skin. He presses harder, cutting off my air, but I

don't wheeze. I don't even bother thinking about the burning in my lungs or the fact that my head's floating away. I don't even look at him. I look at Babs, my eyes meeting hers, and hold their gaze, the words on the tip of my tongue.

What words, you might ask? What would Robin, the hero, want to tell a girl when he's about to die? Well... I want to tell her why more than anything. Why I'm doing this. Why am I letting this happen? Because, yeah. I could get out if I wanted to. But I won't.

It's because I'm a hero, sure. I would do this for anyone, old or young, rich or poor, guy or girl. I would even dare to say I would do this to save another villain's life. Or at least, I would hope so. Because this is what a hero would do. Villains expect it. That's why they take hostages in the first place.

But...

But it's more than that, isn't it? Because Babs isn't just any hostage or damsel in distress. She's not just a civilian off the street or even a girl I met a couple—how long has it been?—days ago. She's so much more. Not to Robin, no. Because Robin just met her.

'I'm Dick Grayson.'

Even as Joker drags me over to where the rope still hangs from the ceiling, waiting, I want to say it. I want to say it so badly I almost mouth the words. They sit there, on the tip of my tongue, waiting, begging. But I can't. I can't because even if I die here, Batman's still alive. And I can't do that to Bruce.

My feet scrape across the concrete, the bumps and catches hurting my broken leg, jarring the bone, and rattling my ankles. But who ever cared about pain? Pain's overrated.

'I'm Dick Grayson. And I know you.'

I keep my eyes trained on Babs, locked on her wet green eyes. If she could see my eyes, I know she would know. She would understand. She would still beg me to stop, to fight back. But I can't do that, can I? Even now, as I look on, she shakes behind the gun, but not out of fear for herself. No. She's not like that, I know. No, the wetness that sparkles in the fluorescents, dripping down her cheeks, falling like crystals from her face aren't for her. *'Fight back!'* She mouths again, her fists trembling.

'Fight, Robin! I'll be fine!'

Then she speaks out loud. "Let him go, Joker. Let him go now!" Her voice doesn't shake. In fact, it fills the room, full and commanding.

“Hm, hm, hm. I don’t think so.” Joker shakes me, my neck bobbing back and forth like a bobblehead. Because I don’t fight back. I can’t. I can’t let them hurt her. “See, little Birdy Boy needs to be taught a whittle whesson, Gordon Jr. I’m sure you, of all people, would understand.”

I ignore his sliding voice, the overwhelming hammering in my head that spells out ‘danger’ over and over again. I keep my eyes on Babs, and she keeps her eyes on mine.

‘Please.’

But that isn’t a plea I can answer. Not out loud or with my lips, because she can’t know why not really. I’m sure she thinks I’m just a dumb, stubborn hero. And maybe I am. Because I won’t let him hurt her. Joker yanks my arms over my head. He loops them into the rope, the fibers tightening around my wrists, biting, gnashing at my skin. But I don’t care. I smile at Babs, and in my head, I picture her safe and sound with her dad in their apartment. Of course, I’m not in the picture, settling down with them in a blanket, but at least she’s there. Away from here. Alive.

Safe.

And with my eyes, which she can't see, I say the words she won't ever know. She can't know unless Bruce tells her himself one day after I'm gone: *'I'm Dick Grayson. And you're my best friend.'*

CRACK!

I didn't even notice the crowbar flashing in the light. I didn't even see the Joker's maniac grin as he raised it over his head. Or the whoosh it made as it swung down. All I know is pain. Pain that cracks through me like lightning. Pain that sends my vision swirling. Or maybe that's just me swinging around from the rope? I don't know. All I know is the agony flowering in my side, seizing my chest, choking me.

Laughter. Screams. The howl of the wind. It doesn't stop. But I won't ask it to stop, either. I'm Robin, Batman's partner. And we beg for nothing for ourselves. It's my job, after all, and I don't regret a second of it.

CRACK!

My face whips to the side, something wet and sticky dripping from my nose and onto the floor. But I don't think about that. I can't. Instead, I imagine Babs' face, just like that hallucination from the fear gas. Not the corpse, but the full, healthy Babs that smiles at me, cast in

the golden glow of sunlight. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I couldn't save you, Babs.*

CRACK!

Something breaks in my chest, sending a rush of cutting air out of my mouth. The light's too bright, the world too blurred. I close my eyes. I can see her clearer now, standing beside me, steady, unmoving. Her hand reaches toward mine, warm and soft. *I'm sorry I got us into this mess.*

CRACK!

This is all my fault. Mine, for being a stupid child. Mine, for trying to spite Bruce. And yeah, that's what I was trying to do. There I was, thinking he was being the jerk, that he was the one doing all the wrong when I went behind his back. Deliberately... when I could have just asked him.

I'm sorry.

CRACK!

My head flops on my chest, sagging. It feels good pressed there, not moving, not swinging. Maybe I can just stay like this forever. But when did I ever have that kind of luck? Hands grab it, crushing it, forcing my eyes open. Open to meet a mad smile. Open to see the Joker standing in front of me, painted red lips spreading too wide. "Sing for me, Little

Bird!” Sing... no, thank you. I don’t want to sing. He lets my face drop, pulling back the crowbar. Huh... I really am a piñata. That’s kinda funny. “I’ve always loved your singing!”

CRACK!

I see three Jokers, all grinning, all laughing. The room whirls around me like I’m on a merry-go-round run by an overenthusiastic giant. Hot, hot, hot. Everything’s hot. It smothers me, stealing my breath and sending sweat dripping down my forehead. But... I thought everything was cold here? I spit something red and thick out of my mouth... and smile. It’s not a very good smile, but I lift my eyes to Joker’s and grin. Because to him, ‘singing’ is...well... let’s just say that screams are his kind of music. And I will not be making music today. He can’t make me.

“You are so boring, Boy Blunder.” Joker hums, circling me as I swing. He taps his crowbar into the palm of his hand. *Tap... tap... tap...* “No singing, no jokes? And here I thought you would go out in a blaze of glory!”

“That’s Firefly’s thing, Joker.” I hate how my voice shakes, warbling as if I’m gurgling water or something, but I don’t drop my smile. I let my eyes go from him to Babs. Babs, whose cheeks are streaked a blotchy red from crying. Babs, who looks like she’s ready to

make a move, her fists shaking, her eyes locked onto the goon with the gun in front of her. I shake my head, or at least try to shake my head at her. Really, it's more like my head bobs like a rag doll's, limp and floppy. Huh... who knew you needed bones?

“There he is.” Hands grab the front of my suit, stopping the swinging but not the swirling in my head. Joker traces the curled edge of the crowbar along the side of my face, only to slam upwards when he reaches my chin. I choke, gasping. Nothing I can do about that. “There's my Bird Blunder!”

I'm sorry...

“You know, I never really knew why Batsy loved you so much.” My head slams back down. The world skews like someone's covering everything in Jell-O. A green and purple blob stands in front of me... Joker... yeah... “Now I know why. You're Batman Jr!” Joker paces in front of me, twirling the crowbar like it's some kind of sword. I'm so glad it's not. Besides, who in their right mind would give the Clown Prince of Crime a sword?

Then again... we're all mad here, aren't we?

“Always rescuing people, always making the heroic sacrifice!” Joker sniffs, pausing to run a hand under his eye before breaking into a

long, loud cackle, slapping his leg. I blink my eyes hard, trying to keep him in focus. Big mistake. Joker stops laughing abruptly, grabbing my uniform front again. The metal weapon presses against my temple, oddly cool and comforting against my pounding head.

Yellow teeth fill my vision, clacking when he speaks. His voice fills my head, trying to block out any other sound. “Only you are more fun to play with, Baby Bird. Such a pity.”

CRACK!

“Now, what do you think will hurt worse, Birdy Boy? A hit to the head—”

Crack! I see stars—wait, are those stars or dots or fireflies? I don’t know anymore. My head splits in half, maybe?—and something warm slides down the side of my face. Something slick and thick.

“Or a whacky-do to the stomach?”

Crack! Something hard and horrible slams into my gut, just below my ribs. If I had lunch, you know, sometime during all this, I would’ve thrown it up. So I close my eyes again, shutting out those teeth, a smile that isn’t really a smile. I mean, how can a smile that grows when others are in pain actually be a smile? I try to block out that mad cackle, the sound that rakes my ears like nails on a chalkboard.

Becasue Joker doesn't matter, does he? He might think all this is about him, his revenge on me. About proving a point to Batman and getting his attention. But really? Joker. Doesn't. Matter. Instead, I see her there. I see her, with her orange hair bedraggled and tangled. I see her with her blotchy face and blazing green eyes. I see her ready to make a break toward me, fists clenched, arms and legs ready to spring into action.

I'm sorry, Bruce.

Why Bruce? Because I went behind his back. Because I was too late, Babs got taken. But more than that... I can't protect her. Not anymore. Because that's what's most important, isn't it? That she stays alive. But... if I'm gone? If I die here? Who's to stop the Joker from hurting her, too?

And I swore... I promised I would protect the innocent... just like her. I can't let her die like her mom did. I swore to Bruce.

I promised... I promised I would get her out of here alive.

CRACK!

The world dissolves into something strange. A painting of pain. A myriad of misery. Wow... maybe I should be a poet. They should put, 'He died with poetic style' on my grave. My grave... right next to

theirs... under that old oak tree. At least... if I die... I'll be with them again.

In my mind's eye, I see the room around me, cold and damp. I see the blows coming toward me before they land, a blur of glinting metal in the glaring lights overhead. And I feel every one of them. My head, my arms, my chest, my legs. They pulse, they throb. They crack under the hard, cold metal. I swing limp and free, a piñata to be battered until I'm broken.

I'm sorry, Bruce.

I know he can't hear me, that no one can hear me, because I don't make a sound, only grunts when the metal slams against bone. Because I won't cry out. I won't whimper in front of the Joker. I refuse. But somehow, I think Bruce'll know. Or at least, I hope he'll know. Until I can tell him myself in a better place. In a safe place... with them.

So I keep going.

I imagine him standing next to me. Not watching indifferently, oh no, because I know he cares. I know he wouldn't stand by and let this happen to me, to either of us. So instead, I imagine him behind a wall, trying with all his might to get in. Just like Babs, I can see the hurt in his eyes, the warmth, the pain. The look he gives me when I wake up from a

night terror, and he's there—waiting to wrap me in his arms. Now that I think about it... It hasn't been as long as I thought since he hugged me. It's so real that I almost fool myself into thinking he is here.

CRACK!

So I talk to him. I have to say the words to somebody before I go. And I'm not about to give the Joker the satisfaction. Never. I'm not going to die a coward. *I'm sorry, Bruce. I wasn't ready.*

CRACK! Something inside my chest breaks again, slicing, poking. I don't want to die. But then again, when it comes down to it, who really does? Besides... everyone dies eventually.

I wasn't ready to go off by myself here. I know that now.

CRACK! More red runs out of my nose, trickling down the side of my mouth and tickling my chin. If I'm able to get this out, though? Maybe dying won't hurt as much. Maybe... if Babs is safe...

I might be a leader in Jump with the Team, but I'm not ready yet. Not here. Not in Gotham. You're still Gotham's protector. I'm your partner. I'm not ready. Yet. But—

CRACK!

But that 'crack' wasn't my bones. Something smashes around me, crashing, shattering. The clink of a thousand diamonds on stone rings in

my ears. A rush of wind tosses me from side to side, sending cool air rushing over my burning skin, numbing the pain.

The world around me swirls, dark and light, screams and laughter. Gunshots. The crack of a whip. The sharp *ting* of metal on metal. The cry of a girl.

The girl screams again. *BABS!* My eyes snap open. I have to blink hard for a moment. It doesn't seem real. Maybe I'm imagining things, hallucinating from the agony. But... two dark shapes move through the room in a deadly dance. One, dark and lithe, dressed in a slick body suit, cowl ending in pointed cat's ears, glinting goggles covering her eyes. Claws swipe, a whip cracks. But that doesn't make any sense. I must be hallucinating. Dreaming. Why would Catwoman be here?

The other figure stands above the rest, huge, black. White eyes pin down his prey, mighty fists slamming down with a vengeance. No... not vengeance. A cape billows out behind him, his perfectly sculpted jaw clenched into a deepening frown, a symbol blazed into his chest, a dark shape with two wings spread wide.

No... not vengeance.

Justice.

Batman! Suddenly, all the pain's gone. Suddenly, I'm not going to die anymore. Suddenly, everything's right with the world. Maybe a sob escapes my lips, maybe a laugh. Maybe both. But for a moment? I'm okay. Everything's okay. Until I see him. Because Catwoman and Batman aren't fighting the Joker. They're thrashing the goons, who seem above average in the fighting department, brandishing metal bats with deadly accuracy. And behind them...

I don't even think about my chest, chock full of broken ribs. I don't think about my broken leg or pounding head. I flip up, latch onto the rope with my bare toes, and yank down. I couldn't care less about hitting the ground with a grinding crunch. I'm on my feet, one foot at a time, until I'm stumbling forward, a puppet on broken strings.

I grit my teeth, ignoring the molten lava running through my chest, burning, pushing the air out of my lungs, and closing my throat. Because behind Batman and Catwoman, making a break for that broken-down door is the Joker.

But not just the Joker, oh no, because it's never that simple, is it? No. I force my legs into a stumbling run because of what the Joker carries. Because slung over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes, kicking, squirming, screaming bloody murder, giving him the fight for his life?

Is Babs.

Something rips out of my throat, a growl so feral, so savage, I scare myself. But I can't think about that. Babs... he has Babs. He's getting away with Babs! *Move, move, move! Move, Grayson!*

My heart slams in my chest, a war drum pounded by frantic hands. Adrenaline rushes through my veins like fire, urging me forward, onward—but my body has other plans. One step and my knees give. One gasp, and I'm back on the ground. My chin hits hard, my teeth cracking against each other. But I don't care.

“BABS!” The name rips from my scratching throat before I can stop it. I don't care if I sound like Dick Grayson because her head lifts, and her eyes lock onto mine, wide and round. Terrified.

Her mouth opens to scream, to say something. But she never gets the chance. With a laugh and a mocking bow, Joker's gone. Gone, gone, gone. At first, I don't think Batman or Catwoman noticed. If they did, why would they let it happen? Why don't they do something?

But then something thuds onto the ground beside me, no, not just one. Two somethings. The goons, finally drooling, eyes closed, snoring on the concrete. Knocked out cold and hard. A shadow looms over me, washing over me, and a deep voice fills the room.

“Catwoman, track the Joker, but do not engage. Not when he has the girl.”

“On it, Handsome,” the other voice purrs, but it doesn’t take an expert to hear the tight edge of the words. Soft feet tread past me, then pause. “Oh—and... take care of Baby Bird.”

Then, with a scamper and the slightest crack of a whip, she’s gone. Gone... leaving me alone with the Bat.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BATMAN ADMITS HE'S WRONG, WELL, SORT OF

I thought we'd stand there for a moment. Well, okay, I stay on the floor, collapsed KOed, and him standing over me, watching in typical Batman fashion. I thought there'd be an awkward silence, a long moment where that coldness stayed between us, keeping that wall that he—that I—built up. I thought that Batman wouldn't say a thing. Maybe scoop me up, carry me back to the Batmobile, and leave me in the car while he goes after Babs and... Catwoman? When did that happen, by the way? I mean, I know she's head over paws for him, but I never thought B would give her the time of day. How long were we stuck in that maze?

But no.

“**Robin—**” I would jump, but I think that would really, really hurt. So instead, I press my cheek against the cement, trying not to move. This has to be a dream because Batman's voice isn't growling, scolding, or even really... Batman. It's Bruce. Bruce...

Something, no, *someone* kneels beside me. Strong hands grab my arms, but they don't hurt or bite. Strong but gentle. Dangerous but caring. Bruce... Something like a sob squeezes out of my mouth. It hurts my

chest, the heaving, the shaking, but I can't stop it. Arms wrap around me, muscular, deadly, but to me? They are the safest place I could ever be. And yeah, I know it's sappy. But give me a break. You get beaten to a pulp, starved, thirsty, and bleeding, and tell me that you'd rather be anywhere else. I dare you.

My cheek presses against a thick, armored chest, the cool metal feeling like ice-cold water against my blazing cheek, calming my pounding head. One look up is all I need. Bruce, and yes, it's Bruce, not Batman, who looks down at me. The Bruce that I thought was blocked from me. The Bruce who sits down and talks to me about girls. Bruce... who doesn't hate me. Bruce... hidden behind the cowl, his lips pressed not into a deep frown, but a frown you get when your eyebrows pull up and your eyes water. So... sad, then.

He's here... He came for me... I relax in his arms, trying to fight off another sob. It doesn't work. "B-B?" I hate how my voice shakes; I hate how small I feel, clasped in his arms, cradled like a baby. I mean, Batman had to save me. I broke my rule. I should be angry. I should get up and tell him I can still fight. But at this point? I don't think I care.

"It's me, Chum." I blink up at him, cocking my head. A breach in protocol. Not that he used my actual name, but he used my nickname.

You know, I never realized just how on the nose that name is. I really do feel like fishbait right about now. But that doesn't matter. Because when he uses that name? I might as well be a puddle on the ground. A sobbing, snotty mess. So much for my dignity. My shoulders shake, jarring every cracked, creaking bone in my body. The pressure builds in my eyes until I can't hold it in anymore. It hurts to hold it in, anyway.

Robin doesn't cry... but Dick Grayson does. And this isn't Batman; it's Bruce.

"I-I'm s-so sorry." The words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them. They shake and tremble like little leaves fluttering in the autumn air, but I don't care. There's more I want to say. Things like, I'm sorry I let it happen. I'm sorry I went behind your back. I'm sorry I couldn't save her... her...

Babs! The thought hits me like a boatload of bricks. Joker has Babs, and we're just sitting here! *Come on, move, Grayson! Get up!* I try to squirm and wiggle free of Bruce's hold, but no such luck.

"**Chum...**" The arms pull me in closer, his voice rumbling against my ear. You know, he dresses like a bat, but sometimes I think he's more like a lion. He roars—he fights—but he also purrs sometimes. No wonder Catwoman likes him. I close my eyes, the tears squeezing

out, burning, tickling as they track down the sides of my face, probably drawing lines through the thick, sticky red stuff drying on my cheeks.

I probably look more like a corpse now than when I looked in that mirror.

The arms around me shift. There's a small click, and something's pulled out from a pouch below me. His utility belt. I can't help the groan that slips out of my lips when something cool, soft, and wet presses gently against my face, wiping the sticky away. I close my eyes, letting Bruce carefully scrub the blood, sweat, tears, makeup, and grime off my face. Yeah... I'm going to need a nice, long, steaming hot shower after this is all said and done.

But then, Bruce surprises me. **“Chum... you don't have to apologize. We were both wrong... and both right.”**

I crack an eye open, trying my best to read the face that looms over mine. Behind the cowl's white eyes, I can imagine the hard, steely gray eyes softening. I open my mouth to say something. I mean, both wrong and both right? What's that supposed to mean? Typical Bruce. But Batman... Bruce... keeps going. I want to get on him for wasting time, I mean, Babs' life is in danger, but I know he won't leave me like this, no matter what I say. Because he cares.

Bruce cares for me.

“You aren’t ready.” The words hit me like another ton of bricks. I know I just admitted that myself, but it still aches in my chest and stews in my stomach. I want to squirm, to snap that this is his idea of an apology? Is that even what this is? But he’s not done yet. **“You aren’t ready... but you aren’t a kid anymore, either, Robin.”**

I freeze, watching him as he finishes wiping the blood away with the cloth. He sets it back into his belt and pulls out something else, a small syringe. My stomach plummets like a rock, hitting my toes. Wait, since I’m lying down... how does that work? You know what? Not important. Because he can’t knock me out. Babs’ still in trouble!

“I should have respected that. I shouldn’t have—” Batman, Bruce, trails off. His hand finds my face, gloved, yes. Huge? Absolutely. But it doesn’t hurt. It soothes, it protects. **“I’m sorry.”**

I blink at him. Then I blink again. Say... say what now? Everyone, stop what they’re doing. Batman, the genuine Batman, just apologized. Sort of. I mean, he did say I was wrong, too, but at this point? I’ll take it. Baby steps.

Besides, it’s not like he’s wrong. We both messed it all up. Me, pulling a stupid, and Bruce... well, to be honest, just being Bruce.

Because I wasn't ready for Gotham on my own, at least not in the way I thought. But... but he thinks that... is that his way of saying that I can do more than he thought? Or that he already knew that all along and was just holding me back? But... why?

“I am so proud of you, Chum.” The whirling in my head screeches to a stop, every thought slamming into each other in a domino effect. What? What did he just say? I stare at Bruce. Bruce, whose lips turn up into the smallest of sad smiles. Bruce, who holds me tight and safe. But... wait, what? **“You kept you and Miss Gordon alive. You protected her... You survived all on your own against the Joker. That is no small accomplishment.”** A dry, humorless chuckle escapes his lips. **“But next time... try to keep you both unharmed, alright? No broken bones?”**

“No promises.” I match his smile. Proud of me... proud... I mean, yeah, he's right. I could've taken better care of myself, or you know, not gotten us in this mess at all, but circumstances being what they are? Alive and in one piece. That's all I could ask for, and Bruce knows it.

Proud of me... I kept us alive. I made a mistake, but we're both alive. And he sees that. Slowly, the gaping hole in my heart stitches itself back together, slowly, achingly, but steadily.

But the needle gets closer to my skin. I freeze, snapping my hand forward, which hurts, by the way, thank you very much, and grab his hand, my eyes round under my mask. I understand that we can't sit here spilling our guts all night, that he can't fix all my bones right here and now, but he can't put me out. Not with Babs—

“You can't drug me.” I don't beg. Robin doesn't beg. But I would be lying if I said my voice doesn't shake. I don't shake my head, but I might's well have. “Batman... she needs me.”

“**I know.**” Bruce slowly slips his hand out of my grip, his voice still soft, still rumbling. The needle gets closer to the crook of my arm, hovering, barely brushing my skin. “**And I know you need this. But promise me... promise me you won't fight.**” The white eyes of the cowl narrow. “**You can't injure yourself more. Do you understand me?**”

I swallow hard. Injure myself more? Not fight? But then why... oh. Just to be there, I guess. Just to show her I'm still alive and kicking. Not giving the Joker what he deserves, which is really a good, solid

thrashing, but watching him get it anyway. But... I guess I couldn't do that, even if I wanted to.

So I nod slowly. "Understood, B-Man." I smile at him. A real smile. And even though it hurts, it kicks the rocks out of my stomach and off my heart. Now, if only a smile could mend broken bones, I'd be all set.

Bruce slides the needle into my arm so quickly and smoothly that I don't even feel the pinch. Something cool begins to race through my bloodstream, rushing through my veins, spreading a blanket over every ache and pain. The world warps, and for a moment, I worry that Bruce lied to me. But then, everything's sharper, clearer. The pain's gone, only a phantom ache in the back of my head.

Ah... sweet relief.

I sit up, even though my bones still creak in my chest, flexing my fingers and toes. They work. Well, they work subpar, but they still work and don't hurt too badly. What kind of painkiller is this? It can't be adrenaline because Bruce never lets me near the stuff, but our painkillers aren't this good. "Whoa... is that stuff new?"

"No. A gift from Allen." Batman slides out from under me, his hands catching my elbows, helping me up to my feet. They shake, but I

don't fall. And yes, he's Batman now, frown back on, turning down his face. He lets go of my elbows and pulls something from behind his back, something that was tucked into his utility belt.

My utility belt. I can't help the big, fat, dumb grin that cracks my face as I snatch it, clipping it around my waist. A sigh slips out in a long rush. Ah, I never want to take it off again. Now, if only I had my boots and gloves, I'd be— Batman produces a pair of black boots with shining green plate armor and thick gloves fitted with a holo screen function.

Mine. Oh man, leather and armor plating have never looked so good.

"Typical B-man, thinking of everything." I wiggle my eyebrows at him, letting a small, less painful laugh slide out of my lips. It feels so good to slip them on again, slide my scuffed, abused toes into the boots' soft casing, and wiggle my fingers, broken one and all, into the gloves. Only, just in case, I still tug off Bab's makeshift wrapping and wind it back on on the outside, strapping my broken finger between its neighbors.

"Robin." I missed that voice, that tone he uses. See, he says my name in different ways. This time, with him striding toward the door, I know he means it's time to get to business.

I pull my bō staff out of my belt. The click as it extends into that full, glistening silver pole is enough to make some pressure build back up behind my masked eyes. *Oh... I missed you...* What? I love my bō staff, okay? And you would too if you only had rope and a knife and a bunch of darts—speaking of which—

I quickly empty my pockets, shedding all the makeshift gear I never want to see again. *Hasta la pasta*, rope, knife, and darts! Yes, I butchered the Spanish, and no, I am not ashamed, thank you very much.

Without another glance at the room, I leap forward after Batman. Now, you might be thinking, bad Batman! You should've knocked that dumb kid out and gotten him to a hospital. And sure, yeah, he probably should've. But he knows I would never forgive him if he did. Or that I would fight back against him, drugging me, or recover from the drug faster and go anyway, without any painkillers. Besides, if Allen made this concoction, it is probably doing more than soothing my aches and pains. And yes, by Allen, I mean Uncle Barry, aka the Flash, aka one of the Justice League members, aka Kid Flash's mentor.

Ooo.. yeah, I don't think the Teen Titans will be very forgiving when they hear about this. Try a thousand 'get the better soon's and 'dude, do you need anything?' texts.

And probably Starfire tracking me down to give me some random alien food or something. Really, I can never know with my team.

But I can worry about that later. Right now? I walk after Batman. And yes, I walk. What do you take me for? I'm not stupid enough to run. I *walk*, using my bō staff like a walking stick, trying to put the least amount of pressure on, well, everything. I mean, really, I, of all people, know that painkillers do literally nothing to help with injuries.

Batman does run, though. Not too fast that he slips out of sight, but fast enough. I keep my eyes locked on his shadowy, caped form dashing in and out of the lights around us. I was right, sort of. We're on Amusement Mile, walking along the coastline, away from a run-down warehouse. But that really begs the question—where does the rest of the maze go? Are there just a bunch of underground tunnels and rooms that Batman doesn't know about? And if there are, how did the Joker find them?

And again... who helped him?

The sea breeze fills my lungs, salty but clear for once, blowing in from the east. The moon glistens silver on the calm waves lapping the pier, glinting off the windows of the Aquarium. All still stands quiet out here, with not a mad clown or a cat in sight. Something dings at my wrist,

almost making me jump. Well, okay, maybe I jump a little. I mean, my nerves are still shot over here. Give me a break! But I don't really mind. I mean, it feels like it's been a lifetime since my holos flashed on my glove with a small box indicating an incoming call. I pause for a moment, tapping my glove, pulling up the small holo screen, the blue light soft in the night sky, painting the asphalt blue under me. *'Catwoman to Bat and Bird.'* Okay, since when did she get a comm? Since when did she get so chummy with the Dynamic Duo? I did not okay with this. How long have I been gone? Please, please, please don't tell me B's dating a cat burglar now.

I don't think I can handle that right now.

'What is it, Catwoman?' Batman still dashes on ahead of me, not pausing while his voice rumbles through the speaker. I shake myself, not that hard, of course, and follow him, keeping one ear trained on the comms.

'He took the Gordon girl to Ace Chemicals.'

My blood turns to ice, freezing and burning at the same time, pain killer or not. My mind whirls, my steps faltering. Ace Chemicals? I mean, it is another run-down, abandoned building. Typical villain move. But... *Ace Chemicals?*

'Watch him.' Batman's growl is so loud I almost expect him to be at my shoulder instead of yards ahead of me. I stumble forward faster. Still not running, but faster. No, no, no. No... I can't lose Babs, not now... not now... *'Don't let him out of your sight, Catwoman. Engage if he gets impatient. We are en route.'*

'Understood.'

Move! Faster, Grayson! Faster! I pick up speed enough to have some pain peek its head through the illusion of the painkiller prodding at my legs, poking my lungs. I ignore it. I won't hurt myself anymore. Babs would never forgive me if I did, and Bruce would probably ground me for life. Is he going to, anyway?—But I won't slow down. I can't. Ace Chemicals is famous. And not in the 'all the world loves them and uses their product' kind of way. More like... well, more like the Arkham kind of famous. You know, famous for all the wrong reasons. Accidents, injuries, deaths, poisoning, they built such a reputation that the City Council finally shut them down. I don't know if it's just the Gotham branch that was that bad, but one thing's certain.

The city forced the company to disperse, but they never took care of the building or cleaned up the vats of chemicals inside. And if there's one thing that Joker loves... It's dangerous and deadly chemicals.

“**Robin.**” I almost jump out of my skin. It must be my shot nerves and the maelstrom that’s my head because I didn’t even notice the dark figure standing next to a sleek black car. I blink at Batman, then the Batmobile for a moment. I nod quickly.

Come on, Grayson, get a grip! “Coming.” Okay, I know, I know things are dire, but I can’t help that I chirp the word or that it feels so good to slip into my seat in the Batmobile, strapping myself into the plush seat, letting my head rest against the cushion. For a moment, my chest seizes, thinking about the roller coaster, but that roaring engine can’t be anything but the Batmobile.

And, before I know it, we’re blazing across Amusement Mile, speeding past the roads, past the bridges, and into the sewer exit that also doubles as our entrance to the tunnels. I almost miss the open sky, the free air. For a split second, my chest tightens again at the sight of the round tunnel pressing in on me, those lights flashing past.

But the lights aren’t green and purple. They’re that soft blue. And this tunnel isn’t echoing with laughter and a sliding voice; the only sound the growl of the engine, the screech of the tires, and the rush of air conditioning that brushes my face.

We don't speak. I mean, you'd think it would be a perfect time, right? But no. That topic's benched, just like everything else. Everything else, that is, except the mission. The mission where Bruce and Catwoman kick Joker's sorry butt while Babs and I watch. Because Babs is going to be okay. She will be.

Because I can't, I *won't* let anything happen to her.

I promised.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

YOU SHOULD KNOW ME BETTER THAN THAT

I don't know how long it took to get to Ace Chemicals. No, actually, I do. Too long. Batman's literally blazing through the tunnels, not taking his eyes off the underground road stretching ahead, but to me? Well, every little second could mean life and death for Babs. Because it isn't just some crook off the streets who has her. I'm sure she could handle that, especially after what she did to those goons.

But the Joker? I can't stop my mind from flashing to everything that could be happening. What if he sprays her with Joker Venom? What if he beats her with a crowbar? What if... I squeeze my eyes tight, trying to block the image that burns into my eyelids. The image of Joker pulling out a gun, just a simple pistol, and shooting Babs.

Just like he shot her mom.

I always thought guns were boring and lame. Only the laziest villains use guns. But there's something about how Babs said, 'He shot her.' That whirls around in my head. Like it was quick and easy. Fast. Without batting an eye, like they don't even matter. Just like Bruce's parents...

I swallow, the motion catching on the lump in my throat. I bite my tongue so hard I think I might just bite it off. I don't think Batman will appreciate backseat driving. We may have apologized, but that doesn't mean I'm not still in the dog house over here. Besides, who would ever dare be Batman's backseat driver? Try being cooked to medium rare with his famous bat glare. Hey, that rhymed.

But... seriously... I promised her we would get out safe and sound. I promised Babs that we would make it. And sure, Catwoman's there, watching. Seriously, when did that happen? And now and then, her voice fills the Batmobile, a whispered hiss saying the same thing: Joker still hasn't made a move. He and Babs are still inside.

Waiting.

It always has to be a trap, doesn't it?

I lean back into the seat, my eyes tracking the blue blur overhead, the tunnel's lights blending into one solid line. *Deep breath, in... out...*

'Still nothing.' Catwoman's voice crackles over the comm, soft and purring. *'Still standing by. ETA?'*

"Five minutes." I can feel Batman's eyes on me for a split second as we screech around a corner, burning a hole in my skull and

reading every little twitch of my face. He knows. He understands. And I'm glad. Because if he made me stay behind or in the car? Well...

I shut my eyes against the flashing lights, taping a finger against my leg. *Hang on, Babs. Five minutes. Almost there.*

When we finally pull up to a decrepit, run-down chemical plant, precisely five minutes later, might I add, I want nothing more than to jump out of the Batmobile and run in, birdarangs at the ready. But a) that would really, really hurt. And b) well, B would ground me for life.

So I slide out of the car as carefully as I can, which stinks because Batman leaps out, his cape billowing out around him. Oh... His cape. I miss mine. But maybe it is helping Babs stay safe? Maybe? A familiar cracking jolt travels up and down my legs when my feet hit the ground. I bite back a groan. Painkillers are nice and all... until they start to wear off.

But that's not important.

Ace Chemicals stretches out in front of us, three huge blocky buildings stained a greasy brown and splattered white from time and seagull droppings, all connected by a run-down, overgrown, beat-up parking lot. The lights flicker and fizz overhead, sparks falling like rain, popping when they reach the toxic greenish smog that hangs over the

ground. I wrinkle my nose, trying to block out the smell that hangs over this place. Sewage, rotting fruit, sweaty locker room, and all things nasty. “Whew,” I keep my voice low as I hurry behind Batman, trying, and mostly failing, to keep my boots from catching on the smashed asphalt, “This smells worse than Killer Croc’s breath.”

Batman doesn't answer, but really? I don't mind. Because instead of that horrible cold between us, now this silence speaks volumes. I can practically hear Batman responding with something along the lines of ‘*yes, yes, it does.*’ I don't know how to describe it other than... Well, right. Normal.

“Is this even safe to breathe?” Batman doesn't answer, typical, but he doesn't have to, I guess. We're already poisoned if it isn't safe to breathe, and at this point? What else can go wrong? You know, no one should ever say something like that. That should be in the vigilante rule book.

My eyes snap from the thick smog around my feet to the biggest building straight ahead of us, towering, a neon green sign flashing ‘CE CH—I—LS,’ which I think was Ace Chemicals once upon a time. At first glance, no one would notice anything strange about it, but on closer inspection, under the strobing light of the back door, you can see the

spray-painted 'Ha-ha's' scrawled over the metal as well as something else. My eyes lock onto a dark figure standing just outside of the light's reach, casually leaning against the wall, ear pressed against the stained concrete, eyes trained on the cracked door, lips pursed. Pointed ears, whip in hand.

I have to shake myself a couple of times. Man, this is so weird. How long has it been since we caught her breaking into the Gotham Museum of History to steal a stuffed saber-tooth tiger? Yes, that actually happened, and no, it wasn't that long ago at all.

"Catwoman." I stop at Batman's shoulder, keeping my head high, flashing my cheesiest grin at Catwoman. She rolls her eyes but pushes off the wall, crossing her arms over her chest, whip still clutched in her fist. Batman nods to the door. **"Situation?"**

"He hasn't made a move yet. He's waiting for you." Catwoman waves a hand but gives me a look. At first, I think it's going to be sly, 'Well, well, well, what do we have here?' kind of look. Or even the 'Ew, it's the interloper' look she gives me every time we run into each other. Instead, her eyes soften behind her goggles, her lips puckering into a frown. "Why'd you bring the Baby Bird? He should be getting medical attention after that beat down."

Wait... *what?*

“Since when did you ever care about my well-being?” I raise an eyebrow. What? It’s not rude! I’m serious! I push down the questions I want to launch off the tip of my tongue. There’s no time for that. Joker may be waiting, but he isn’t known for his patience. Still... “Last I checked, I was the annoying third wheel.”

“And you still are, Kitten.” Catwoman’s lips spread into a too-white smile, her eyes flashing behind her goggles, but is it just me, or was that more affection than humor? “But I never wanted you gone. Besides, who else would help the big bad Bat find you?”

Wow. Who knew that Catwoman tolerated me? I can’t pay attention to that, though, because something Catwoman said slaps me across the face hard. My stomach plummets, seriously, I think it’s on a rollercoaster over here, and the world freezes for a horrible moment. Kitten... Kitten! I forgot about Kitten! My eyes almost pop out of my mask, sweat slicking my palms. She's with Harley Quinn! Harley, who got away! I can’t believe I forgot!

“Kitten!” The name spews out of my mouth before I can stop it. I turn to Batman, ignoring the look Catwoman’s giving me. No time.

“Katherine Walker! She was there with Harley Quinn! The two left before—”

I don't finish. The flash of the crowbar and a cracking sensation through my ribs is enough. Batman bristles beside me, his growl deepening a couple of notches. **“Where?”**

“I don't know. They didn't say.” My head swims, my fingers strangling my bō staff. I know Kitten's a creepy stalker, and yes, she's kinda the one who got me kidnapped in the first place. But really, when you come down to it? She's just a girl. A silly, Robin-obsessed girl who has no idea—I'm lost in a hurricane, teetering on my feet. What will Harley do to her? Harley isn't really that bad when the Joker isn't around, but you can never tell what you'll get with her.

“I'll get the Kitten.” Catwoman purrs, planting a hand on her curved hip, flashing a grin, and flicking her whip casually. “Harley owes me a favor anyway. Besides, she sounds like my kind of girl.”

“No kidding,” I grumble, my heart slowing down to a normal rhythm, my breath coming easier. If Batman trusts Catwoman enough to follow Joker when he has a hostage, then I'm sure she can handle getting Kitten away from Harley. Well, okay, mostly sure.

Catwoman ignores me, of course, and leans forward to Batman, tapping him on his broad, armored chest, cooing, her lips curled into a sly, puckered smile. “See you around, Handsome. Remember our date.”

“What date?” If that didn’t snap me to attention, I don’t know what would. Oh no, please, no. No! I mean, it's not important now, we have bigger things to deal with, but—date? With Catwoman?

But I don't get an answer. Really, I don't want an answer. There are more important things to take care of. So while Catwoman dashes away, disappearing into the darkness, Batman and I climb the steps to the door.

I hesitate, my heart beating faster again, hammering in my chest. I shut my eyes tight. No matter what Catwoman says, I'm not sure I want to see what's in there. But Robin isn't a coward. *I'm* not a coward. I open my eyes with a snap and lean next to Batman, looking through the door.

One peek inside, my heart stops, standing stone still in my chest. Joker's waiting for us, alright, but he's waiting in style. Or, you know, his version of the style.

The main building of Ace Chemicals stretches out in front of us, the inside just as run-down as the outside. The concrete cracks and groans from years and years of sitting there with stains and plants, goopy and

twisted, pushing through the cracks. The marks on the floors, walls, and ceiling range from brown to bright green, almost like a crazy painter decided to experiment with their paint tubes. Chains dangle from wenchies on the ceiling, clattering with every creak of the walls, the dangerously sharp metal hooks hanging sad and dejected on the end.

A metal walkway spans the upper level of the massive room, creaking on rusted supports, shifting with every little puff of air. Which would really stink for the people on top of it because the walkway crosses right over enormous vats of chemical stew. And when I say chemical stew, I mean lime green and lemon yellow, still bubbling after all these years.

One lick of my lips is enough to taste whatever it is. And whatever burns my tongue, stinging, biting, choking my lungs from the inside. No wonder they shut the place down. I mean, really, what's this stuff supposed to be?

But that's not the worst part of this place. Because someone stalks on the walkways, not even bothering how they shift and squeal under the tapping of his shoes, not even worrying about the fumes that swallow him with every pass—

Is the Joker.

My blood begins to simmer in my veins, my knuckles turning white as they grip my bō staff tighter and tighter. A good, solid kick to the nose, I think. But I'll have to let Batman do it. I'm sure that it'll be his pleasure.

But even the Joker's not the worst part. Because out there, clinging for dear life onto one of the chains, wrapped in a black cape like a bird's wings, her grip slowly slipping, dangling over one of the vats simmering and spewing a thick green liquid... hanging there, her mac'n'cheese hair plastered to her face, her green eyes wide, is Babs.

Babs... I glance at Batman, fighting to keep my feet rooted to the ground, fighting to keep my heart from jumping ahead. Calm. I have to be calm, cool, and collected. I have to let Batman take point on his own.

But... Babs. I promised.

One moment, we both stand at the door. The next, I'm running painfully, might I add, my shoes not making a sound on the concrete, my eyes locked on my target. The top of the stairs.

I pull my grapple gun from my belt—man, it feels like it's been forever since I've done this—and aim for the top of the stairs. Batman and I zip through the air with two muted whooshes and clangs.

I'm almost tempted to close my eyes. The air rushes around me, not fresh, of course, but this feeling of launching up, speeding over the ground? Well... I was born for this. Because up here? For a moment? I can forget my broken bones, the gnawing pit in my stomach, and my cracked lips. For a moment, I fly like I'm supposed to. So I laugh. Not my normal laugh, oh no. That impish cackle fills the building, echoing and reechoing, seeming to come from everywhere at once.

Babs looks up, locking eyes with me. Even though her face's pinched, white, and drawn tight, her lips turn up into a small smile, something like relief washing over her features.

At least until someone answers my laugh. The long, crazy cackle floods the room, drowning us all in the rolling, screeching guffaw. I land next to Batman, trying to absorb the impact with my knees, but let's just say my legs still don't appreciate it that much. Pain knives through every muscle, cutting my bones, and sending my vision flashing white. I bite my lip hard, swallowing the small yelp that wants to explode out of my lips, but I stand up anyway.

"You know," Joker slides his crowbar, *the* crowbar, out of his jacket, inspecting the sleek, curved weapon as if it's a great relic or something. My eyes narrow when I see the red slicking the end, slowly

drying, my stomach twisting into a million knots, “I had hoped you’d leave the Boy Blunder in the car, Batsy, seeing as he got so tired from all this fun.” Joker’s smile cracks his face, splitting it in two. His bloodshot eyes go from me to Batman, though he casually leans against the railing, which is not safe at all, but when did he ever care? “Then the two of us could have a proper grown-up chat. But then again—” Joker licks his teeth and painted red lips, tapping the crowbar to his temple, “We had a *smashing* time, didn’t we, Boy Blunder?”

“**You crossed the line, Joker.**” If looks could kill, I think Joker would spontaneously combust. Batman slides six batarangs out of his belt and takes a heavy step forward, his voice so deep and growling that he can’t be a bat anymore. He has to be a lion or tiger or something.

“So uptight!” Joker sighs, shaking his head as if it’s actually sad, though he still smiles. “But I have to say, Batty, it’s good to have your attention.” Joker lifts his head, spreading his arms wide, grinning at the dripping ceiling. “Not the Birdy or the Girly can break the two of us apart, Batman! The two sides of the coin!” Joker straightens, one eyebrow teasing up, his eyes wide, unblinking over that stretched smile. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

One second. I have one second before all chaos breaks loose. And yes, chaos. Two sides of the coin isn't all Two Face's shtick. Order and Chaos. Batman and Joker. A legend that goes as far back as Batman's first appearance in Gotham.

And chaos is very on the nose for Joker. Really, I'll never understand how Joker has the time to install stupid glitter bombs in a chemical plant, but there it is.

He's the Joker.

Glitter erupts from under our feet. Confetti and Joker Venom spew from the ceiling. The chain that Babs clings to slips from the wench. And Batman slams into Joker, throwing the walkway creaking and groaning to the side. All in a second.

I know I promised not to fight. I know I promised not to hurt myself anymore. But I think Batman will forgive me. Besides, there's a reason Batman has a partner.

So I jump off the walkway, launching myself off the railings, my hand swiping at one of the chains as I plummet head-first toward the vat of chemicals. It spits and sputters, the glitter fizzling on contact like one giant pot of madman's gumbo.

One second, Babs holds on to the chain, clutching with one hand, reaching for me. But then, next—Everything happens like it's in slow motion. I see it. I know she sees it too. Her hand loses its grip. She whips both arms forward, trying to catch the chain, reaching—too late.

Babs falls.

My mind flashes back to that day when someone else precious to me plummeted to their death. Both look at me with the same terrified eyes. Both scream my name. Only Babs doesn't know my name, does she? Because I never told her. My heart pounds a million miles a minute.

Not Babs, not Babs. I won't allow it. Not Babs. I can't lose her, too. No mistakes this time. Because mistakes put the people closest to you in danger. Because mistakes get you killed.

Whipping my legs in, I swing out on the chain, flying through the air, my fingers reaching, stretching for hers. Hers, as she falls, her mouth set, her eyes widening. Hers, as she plummets towards the bubbling stew, the vapor closing around her like fingers dragging her down.

Time seems to stop.

For one moment, one agonizing moment, her fingers stay out of reach of mine. Too far away. Too far gone. But the next... The next, her fingers are clasped tightly in mine. Something rushes up my arm as my

hand grasps hers, a warmth that sings through my aching limb and wraps around my heart. A long breath whistles between my lips as I pull her up, my arms shaking, burning, my sides groaning and creaking with the pressure. When I get her all the way up, I let her hold onto my chain, her fingers letting go of my hand to cling to the metal links separating us.

Our faces are so close I could move an inch, and we'd bump noses. I swallow hard. I want to close my eyes, take a moment to tell my heart to slow down, for my mind to take a breather. But my mind still flashes to Mom... Mom screaming my name. Mom falling to the ground, cracking on the sawdust.

And Babs... I swallow the sob that wants to choke me. This is what we do. We save people, mistakes or not. And I saved her. Right here, right now. She's alive, breathing. I meet her eyes and let a huge grin lift my face. Her breath cools my blistering cheeks. "How are you tonight, Miss Gordon?" The momentum steals my words, but she hears them anyway.

Something glitters in her eyes, sparkling in the harsh light of the fluorescent above and the vats below. They soften when she nods slowly, her mouth twitching into a small smile, taking the time to blow a hair out of her face. "Doing alright. How about yourself?" She gives me a

once-over even as we whip around, the chain creaking on the wench as we swing back toward the walkway. The walkway that's collapsing steadily, dangerously close to the vats. Babs sees, but she keeps on talking. Points to her. "You should be at the hospital."

"Naw, who needs a hospital?" As soon as we touch down on the concrete, I grab Bab's hand and stumble forward into a run. Should I be running? Ha! No, of course not. But you would too if an entire metal walkway that weighs hundreds, if not thousands of pounds, were falling on you.

Every bone in my body blazes like molten lava, crunching like hard candy with every step. Agony slams into me like a semi-truck, nearly knocking me to the floor. So much for painkillers. I wheeze, every bone in my chest pinching at my lungs. Babs notices. Of course, Babs notices. But we don't have time, and she knows it.

With an agonizing screech that fills the entire plant, the walkway behind us falls, crashing toward the ground. I risk a glance over my shoulder. Batman leaps off, his legs tucking in, his arms spread out, and his cape billowing like a bat's wings. His shadow covers us, cool and comforting, but he isn't the only shadow chasing us.

Joker howls like a dog, cackling and dancing on the walkway as it comes down, his arms swirling the Joker Venom that drifts like a deadly blanket towards us. And, because it's never enough, apparently, the rusted metal of the structure slams into the vats, knocking them over with a booming thunk and whoosh.

“Catch!” I snatch two gas masks from my utility belt, what did I say about Batman always being prepared?—and toss one to Babs. She catches it, letting go of my hand to slip it on her face.

I press my own up against my mouth and nose, but that's the least of my problems because, with a groan and a clattering *bang*, the walkway hits just inches from my heels, the impact sending a cascade of dust and debris slamming into my back. I stumble, my arms flailing in helicopter circles to try and keep myself upright.

The roar of liquid rings in my ears, drowning out Bab's scream. Well, now. I've always wanted to drown in something other than water. Guess I can check that off the ol' vigilante to-do list. Droplets rain down on my head and back, sizzling and burning on impact like drops of acid. I grit my teeth and push my legs to run harder, faster. But it won't be enough unless—

A hand grabs the back of my suit, tugging me upward. Not wasting any time, I reach out an arm and scoop Babs up, pulling her to my side, taking a deep, shaking, rattling breath. Batman yanks us into the air just as the chemicals roll in a deadly wave across the floor, the hissing and fumes filling the air with a thick, barf-yellow smog.

And I thought swimming with a shark would be the craziest dip I've had in a lifetime. I cling to Babs, searching the flow for someone with white skin and green hair. It doesn't take long to find him. He stands on the fallen walkway, standing right on top of the poisonous flow, clapping like this is A-grade entertainment or something. Then again, to him, it might just be. I grit my teeth, a growl rumbling in my throat. After all he's done to Babs, to me, he just gets to keep mocking us? Taunting us?

Not on my watch.

Batman swings us around over the bubbling mucky yuckiness—Really, what *is* that stuff?—And drops us all off on the remains of the walkway. Not the smartest move, but really, where else are we supposed to go? We can't leave the Joker here, as much as I would love to, and Batman can't carry him and me and Babs all at once, no matter how strong everyone thinks he is.

The walkway teeters below our feet, bobbing in the flow like a log in a river. I adjust my feet, shoving the pain to the back burner and falling into a ready stance. Adrenaline's probably the only thing keeping me going. But hey, if I'm here, I'm going to have to fight. No way around it. I'm sure Batman will forgive me.

“Isn't this fun, Batsy?” Joker hoots, spreading out his arms. “All of us here, enjoying the nice atmosphere, and oh! Do you smell that?” He inhales deeply. My nose wrinkles. The fumes are already burning my eyes. If I didn't have a gas mask on, well... What are they doing to him? Then again, I don't think he really cares about singed nose hairs. “Ah! That's the stuff.”

Joker starts to pace in his small spot on the walkway, which bobs our end side to side. I reach over to steady Babs, but I always seem to forget. She's a gymnast too. Not an acrobat, but her balance is almost as good as mine. Her feet shift with the walkway, her bare toes clinging to the rough metal bars, her eyes locked on the Joker. Something ticks at her temple.

I can't hide my grin. Oh, she's ready.

“We’re done playing games, Joker.” Batman doesn’t move. But then, he doesn’t have to, does he? He stands like a statue, tall and imposing, every bit the myth and legend. **“Fun’s over.”**

I should’ve seen it coming. I mean, it was the perfect setup! But still, my muscles tense around my breaking body, clenching in pain when Joker looks right at us, cocking his head to the side, a switchblade suddenly clutched between careful fingers. His teeth glint green in the glow of the liquid swimming around us, his eyes flashing a deep red. “Oh, really? Because I thought the fun was just getting started!”

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

BABS KICKS BUTT

One second. Just one second to stand and think about what in the world I just got myself into before everything happens all at once. I mean, some people say your life flashes before your eyes before you die, but I am more optimistic.

I know I won't die.

Still, in moments like these, I tend to see all the choices that led up to said moment and regret almost every single one. Like pulling a dumb teen move or running into the school like a maniac with no backup. Or maybe turning my back to an open locker room and getting hit on the back of the head with a giant mallet. Or, try this one on for size: how about wrestling a shark, huh?

Yeah...

Generally speaking, I'm a reasonably smart person. I mean, if you aren't smart on the streets of Gotham, well, you're dead. But now? With the Joker running full tilt at us with a switchblade clutched in his fingers and that horrible cackle exploding out of his mouth like the boom of a canon, all the while standing on a slowly disintegrating piece of metal in

a miniature lake of mixed chemicals, surrounded by laughing gas with not one, not two, but several broken ribs, a broken leg, a broken finger, probably at least a moderate concussion—need I go on? Now, do you understand?

I regret everything.

Well... for that split second, my eyes whip over to Babs. Babs, who's already on the move, her feet sticking to the metal as she breaks into a run right toward the Joker, arms pumping, cape billowing out behind her, her face set. Her emerald eyes snap with something like fury, and she's never been more terrifying—or more beautiful.

No... I don't regret everything. Because if it wasn't for this, I would have never gotten to be with her this whole time. Well, okay, Robin wouldn't have been with her.

Sappy? Oh yes. Do I care? At this point? Nope.

So yes, one measly little second. Everyone else moves and lunges forward almost at the same time. Joker, Batman, and Babs. But me? Well, there's no way I can't *not* fight. I mean, I'm stuck in close quarters with a madman; what are you expecting me to do? But—I can't fight either. And by that, I mean literally can't. Adrenaline's the name of the game, and I've already been borrowing too much of it. The painkillers are long

gone, and let me tell you, having this many broken bones and still standing up, breathing is a miracle. I'm a ticking time bomb and not one of those who will go off with a vengeance and totally kick butt. Try more 'passing out and stay passed out for a week or so.'

Yeah... My eyes droop, and my arms and legs sag. That sounds really nice, actually. But when do I ever have time for that? So, one second, and I slide my bō staff in both hands. One second and I've made up my mind. One second, and I jump forward, racing alongside Babs. I can feel her eyes on me the next second, giving me 'the look,' but I ignore it.

Because there's no *not* doing this. I'm sure Batman will forgive me... eventually.

I keep my eyes on the Joker, darting from his eyes to the switchblade glinting in his hands. Batman reaches him first, a solid punch sailing toward his face, a knee slamming toward his gut. At this point, Robin, yours truly, would leap over his head and do an aerial kick or something just as cool. But I don't think I could get two inches off the ground to save my life, literally, so I slide in low, my bō staff cracking toward Joker's legs.

But, as it turns out, I didn't need to go high. There, as if she's performing a vault for the Olympics, is Babs. Her hands land on Batman's back, pushing off like it's a springboard, sending her twisting, flipping, flying through the air like a bird. For one heart-stopping second, I think she'll overshoot it and land in the acid. But, right as she's sailing over Joker's head, she pivots midair, twisting around and landing a hard kick right to the back of his head. Right as I slam my bō staff into his legs and Batman nails him in the gut and the nose. But I couldn't care less about how Joker howls with laughter, stumbling over and flipping his blade. My eyes stay locked on Babs as she lands, firmly planting herself on our bobbing, shaking, dissolving boat.

The world seems to freeze for a second, my heart stilling in my chest, my eyes nearly falling out of my mask. That was one of my moves. Gymnastics combined with martial arts. I blink hard. It's not as clean or quick as mine, but for someone with no professional training by Batman... Well, then. That's something.

I lunge forward again, my boots leaping away from the pole that fizzes and spits under my feet, following Batman toward the Joker. Babs follows right next to me. No one says anything, not even the Joker, which is surprising. He only howls with laughter, swiping at us with his blade

and pulling the crowbar out of his jacket. My blood boils, rushing into my ears. I grit my teeth, trying to hold onto the adrenaline and push the pain to the side.

Just... just a little longer...

Crack! The crowbar swings toward Batman. *Swoosh!* The knife cuts toward Babs. *Clang!* I thrust my staff forward, catching the blade and the bar, my muscles screaming at me as Joker cackles, pushing down toward me, bloodshot eyes glinting with fire. My arms tremble, threatening to buckle. Agony knives through my leg, cracking, snapping pain. I refuse to shut my eyes, though, as my broken leg collapses. Spots blur my vision. The acid in the air blisters my skin, teasing at my gas mask. I gasp on the poles, gripping the cool but quickly heating metal with both hands.

Helpless... weak...

But I'm not alone. I don't have to do this by myself. Babs rushes forward, landing another solid kick to Joker's side, dancing over the sinking shrapnel, her feet light on the poles. "That's for ruining my night, you reject circus clown!" I wince. Babs needs to work on her quips, but at this point? I'll give her a pass.

The acid spits up onto the poles, hissing and sizzling as it eats away at our tiny, shrinking, less-than-safe boat. I swallow hard, my breath fogging my gas mask. We're running out of time.

Batman goes in for a big one, his powerful fist cracking into Joker's temple. I yank myself away, thrusting my good leg to trip up the Joker. "Here!" The Babs-es race a few steps away, hand open, arm outstretched, no... wait, since when were there two Babs? I shake my head as hard as I can, shutting my eyes against the glaring yellow of the bubbling pool around me. Somehow, even though the heat, haze, and pain eat me alive, I know exactly what she means.

I throw my bō staff with all I have, trying to get the two Babs to go back into one Babs. She snatches the metal pole and lunges forward again, swinging the staff back behind her head. One moment, her eyes flash that deadly green. "Pull!" Her voice cracks through the chemical plant.

Joker trips on my leg, kicking my shin hard with his faux leather shoes, stumbling back as Batman's fist cracks into his jaw. And, as he falls back, Babs swings the bō staff with all she has. The horrible crack of metal on bone rings through the room.

“And that’s for murdering my mom.” Babs’ whisper barely echoes above the sizzle of the pool underneath us, but I still hear it. A small smile twitches at the corners of my mouth, aching. Babs got justice.

I let myself collapse completely, lying on the poles of the walkway, staring down at the acid that eats its way toward us, only inches from my nose. The thump of a body next to me and the mad, howling laughter is enough to let me know.... We won.

We... won...

I close my eyes, letting sweet, sweet darkness wrap me in its soft blanket. Well, okay, not completely soft. The hard poles press against my shaking, shattered ribs. The fumes from the acid wrap my skin in one massive burn, blisters racing along my skin like fire. But at least... at least I don’t have to move.

Over... It’s over. Finally... I wheeze, trying to fight against the rattling in my chest, and suck in the fresh air. Finally... It’s over. Over...

But as soon as I feel the hands, soft and gentle, grabbing my shoulders, I know it’s not quite over yet. Not over... right... the acid...

Figures. I mean, since when did anything get easier for a hero?

“Come on, Boy Wonder.” Babs’ voice is far away, like it’s echoing through a tunnel, trying to find me in the darkness. Hands, hers,

I'm guessing, tug on my shoulders, trying to pull me up. I can't help the hiss of pain that squeezes through my lips as the motion shifts the bones in my chest.

"Just... just give me a minute..." The words are hardly a breath in my own ears, but the tugging doesn't stop.

"Here, let me help." A shoulder shoves under mine, pressing against my armpit, lifting me. Babs grunts, her breath ruffling my hair. I don't fight the motion, but I can't lift my head to look at Babs, let alone look around. The world warps around me, a yellow stew with smudges moving around in it, like living ink blots.

Fingers press into my arm, cool against my smoldering skin. They don't dig or bite but hold onto me with a firm, steady grip. I force my feet to press into the bars, keeping me up, so Babs doesn't have to. "...We... won...?" I should know that we won; I mean, we totally kicked butt! Well, okay, Babs and Batman kicked butt... but for some reason, it comes out as more of a question.

"Yeah. It's over now." Babs' voice tickles my ear, almost drowning out the laughter but not the growling. The growling that presses in close, like a lion or a tiger. It fights the laughter, cutting through it as smoothly as a knife through butter. Only one person can growl like that.

“**No one**,” Batman snarls, but not at me, not at Babs, “**No one.**

Touches. My. Kid.”

Most people would be terrified. But I don’t think anyone present classifies as ‘normal.’ To me, those growling words send warmth, not a burning, gnawing heat, but a soothing, fuzzy warmth spreading through every inch of my chest. Now, if only words could heal broken bones, I’d be set.

Joker doesn’t answer. At least not with words. Instead, the laughter scratches at my ears, like nails on a chalkboard, raking and scratching until my head spins so fast I can’t even feel the shoulder under my armpit or the fingers pressed against my skin anymore. I think my ears might just start bleeding. I don’t hear Batman or Babs, only the ringing of laughter. If Joker was crazy before, now he’s lost it. No words, just laughter.

Laugh, laugh, laugh.

Then—it’s gone. It still echoes for a moment, but with a clanking whoosh, the laughter’s gone, soaring through the air as if the Joker just sprouted wings and learned to fly. But I know that isn’t true. It can’t be.

I don’t open my eyes, but I know that, most likely, Batman sailed away with the mad clown swinging on his grappling hook out over the

lake of acid. Leaving Babs and me here, alone. Again. For a split second, my stomach plummets. But that's stupid. I know Batman... Bruce... won't leave Babs and me.

"Hold on, Robin." Her voice is cool against my ear, like water on all my burns. Oh... that sounds nice. "Just a few more minutes."

My cracked lips stick together, only a tiny hissing breath squeezing out. Maybe I can allow myself to think about water and food now.

Now that it's over.

Over...

There's the thump and clang of something heavy landing on metal. The walkway shakes, bobbing back and forth like a teeter-totter, nearly sending me stumbling forward and headfirst into the roiling muck, and I would've too if it wasn't for Babs' arms wrapped around me.

Voices speak, faraway voices that bounce around and echo in my head. Just voices, no words. I'm pulled away from the arms that held me up, pulled away but clasped into another person's arms, lifted and cradled like a baby. But I don't care. I let my head press against the cool metal of his chest, listening to the beat of his heart. Loud, strong, but faster than usual. But... why faster?

“**Robin—**” The words rumble against my ear, rattling my head. But it doesn’t hurt. It feels right. “**Robin... hang on.**”

I want to laugh, but it gets stuck in my chest, aching and hurting. I am hanging on. But... hang on to... what? I’ve always wondered. What’s that supposed to mean? I’m shifted into only one arm, pulled in tighter. Small, softer hands run through my hair once before pressing against the armor right next to my head, holding on. Is... is Batman carrying Babs piggyback? Oh.... I wish I could see...

One moment, we stand in the fumes and the bubbling chemicals. Next, the wind rushes through my hair, washing my face. Not clean air, but it doesn’t burn either. I would love to take a long, deep breath, but all I can manage are quick, rattling, wheezing gasps that send sharp pain stabbing my chest.

The world seems like a dream, even though I know I’m awake when we land. The thump jars my bones, but only a tiny pathetic little grunt wheezes through my lips. I’m shifted to being held by two arms again and allow myself to relax and sag in Batman's grip. Safe... I’m safe... we’re safe...

It’s over.

The cool night air presses against my face, and I don't even care if it smells like a garbage heap gone rotten. I'd take this over burning acid any old day. I crack one eye open, getting the full view of Batman's chiseled chin and the sky above. No stars twinkle in the dark sky, but something silver winks at me. A small sigh escapes my lips, long and low.

The moon's never looked so good.

The cool silver light melds with flashes of red and blue, strobing close by. I tilt my head and squint. Cop cars, an ambulance, and an armored Arkham escort sit at the edge of the parking lot, people murmuring and bustling and shouting as soon as they catch sight of us. I ignore the sight of Joker being shoved into the back of the Arkham van, still cackling and thrashing against the straitjacket. I don't ignore the sight of a more cooperative Harley Quinn sliding into the back of another van, stripped of her mallet, of course. I blink hard. Wait, if Harley's here, then that means—my eyes sweep the writhing mass of people. No Catwoman, which isn't a surprise. She and Batman might be all chummy now, but Gordon couldn't care less.

No, what I find is a girl sitting on the edge of the ambulance, still, in that pink dress, golden curls, tangled, windblown, clutching a blanket

around her shoulders, shaking. Another sigh escapes my lips. At least Kitten's safe.

“Dad!” The call cuts through the air right next to my ear, rising above the calls and hullabaloo in front of us. Babs stumbles into a run, still with my cape and bō staff, running full tilt toward a man with a bushy orange mustache, a fluttering tan jacket, and glasses that reflect the pulsing lights.

“Barbara!” Mr. Gordon holds open his arm, his smile so wide I can see it from here. I let my heart finally slow almost to a stop, letting it settle into a gentle, calm beat. Babs lunges into the Commish's arms, disappearing into his strong hug. Safe. Babs is safe. Everything's going to be alright.

Even when Babs' shoulders start to shake violently in Gordon's grip, muffled gasps and sobs twist my chest. I let out my longest sigh yet, a grin settling on my face. It's over.

“Batman.” I can feel Gordon's eyes on me as soon as we walk up to him, closer to all the noises and the flashes. I shut my eyes against the glare. Gordon's voice slides through the air, thick and heavy. Tired. I don't blame him. How long have they been looking for us? How long were we in that maze? “Robin... is he—?”

Warmth snuggles me. Batman's here, Gordon's here, Babs is safe, and Joker's gone. Things are normal again. Well, okay, mostly normal.

“He'll be alright.” Batman's grip tightens around me, firm but not enough to be uncomfortable. I crack open an eye, for Gordon's sake, and manage to give him a weak thumbs up. Babs twists in her dad's hug and gives me such a look I think I might just spontaneously combust, even through her red, tear-streaked face. But it isn't an 'I'll kill you later' look. It's more of a 'don't you dare hurt yourself more' look. A 'yeah, right, you're definitely not okay' look.

Ha! She knows me too well.

“Broken bones, mild burns, a moderate concussion.” Batman breaks down my injuries for Gordon, calmly as only Batman can, but with a softness that doesn't really fit with any sort of Batglare. I want to be embarrassed; in fact, it might be the burns, but my cheeks burn like a hot chili pepper. **“Exhaustion, exposure to Joker Venom and fear gas, dehydration, and lack of food.”**

Wow. That isn't that bad, actually. I know, I know, that sounds horrible! But to be honest? I should be dead. And in this line of work? Broken bones are definitely not the worst things that can happen. And no, no one would dare call Child Services on Batman.

“Sounds about right.” Babs voice, to her credit, doesn’t shake, even though it’s thick and heavy. But she doesn’t smile either. Her eyes are still on me, knowing. Batman wasn’t there. She was. Some things happened there, words that were spoken... maybe I’ll tell her the truth. Someday.

Babs taps the Commish on the shoulder. “I could use a nice, gigantic cup of ice-cold water. And some pizza. A nice big pep with extra parmesan. And ice cream. Just vanilla, though, no toppings.”

“Of course, Pumpkin.” The Commish rubs Babs’ back, smiling. At least until he turns to us. Even with my eyes squinted, I can’t miss that sharp, pointed look that Gordon gives Batman. It’s not mean or suspicious, it’s just... protective? “Batman... you take care of that kid. I’ll get everything else sorted out. You just...” Gordon swallows hard and nods, whether to Batman or himself, I don’t know. “Take care of Gotham’s Light.”

You know that feeling when a bunch of people look at you all at once and are suddenly super quiet? Yeah, that one. Well, dial that to eleven, and that’s what you get when Batman, Babs, and the Commish look at you as if you’re some kind of injured puppy.

But... *Gotham’s Light*? What’s that all about?

“Thank you, Robin.” I blink my eyes all the way open, staring at Gordon. He blocks the lights, stepping forward and placing a large, rough but gentle hand on my shoulder. His voice is warm, rumbling, solid, and comforting, just like it was once upon a time when he was the one carrying me after that night.

Only this time...

“Thank you for protecting my girl.”

I don’t nod, but my lips spread into the biggest smile I can pull off, which sadly isn't that impressive, but oh well. I’ll take what I can get.

Because that? Right there? That look on his face? That warmth in his voice? That makes all these broken bones and all this pain worth it.

“N—” I cough, which tugs at my shifting ribs, which send more pain through my chest than my scratching throat, but there’s nothing I can do about that. “No prob, Commish.”

I hate how horrible my voice sounds, how weak, how pathetic, but I know they don’t care. Gordon squeezes my shoulder so lightly it’s almost like a phantom hand. Then, she’s there. Babs, with her sparkling emerald eyes and sweaty, stringy mac’n’cheese curls. Babs, with her bruises and cuts and dark circles under her leaking eyes. Babs, with her parched lips and white as a sheet face, streaked with red and snot.

Babs.

Beautiful, amazing, kick-butt Babs still dressed in my cape, the black and gold fabric fluttering in the wind like wings, my bō staff clutched in her hand, glinting in the flashing lights.

“Thank you.” A hand curls into mine, fingers pressing against my own, cool but not cold. Her words are a whisper. And for some reason, for once, the words ‘thank you’ aren’t just words that could mean anything from something special to say ‘thank you’ for a slice of pizza. For once, the words ‘thank you’ mean more to me than any huge speech or anything else she could say. Because all I have to do is look into her eyes, her eyes that swim and glitter with tears that threaten to spill over her cheeks, her eyes that turn up with the smile that sends warmth shooting through my chest.

Because for once? Thank you is enough. More than enough. It makes the pain go away. Hey, don’t ruin this for me, okay? I’m serious!

I squeeze her hand back, my smile softening, settling. Because how could I not smile when Barbara Gordon looks at me like I’m the greatest hero in the world? Like I’m her hero.

“Anytime, Miss Gordon.” My voice cracks, sliding from a scratchy high to a satisfying low register that’s more manly. I manage a

small, short laugh. It hurts, of course, it hurts, but it's worth it. "Let's just not make a habit of getting locked in insane mazes, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan." Babs' fingers slip through mine. We stare at each other for a moment, and I forget Batman and the Commish are watching us. But then Babs' eyes widen for a second. And for that split second, my stomach plummets. For that split second, I think something's wrong again, that we're going to die, that this was all some hallucination from the fear gas, and Joker's about to kill us.

But no, Babs holds out my bō staff, the other hand moving to slip off my cape. "Your things! Here, let me—"

"It's fine." And from a slight nod from Batman, I know I'm not overstepping. I mean, the cape and the bō staff are mine. Besides, I think she looks pretty good with them. Like her own hero. "Keep them." I can't hold back a small wink. "I would say add them to your journal, but I don't think they'd fit."

Babs laughs, the sound ringing through the hustle and bustle of police, detectives, and medical personnel. A laugh that's out of place. A laugh that rings like bells. "Noted. And thank you." Her eyes shine, and she nods to Batman. "You have an incredible partner. I hope you know that."

Probably the first words she's spoken to her hero outside of a crisis, and they're about me. I can't hide the house fire that crackles to life on my cheeks, looking up at Batman. He doesn't look at me, but a smile, you know, that tiny upturn of his lips?—Lifts his face.

“I know.”

I know.

It never ceases to amaze me that two words, two measly little words can mean so much. But they do. I want to say something, to say thank you to Babs, or to Batman, something, anything. But I'm afraid that if I open my mouth, I'll shatter this moment. This moment when it's just us, and everything's right with the world.

But, without a word, Batman glides past Gordon and Babs. I peek around his huge bicep to stare at Babs as I bob away, swaying with B's heavy, quick steps. She's hugging the Commish again, looking at me from over his shoulder, her eyes smiling.

I smile back, although I don't think she can see it through the mask. But I think she knows.

The cop and ambulance party is starting to turn into a media circus. Reporters blaze in on the scene, swooping like vultures with their cameras and mikes, interviewing everyone they can get their hands on.

But, unlike Bruce Wayne, no one dares to come within a couple of yards of Batman, choosing instead to video us as he walks past.

So I wave at them. What? I'm not about to look dead on camera. That wouldn't be good for morale. So instead, I wave, smiling and giving them a thumbs up, sticking out my tongue at some and winking at others. If I thought the murmuring and shouting were too loud before, it definitely is now.

Still, as much as I want to get away and get home to my own bed and sink into those nice soft, cool covers and bury my head in the pillow, there's something else I need to do. My eyes lock on one person when we start walking past the ambulance.

A girl with golden hair and icy blue eyes. A girl with smudged makeup and running mascara. A girl with too-white teeth and a rumpled pink homecoming dress. I tug on B's cape, looking up at his clenched jaw.

"B." My voice barely makes it past my lips. I lick them, which only hurts.

Batman glances down at me, white-masked eyes narrowing, mouth set in a line. Most people would take it as a glare, but I know

there's a question in that gaze. 'What?' it says. So I nod at the girl. At Kitten.

Batman sighs and nods, taking a step over toward the ambulance. Kitten sits there, still wrapped in a blanket, nearly doubled over, her shoulders shaking under the fabric, snot, and tears streaking her face. I let out a sigh, too.

"Kitten." She looks up, her eyes flying open so fast and wide that they might just pop out of her head. Her mouth opens into a little 'O.' At first, I think she'll break into a round of giggles or lunge toward me, sobbing. Instead, she sits and stares, her eyes round and frozen.

I search her eyes for something, anything. All I find are tears. Something pangs in my chest, aching, hurting. I almost wish I could give her what she wants, but that wouldn't be right. Besides, can't she have her favorite hero without going way too far to get his attention?

"Kitten..." There are so many things I could say. 'I forgive you,' or 'It's going to be alright,' or 'It wasn't going to happen.' I swallow hard. Part of me wishes that Bruce, not Batman, was holding me and prompting me with some magic word that gets Kitten to smile but makes her understand that it's not going to happen between us. I mean, she doesn't like Dick Grayson. How would that work?

But... what do you say to a girl who was so desperate to get your attention that she... well...

So I just let the words tumble out of my mouth. "I'm glad you're alright."

I don't even get to see her reaction as Batman surges forward again, whisking me away from the cops and the EMTs who try to stop us to take a look at me, insisting I should go to a hospital. We leave the media circus behind, fading into Gotham night.

I shut my eyes tight and let out a long, chest-rattling sigh when the crashing of waves and the distant noise of traffic and sirens are all that sing in my ears. Finally, it's over.

Well, okay, not quite over...

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

I HAVE AN ALMOST GIRLFRIEND

I would be lying if I said I didn't have a few tears slide down my face when I saw the limo parked in the shadows of an alley. Okay, a little more than a few. But here's the thing: after all of this, after everything, well, let's just say that limo has never looked so good.

The long, sleek black car catches the lights overhead on its glossy finish, and the warm glow inside the cabin burns as warm and bright as any fire in the manor. As soon as Batman steps into the alleyway, the door flies open, and someone steps out. Someone with thinning gray hair and a perfectly waxed mustache. Someone with a neatly pressed three-piece suit and white gloves.

“Good heavens! Master Dick, Master Bruce! Thank goodness.” Alfred opens the door wide, his smoky eyes swimming with concern, his lips thin and pressed. I let my head thump against Bruce's arm. And yes, Bruce. With one tug of his cowl, those steely eyes look down at me, soft and gentle, his coal-black hair standing on end, dark smudges under his eyes.

The smudges of someone else who hasn't slept for days. Hey! We match!

“Come on, Master Dick. There we are.” Alfred helps Bruce slide me into the back of the limo, which honestly looks like someone merged it with a hospital room. Trays filled to the brim with syringes and bandages, and all the tools sit along the far side. The seat cushions have been pulled out and covered with a fresh, clean sheet and that rolling paper stuff.

I try not to move too much when Bruce settles me onto the crackling paper, resting my head against the pillow. I shut my eyes, letting my head sink into the cushion, a noise squeezing out of my lips. It's like... well, it's a pillow.

I could sit here forever, just letting the knot on the back of my head sink into the fluffy cloud, letting the smell of new leather, cinnamon, and sterile bandages wrap me in warmth, but there's no time for that. I mean, I'm not exactly a critical patient that I know of, but there it is.

You can't really rest when you've been beaten to a pulp by the Joker. Something pinches my arm, and a rush of something spreads through my veins, sending relief coursing through every bone, every

break, every bruise. My head lifts like a balloon tugging on a string. It tries to float away, but it doesn't.

I'm aware when Bruce's large, calloused hands remove my mask, the squelch of the adhesive pulling on my skin like a bandaid that's been stuck for far too long. I grit my teeth, trying not to think about the yanking and the tugging, but then, with a rush of fresh air, the mask is gone, my eyes squinting up at the light twinkling in my face with no filter.

At least until a concentrated beam blazes into my eyes. I mean, seriously, what's the big idea? I would love to sleep right about now, with no more poking and prodding. But that's not how this goes. A few more needles pinch my arm, each sending a rush of something. Hmm... the first one sends a wave of calm through my body, mending my shot nerves, soothing my thumping heart. A small smile teases my lips. Probably a more refined anti-fear toxin. The next is similar, also calming, but in a different way. I would say probably a Joker Venom antidote. Again, the more refined version, not whatever those goons had in their pockets.

Then comes the part I want to be knocked out for. You know the one. I mean, really, it's kind of a no-brainer. Batman's hands unfasten the

clasps of my uniform, pulling off the red over vest as gently as if I were a china doll. It still jars my chest, but the pain's muted, like an echo from far away. Next, he carefully removes my green undershirt. The growling hiss and the muffled gasp and 'Oh dear' from Alfred are enough to know that I don't really want to see. But then comes the awkward part.

Batman's hands clasp the waistband of my leggings and, as quickly and painlessly as he can, slide them off, hardly jarring my broken leg.

Just as soon as the pants are off, the blanket's on, settling over my legs, soft and warm. Warm... a heated blanket? I crack open an eye. Bruce towers over me, even though I know he's kneeling, his head blocking the light for a split second.

"We're going to put you out, Chum." His voice tickles my ears, sending something cool and comforting racing up and down my spine. His hand settles on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "Just until we set the bones, alright?"

I mean, that makes sense. I wouldn't want to be awake. I doubt anyone would want to be awake for that. So I nod slowly, so it doesn't hurt, letting Alfred clasp my arm in his now latex-gloved hands. Bruce rolls something over to my side, one of those tall, portable coat rack thingys with the IV drip, and hands the tube to Alfred.

I shut my eyes when Alfred swabs the crook of my arm, turning away. What? I may be a vigilante, and I may be OK with a tiny little shot of something, you know, in and out. But I reserve the right to hate needles that stay in for too long, okay?

My gas mask slides off my face, instantly replaced with a new one that sends something other than air rushing over my mouth and nose. Usually, when you smell that kind of ‘air’ in this line of work, you need to rip off the mask and make a run for it. But this definitely isn’t one of those times.

So I take as many deep breaths as my chest will allow, letting the world warp in front of my eyes, letting my vision tunnel until all I can see are shadows and the light right above me. The light glitters like it would off the water, slowly disappearing.

Everything’s black. For about two seconds.

Then, with a rush and a pull, the tunnel starts to widen again. First, the light, then the ceiling, then the face right above mine flicker into existence. I bite back a groan. I hate going under. I mean, I know it’s helpful for things like surgery or stuff, but who wants to wake up as sad and helpless as a baby?

“Here.” A hand offers me something square and whitish with tiny holes in it. I squint. The thing smells... interesting, like salt and... hospitals. I open my mouth, and the hand settles the thing on my tongue. It starts melting immediately, from a cracker to mush, small bursts of salt exploding in my mouth. I bite down and start chewing slowly.

A saltine cracker?

“Alfred, grab the Sprite.” The face over mine turns, looking off to my left. A large, heavy hand finds my shoulder. Not crushing, but steady, firm. I keep chewing on my cracker. It gets stuck in my dry throat, refusing to go down, just chilling on my tongue. I smack my lips.

The mask is gone, replaced by normal open air. The IV isn't in my arm anymore, replaced by a meticulously wrapped bandage. In fact, a lot of my body is bandages. My chest moves and stretches under layers of bandages, and something cool soothes the pain.

A splint braces my broken finger, strapping it back in place. And a colossal cast covers my leg, itching against my bare skin. Something soothing settles my burns and bruises, Alfred's ointment smelling like a health food store.

“Here you are, Master Dick.” Another face appears, holding out a crystal glass with a straw. The liquid inside bubbles. “Drink.”

Hands slide me up, propping me against pillows that settle under my back. I pull my hand out from under the blanket, letting the glass press into my fingers and the gloved hand closing mine around it. The glass feels nice against my skin, but even better is the fizzy, citrus soda that I slurp, ignoring Alfred's chiding that I take it slow. It fills my mouth and rushes down my scratched, parched throat like rain in a desert. I know I'm supposed to take it slow, but I don't stop until the entire cup's empty, leaving me to slurp on nothing.

“Th—” I cough, which hurts but not as badly. The glare slowly disappears as I blink at Alfred and Bruce, who kneel beside my makeshift bed. Bruce is still in his Batsuit, eyes drooping, and Alfred tugs off his latex gloves, settling them in a bin filled with discarded bandages and filthy rags that were probably white once. “Thank you.”

In fact, I do an internal once-over. My skin, which was once covered with salt water, sand, dirt, dust, grime, and paint residue, has been scrubbed spotless. My Robin uniform sits in the corner of the limo, folded neatly. A plain white soft cotton T-shirt presses against my skin and the bandages, and just one shift of my leg reveals the familiar feel of flannel pajama pants.

“Of course, Chum.” Bruce doesn’t take his hand off my shoulder. His eyes search my face, reading everything. Which, at this point? Isn’t that much. “How are you feeling? Do you need anything?”

“I feel like I just got pumped full of pain meds.” I grin at him, settling deeper into the pillows. “And no, I’m fine.”

Well, as fine as I can be, anyway.

“Here you are, Master Dick.” Alfred holds out another saltine, his eyebrows raised. “You must eat, or those ‘pain meds,’ as you call them, will not settle well.”

“Verdict?” I turn from Bruce and Alfred, my fingers only trembling a little when I settle the cracker into my mouth and chew slowly again. It slides down easier this time.

“Ten broken ribs. One broken femur, broken left pointer finger, first-degree chemical burns, water remnant in the lungs, minor cuts and lacerations, and a moderate concussion.” Bruce’s smile is tired when he looks me in the eyes, his fingers squeezing my shoulder. “I’m thinking at least four months’ recovery for the leg, less for your ribs.” Bruce gives me a look.

I want to disappear into my pillow. I mean, really, how much of a child does he think I am? The surge of indignance stops halfway between

my chest and my mouth. Then again, I got into this mess and fought when I said I wouldn't, so...

"Ms. Thompkins is waiting to make a professional diagnosis back at the Manor." Alfred holds out another cracker, which I take, popping it into my mouth. "But we are not quite ready to leave yet."

I freeze mid-chew. Wait, not ready to leave yet? What's that supposed to mean? I raise an eyebrow at Bruce, but start chewing again. I know I'm hurt, and I think he'd forgive me, but still, it's always safer not to talk with your mouth full around Alfred.

"I thought you might want to see Barbara." Bruce doesn't move from my side, but his smile slowly grows. "As Dick Grayson, of course."

The world stands still. I blink at him, my mouth opening and closing like a fish. Wait... what did he just say? See Babs? As Dick Grayson? My heart surges in my chest before stopping in its tracks.

"But..." I motion to all the injuries. No way, Babs, who knew every little scratch that Robin got, will not get suspicious. Unless, of course, Bruce is ready to reveal who we are. But I'm not banking on that. "But what about all this?"

"Dick Grayson went out to look for Barbara Gordon." Bruce's eyes glint, a small smirk of all things creeping up on his mouth. "He got

himself jumped and beaten up in an alleyway and was later found by the Batman.”

I can't help myself. I laugh. It hurts and feels good all at the same time. Trust Bruce to find a way to cover up every little absence. I mean, seriously, if people looked harder, we would be found out so easily. It's so obvious.

“Alright.” I hold out a hand, letting Bruce pull me all the way up. My head swims, and the world spins, but only for a second. I grip Bruce's hand, squeezing his larger fingers tight. “Thanks.”

It doesn't take long for us to arrive back at Ace Chemicals. On the way, I lean back in the limo, curling in my blanket, listening to Alfred tell me from the driver's cabby what happened as Bruce changes in the corner, slipping out of his gear and into jeans and a clean T-shirt, running some hair gel through his cowl-head and scrubbing his own face.

Four days and five nights. That's how long Babs and I were missing. Four days and five nights. I let the numbers roll around in my head, trying to fit them in with the different rooms of the maze, trying to figure out how long each part took or how long Babs and I were passed out in the middle room, but I can't for the life of me figure out how it fits.

A fever dream, that's what the maze was. It was never meant to follow the rules of time.

But then Alfred tells me how Batman and the Commish had started looking, how the trails ran to dead ends and traps, and how, after the first two days, Batman had enlisted Catwoman's help.

"Ms. Catwoman had tried to gain the Batman's attention."

Alfred's voice rolls through the limo in his storytelling register, weaving the events together in my head. "But he was far too busy."

"So she decided that if she was going to spend more time with me, she had to help," Bruce interjects from the back of the car, scrubbing the last of the dirt smudges from his jawline, his mouth set in a frown. "It was... interesting."

"So... what was all that about a date, then?" What? I can't help myself, okay! I mean, I really don't want Batman and Catwoman to be a thing. That would be so weird! But I still smirk and wiggle my eyebrows.

Bruce huffs, his eyes hardening for a split second. "She was joking. We aren't going on a date."

"Eh—" I lean back into my seat, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Does she know that?"

Before Bruce can answer, though, we pull right in front of the media circus. The Arkham escort and the ambulance are gone, leaving only the cop cars behind and the news vans, of course. Oh... we have to walk through there as Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson. I wrinkle my nose, hugging myself tighter in my blanket. Maybe this isn't a good idea.

"Now, remember." Bruce is suddenly at my side, his hand on my back, helping me to my feet, grabbing a pair of crutches from below the seat. "Jumped by a gang while you were looking for Barbara."

"Great," I grumble, accepting the crutches and moving slowly toward the door behind Bruce. "Now our relationship's going to be public. Romance of the century. Wonderful."

"Don't worry." Bruce's arm wraps around me in a sort of hug. But hey, with Bruce? I will take a 'sort of hug' any day. I look up at him, meeting those steely eyes. Those eyes that looked at me so hard and demanding what, only five days ago? But now look at me with something soft. Something that wraps around me warmer than my blanket but also sparkles with mischief. "Just keep your nose clean, and they'll only *try* to dig up dirt. Unless you *want* to be like me."

“Ha!” Be like Bruce with two girls on my arm and the entire city swooning over me? No thanks. For one, Babs would kill me. And for another, Babs would kill me.

The door to the limo opens, Alfred standing to the side, one hand behind his back, the other on the rim of the door. Bruce steps out first, and the cameras snap onto us. Bright white flashes paint the world, voices rising into shouts, mikes shoved at his face. But Bruce ignores them. He turns and holds out a hand to me.

I accept it, letting him help me out of the limo, letting him help me get situated on my crutches. Now it's my turn to get bombarded by people who chatter like monkeys, trying to get the exclusive scoop. Questions like 'what was it like knowing your friend was in the clutches of the Joker', 'How many men jumped you,' or 'What do you think about the statement that Bruce Wayne shouldn't be allowed to be your guardian?'

I ignore them all, pushing through with my crutches, my eyes searching the flashes, the writhing mass of bodies, pressing through the heat to find one person. One person...

And then I see her. Bandaged up just like me, mostly clean, her hair pulled up into a messy bun, still wrapped in my cape, still holding my bō staff. Well... Robin's cape and Robin's bō staff.

I know I just saw her; I know that we've spent the last few days together. But that was Robin, not Dick. To her, that was a stranger, not a friend. At least, not at first. So, for a moment, the world freezes. The voices fade, and the lights stop flashing. I stare at her for a moment, my heart pounding in my ears. Then she turns, and her green eyes snap onto mine. And light the night.

"Babs!" her name explodes out of my lips. I swing forward on my crutches, not taking my eyes off her. The bō staff clatters to the ground. Babs leaps away from her dad, running full tilt at me.

"Dick!" My name reaches my ears, embarrassing, yeah, sure, but the way she says it, with that laugh mixed with something like a sob... well...

I wouldn't trade it for the world.

At first, I'm afraid she'll knock into me and shatter the other fourteen of my ribs, but she stops a yard away, her shoulders sinking, her lip trembling. My stomach plummets for a second. What's wrong? Is she okay? Is she hurt in a way that I didn't know about? Or... the thought hits

me like a train. What if... what if she hates Dick Grayson after this?

What if she likes Robin more? What if—

Babs closes the distance between us, fresh tears pouring down her cheeks like twin waterfalls, a small choking sob squeezing out of her lips.

I let my crutches clatter to the ground and hold out my arms, my mind still whirling. What if she—

Then, she's in my arms, hugging me tight, her head pressed against my shoulder, her breath on my neck. My ribs creak, but I barely feel a thing. I blink over her curls, but only for a moment. The next, I wrap my arms around her and squeeze. Something fills my chest, a place I didn't even know was empty.

And I know.

I could stand here and hold her forever. Yeah, yeah, I know it's sappy! But it's true! Let me have this!

“I-I'm glad you're here.” Her voice tickles my neck, teasing my hair. I squeeze her tighter, trying to chase away the sobs, my hand slowly rubbing circles into her back. Something shoots me over and over right in the heart. Not a painful shot but a knowing shot. Something that says, ‘See? More than a friend.’

“I’m glad you’re safe.” I surprise myself with how my voice rumbles, finally a nice manly deep, not cracking at all, even though a lump makes its happy home in my throat. “I’m sorry I was late.”

For a second, I freeze, holding back a sharp breath and a wince. Because Dick Grayson wasn’t late, Robin was. Dick Grayson was supposed to be waiting for Babs at the school. But Babs doesn’t seem to notice. And if she does, she doesn’t say anything. I swallow hard, letting my chin rest on her head, pressing down into her tangled, greasy hair. What? Do you think I care about that?

“Do... do you need anything?” I pull away the tiniest bit, letting her look up at me. Really, it’s so weird to be taller than her now. I ignore the feeling of eyes crawling up and down my spine and the muffled whispers of the media. The ‘awws’ from the women and the chuckles from the men. They will probably show this moment between us over and over again on every channel, but I don’t care.

Babs is here. Babs is safe.

“No.” Babs smiles up at me, her eyes swimming, but the rest of her face beaming. “I just want you to be here with me.”

I laugh, it hurts, but it’s worth it. I tug her back into a hug, wanting nothing more than to give her a nice ol’ kiss right smack on the

lips—but the Commish is already giving me a look. And, okay, I’ve heard of the ‘dad look,’ and I’ve survived the Batglare. But this is no joke. So I make sure to leave space between us and not get too comfortable with my Almost-Girlfriend. Because, yeah, she is my Almost-Girlfriend, isn’t she?

“I can do that.”

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

BRUCE AND I TALK

The rest of the night goes by in a blur of flashing lights and long car rides. I have to fill out a full report as Dick Grayson, detailing the events of my beat down in an alleyway that didn't actually happen, don't do this at home, kids, lying to the police, I mean, and sitting next to Babs as she spills her guts about what happened in the maze. Hearing her tell it, everything from waking up after the shark tank to running from the hyenas to the scorpions to watching Robin get beaten to the pulp—

Yeah, it really does sound like something a person would dream about after eating too much sugar before bed or something. But what surprises me most are the parts where Babs was awake and aware, and Robin was not, or at least thought she wasn't. Especially the part where she overheard Robin singing to himself. I'm never going to live that one down.

But then, I'm back in the limo, lying on the makeshift bed, Bruce sitting at my side, his arm draped around my shoulders, his eyes locked on the doors and windows, looking out for any threat. Of course, he is. I would be, too, if I wasn't so tired.

We finally pull through the iron gates to the Wayne property. I can't see, lying down over here, but I can imagine the rolling hills, the waving trees, and the stately manor spreading out in front of us, glistening in the gray of pre-dawn.

Alfred pulls us right up to the front door, climbing out of the car to open the door for us. And, just like before, I let Bruce help me out of the car, my feet settling onto the drive. A booming *woof* echoes through the grounds. I grin, my heart soaring as a huge black shape bounds toward us from across the hills, paws kicking up the turf and autumn leaves on the way over.

“Ace!” I hold out a hand just as he reaches us, weaving around us like some excitable puppy, huge tail pounding from side to side, large pink tongue slobbering, head shoving up into my hand. I dig my fingers into his thick, soft fur and let him walk with me to the door, scratching behind his ears the whole way.

When we reach the door, I expect him to turn away, for Bruce to shoo him back into the grounds, but Bruce doesn't. Instead, when I swing over the threshold, landing in the Manor's warm, echoing entrance hall, Bruce motions to Ace. “Ace, come.”

My heart soars when Ace patters into the hall, his nails clicking on the hardwood, his huge pants bouncing off the walls. I stare at Bruce, blinking, my hand going back into Ace's fur. Ace is an outside dog, a guard dog. He's never come inside for as long as I can remember.

"You need some company," Bruce says simply, his hand reaching out to cup my elbow and help me back into my swinging walk. "I can arm the fence."

Well, I'm not about to argue with that, now, am I?

Bruce guides Ace and me to my bedroom. It's not how I left it. No, it's cleaner. The sheets changed and pulled back, ready for me to slide into. An IV drip stand and another tray of medical supplies sit next to my bed. A woman about Alfred's age with fluffy white hair curled around her head, soft brown eyes, and a smooth, smiling face with only the smallest of wrinkles waits for us, dressed in a simple jacket and skirt combo.

Leslie Thompkins, the hero's hero. And by that, I mean our own personal doctor. I smile at her, letting Bruce take my crutches and help me swing up into my own bed. My own bed, with the bouncy mattress and soft-as-a-feather pillow. My own bed with nice cool sheets and fresh ice packs for my ribs.

Ah, there's no place like home.

“My goodness, Sweetie.” Leslie clicks her tongue, pulling up my shirt to inspect the bandages and shaking her head. Her hands are light as she feels around the bandages, poking and prodding where my ribs shift. It hurts, but right now? Cuddled up in my own bed? It doesn't hurt as much. “You had quite the number done on you.”

“Ah, well, you know me.” I wave a hand, holding out the other for her to swab. I turn my head to the side when she grabs the IV. What? Needles are horrible, okay? “Always getting into trouble.”

“Bruce,” Leslie waves a hand, motioning to the tray as the other hand expertly slides the IV into my arm without so much as a tug. I turn my head back, peeking at Bruce, who hangs back in the corner. “Be a darling and grab me that stethoscope.” Leslie smiles, patting my hand. She's soft and warm, and I'd never call her ‘squishy’ to her face, but—well, she's the doting grandmother I never had. “Bruce and Alfie got you patched up well, Sweetie. Let's see what else we can do.” Leslie brushes some hair from my eyes, her smile soft. The world glistens, fading around the edges.

“M'kay.” I don't bother with how much my words slur. I can already feel the tug of sleep pulling down my eyelids, Leslie's face

blurring around me. Something warm and furry presses into my side, breathing steadily. I let out a long, painless breath and give in to the pull of sleep.

The next week goes by in a haze. A haze of lying in my bed, Ace pressed up against my side, and doing... well... basically nothing. Well, okay, not *nothing*, nothing, but let me tell you, only being able to lie in bed and watch movies and read books and be careful not to move in a way that would completely and utterly hurt is one of the most annoying things ever, especially for someone who's used to flying through the Gotham streets every night.

I do, though, get to call the Teen Titans several times. None of them come to visit, though Wally, aka Kid Flash, is probably going to come sometime this week, though. Anyway, telling them about what happened, you know, all the cool, dangerous parts, is actually kind of fun. It's strange how, in hindsight, what was so terrifying at the time could actually be funny or, as Kori put it, 'the epicness.'

Babs comes over, too. Several times, actually. First, just to drop off some school work so I don't fall behind, even though I'm already ahead and should be getting back sooner rather than later, and the next few times just to hang out. And last night I got my wish.

A bowl of butter popcorn, a fuzzy blanket, and a Lord of the Rings marathon. Well, okay, that last part wasn't exactly in the original wish, but they're movies, so success.

But more than that, Babs finally comes over to my house. She laughs at my closet, pointing out that I never wear any of my hundreds of clothes, and geeks out over the indoor gym, outside pool, and so on and so forth.

It's nice having another kid at the manor.

But today isn't a day that I've called anyone or have had anyone over. I sit in my bed, propped up against the pillows, petting the warm, fluffy thing that curls next to me, tail thumping slowly. Ace hasn't left my side for anything except bathroom breaks. Not even for food. In fact, it got to the point where Alfred started to bring our meals together.

I stare at the plaster ceiling, tracing the shapes with my eyes, basking in the chilling autumn sun that streams through my floor-to-ceiling windows. One wonky giraffe with a huge tail. One elephant with only one ear and three legs, each a different size. A shape that looks like a face, well, okay, sort of like a face—

Ace's ears pick up next to me, his large dark head rising just before the door swings open softly. I glance over and blink to see Bruce

standing there. Bruce, with his hair unkempt, dressed only in a T-shirt and flannel pants, just like me. He knocks gently on the open door but doesn't smile, at least not completely.

“Can I come in?”

I scoot higher up against the pillows, trying not to stare. Bruce has been around so much that it's actually strange. Movies, reading books, or just talking, not chatting, of course, about the goings on in Gotham.

In fact, he and Alfred have taken turns changing my bandages and checking my leg, ribs, cuts, and gash for infection. But... that's always before he leaves for work or after he comes home for the night. Not right, smack dab in the middle of when he's supposed to be at the office.

“Yeah... sure.” I pat the bed next to me, the spot not occupied by Ace, and grin at Bruce. I'm glad he's here, that there's nothing like that horrible chill between us anymore. That we can be our own strange version of a family again.

Bruce pads across the floor, his bare feet not making a sound. He sits on the side of the bed, shifting the mattress, and turns to me. “How are you doing, Chum?”

“Better.” My heart surges at my nickname, and I pat my chest, which doesn’t hurt as much as it used to. “Alfred’s slowly taking me off the meds.”

“I know.” I snort, coughing down a laugh. Of course, he does. I mean, why do I even bother telling him anything anyway? Then again, it’s always bad to assume someone knows something, even if that someone is the Batman.

“Yeah...” I drum my hands on my knees, one hitting against the cast, the other thumping on the blanket. I hum for a moment, but Bruce doesn’t make a move. So, my turn again, I guess. “So... how’s everything at Wayne Enterprises?”

“Going well. But that’s not why I’m here.” Bruce’s hand covers mine. His eyes harden for a moment, then soften. He lets out a long, loud sigh. “We never got to really talk about what happened.”

My stomach plummets down through the bed, through the floor, falling all the way down to the cave way below our feet. What happened... I swallow hard. The words he said in that warehouse when he was holding me, ‘we were both right... and we were both wrong,’ echo in my head over and over. He’s right. We really didn’t talk about it much, our fight in the Batcave after the Joker attack, about our fight in

the banquet hall before I ran away—about me going behind his back. If I were a balloon, I would be deflating, spiraling around the room.

“Oh.” Here we go. I grab the blankets, strangling them between my fingers. I swallow hard. I’ve wanted to talk about it for so long, to get it all off my chest, but now? I can’t even look him in the eyes. For a couple of seconds, anyway. The next, I whip my head up, blinking back the pressure that burns behind my eyes. “Bruce... I’m sorry about....” My shoulders sag. I swallow hard. I can do this. “I’m sorry about what I did. Running off and—I made a mistake. I should’ve talked to you... I should’ve just....”

“You asked me—” Bruce picks up smoothly from where I left off. Only he doesn’t cut me off. He waits for me to finish before speaking. His voice isn’t cold or warm. It’s thick and heavy. Tired. His shoulders droop, and for once, his perfectly sculpted face sags. He runs a hand down it, rubbing his chin. “What I was so afraid of.” Bruce meets my eyes steadily, his mask gone. Not Bruce that the public sees, or Bruce that I see. Not Batman. Just... Bruce. “*Chum...*” Bruce’s hand settles on my shoulder, firm and warm and real. His voice catches. I swallow hard, biting my lip. Our argument flashes before my eyes. I did ask that, didn’t

I? “Do you want to know the one thing that keeps me up at night? The one thing... that haunts *my* nightmares?”

I don’t dare to breathe, to move. I just stare, waiting.

Bruce’s other hand reaches out and clasps my other shoulder. He doesn’t look away, but his eyes soften, melting like ice in summer. “The one thing that haunts my nightmares... is losing you.” Bruce sighs a long, heavy sigh. “Every time we’re on patrol—every time someone fires a gun or comes at you with a knife—” Bruce looks away, turning his face toward the sun filtering through the windows, closing his eyes, “That’s what I dream about. That’s what wakes me up every night and every morning.”

Wait... what?

I choke, trying to push back against the shaking in my chest, against the pressure in my eyes. Bruce... Bruce has nightmares... about losing me? I mean, now that I think about it, it makes sense. I’m a kid doing a job no one should have to do; a skilled kid, sure, but still a kid.

I don’t even know what I’m doing or when I made the decision, but one moment I sit there, the next, I lunge forward and wrap my arms around his thick, muscular chest, burying my face into his shoulder. I

know I'm probably too old for hugs, but then again, when is anyone ever too old for hugs?

Bruce doesn't hesitate. His arms wrap around me, holding me tight, rubbing my back as my shoulders shake. I hope he doesn't mind the snot and tears I'm getting on his shirt. But I can worry about that later.

"That's why I push you so hard, Chum. That's why we train every night. But don't think for a second I don't trust you or am not proud of you." Bruce's voice rumbles against my ear, his fingers tracing soothing circles around my aching back, his strong arms holding me tight. "I am. You have grown into a strong, brave, kind young man. You've become a beacon of light in this city. You've grown more than I could have ever dreamed. And I don't tell you that nearly enough." Bruce tightens his hold, not enough to hurt but enough to keep me from shaking, even though he shakes. Only a little, of course, because he's Batman, but I don't care.

He's here. He's proud of me. And we're talking. That's enough.

"I'm so, *so* sorry, Chum."

I shut my eyes tight, biting my tongue. I don't want to say something stupid to ruin this moment, this moment where I have Bruce, where everything's right with the world.

“But... I'm not the only one who's noticed how you've grown.”

Bruce turns to me a little, his chin resting on my head. I blink. What does he—? “They don't underestimate you anymore, like when you started out as Robin. Dick... you're growing up, and the stronger you get, the more dangerous this game... this... crusade... is.”

Oooh, *that*.

I don't argue. Because it's true, isn't it? Bane recognized that I was stronger and faster. I couldn't get Babs and me out of the maze in the first room because Joker didn't underestimate my abilities. Bruce is right. The more the villains see us do, the better we get, and the more the bad guys rise to the occasion. Goons underestimating me used to be one of my few superpowers.

I guess that time's over.

I nod slowly. This is why we train as hard as we do. This is why we have to be perfect. Well, not perfect, but we have to be on our guard, doing our best. Because if being trapped with Babs proved anything, it's that being on top of your game is the difference between life and death.

I open my mouth to say something, but Bruce isn't done, not yet.

“And... I'm sorry for not handling it well... I... I was terrified, but that didn't give me the right to snap.” Bruce laughs, a short,

humorless laugh, stopping the rubbing, pushing me away so we can look at each other again. Bruce Wayne doesn't cry, but I've never once seen him get this close. Those stern eyes, that clenched jaw, everything's softer, open. Honest. I relax, my shaking slowing. I've never once heard Bruce apologize this much before. Maybe this will be a regular thing from now on?

Eh, I probably shouldn't get my hopes up.

"You know me." Bruce grimaces, shaking his head. "I'm not good at... this...."

I laugh, a real laugh, and shake my head, patting his arm. "You're not. But you're getting there."

"That's no excuse, though." Bruce's hands sit on my shoulders again, unmoving. "I should have never treated you the way I did, Dick. I hurt you, and... I..." Bruce trails off, his shoulders sagging. His voice lowers to a rumbling whisper. "You aren't a failure, Dick. I'm not disappointed in you. You... you're my *son*."

The world stands still. My heart slows to a stop, even as it swells ten times too big in my chest. I don't say anything. I can't. I just take the words and slip them safely into the back of my head for later. Because

you better believe things won't be this perfect forever. But I'm not going to think about that now.

After all we said, all we did, all the anger and the rage, it's amazing how simple it is to break down those walls. Because all I ever wanted was my Dad. All I ever wanted was this, right here, right now.

The pause keeps going, at least until Bruce laughs again, dry and still humorless. "I'm not good with teenagers."

Well, now. Truer words have never been spoken. But I can't blame him. I mean, Bruce Wayne? Secluded Billionaire? Was he raised by his butler in a massive manor by himself since he was a kid?

"You weren't good with tweens either," I smirk into my lap, fiddling with my thumbs, before glancing up at him. Bruce. Apologizing. Bruce laying it all out for me. Bruce hugging me. Bruce saying that he was wrong. It doesn't give me satisfaction. It doesn't make me want to rub it in his face. The only way I can describe the feeling that rushes through my stomach and chest is relief. Plain and simple. "I just wish...."

What do I wish? Well, that one's easy. I let my smirk drop, even as my eyes meet his. "I just wish you had told me sooner," because if he had, we never would've fought. But there's no changing the past. It's my turn now, my turn to spill my guts. "But... I'm sorry, too, B. For

disobeying you. I was acting like—” you know, for someone who wanted so badly to have more responsibility, I was kinda acting like— “Like a kid.”

I swallow hard but manage a small, shaking smile. It fills me up, wrapping around my chest. “I should’ve known you were just being an overprotective Dad-Bat. I’m sorry, and... I forgive you.”

I mean, everything from telling me not to make mistakes, keeping me from homecoming, sending me away from the Joker case, not letting me go off on my own—ugh, why didn't I see it before? Just put, ‘he drew wrong conclusions’ on my grave.

Dad-Bat. Huh. That one’s new.

Bruce laughs; this time, it’s full, long, and real. I join in, lunging in for another hug. This one’s lighter, without tears or shaking. It fills up that hole in my heart so much I think it’s going to burst. I let out a long, loud sigh.

Things are finally back to normal. No, they aren’t, are they? Not normal, not the same.

Better.

“I promise—” Bruce’s hand slips down to grip my biceps as he pulls me gently away again, his eyes more open than I’ve ever seen them,

his face so easy to read it's almost terrifying. But... I'd be lying if I said it isn't a breath of fresh air. "From now on, we'll work more as partners. A compromise. You will get more missions, more freedom in operations." Bruce slides something into my palm. I glance down, blinking at the tiny thumb drive and a pair of keys. "You will start taking point on patrol and more initiative with Gordon."

I blink up at him. Wait, what did he say? More freedom... more initiative... I can't help the huge, dumb smile from cracking my face. Apparently, I'm not grounded after all. But... he did say compromise, didn't he?

"We'll take it slow, though." Bruce smiles; that small smile barely tugs at his lips but is so unbelievably Bruce that it only feeds the fuzzy feeling spilling over in my chest. "For my sake. No going solo for a while in Gotham. Deal?"

Bruce holds out his hand. I don't think twice. I mean, would you? I never wanted to go off by myself or handle things on my own, not really. I mean, it doesn't take that long in a crazy maze to remind a person they aren't in Jump City anymore.

So I shake his hand, not vigorously, but firmly, not caring how much my eyes are probably sparkling or that stupid grin on my face.

“Deal.”

“And, as a bonus.” Bruce drops our hands, passing me a slip of paper. I snatch it up and blink at the contents. It’s a schedule. My schedule, but something’s different about it. Because, on some days, between ‘free time’ and ‘dinner,’ and sometimes passing dinner, are the words ‘time with Babs.’ I whip my head to Bruce.

No. Stinkn’. Way.

“Thank you!” I lunge in for another hug. What? He’s not a hugger, okay? I might as well get them all in now! Besides, I couldn’t help myself even if I wanted to. “Thank you, thank you!” I bury my head into his shoulder. Really, it’s as if he just gave me the world. Who would’ve guessed Bruce Wayne would soften up? “Thanks, Dad.”

“I never wanted this life for you, Chum.” Bruce holds me tight, a firm, solid rock that won’t change, that won’t move. At least, not too much. “I wanted you to have a normal life for as long as you could. I’m sorry I lost sight of that.”

I pull away again, waving a hand. He's not wrong, again, but I know if anyone has a worse time handling guilt than I do, it's Bruce Wayne.

"I know. And I get why you push me so hard." I clasp the new schedule, the thumb drive, and the keys to my chest, my smile settling into something normal. "And... I wanted to say..." the words aren't enough, I used to say. There should be something more. That's what I always thought. But... "Thanks, Dad." My mind flashes to the maze. Then I was so worried about surviving that I didn't even realize... "Because of you... I survived."

Bruce stares at me. I stare at him. He nods slowly, his lips twitching. We don't say anything after that. We just sit on my bed. Me snuggled between Ace and Bruce, clutching my newest treasures to my chest, Bruce sitting next to me, carefully running his hand along Ace's head, which settles on my stomach.

Well, okay, we don't say anything until—

"Wait!" I shoot upright, holding out the keys, the penny finally dropping. "Are these for the Batmobile?!"

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

I FINALLY GET MY FIRST DANCE WITH MY ALMOST GIRLFRIEND

Broken bones stink. I mean, seriously, they take months to heal, and you have to deal with physical therapy, getting back into shape, and all that annoying stuff. But of course, just because you have broken bones doesn't mean your life stops. Or at least, my life doesn't stop. I still have to hobble back into school on a pair of crutches, submitting myself to the very interesting tradition of signing my cast, which some people enjoy way too much. I mean, really, who draws a full-blown mural of a dog chasing a cat on someone's cast? But then there's the awkward bit of people asking if you need help with anything.

And by 'bit,' I mean almost every single second of every single school day. Well, not Babs. Babs never asks once if I need help with anything. She just does it. Or flags down one of the boys to help. Now, you might be wondering, how are Babs and I? I mean, we had that hug after the whole Maze of Madness shindig, and she said she just wanted me around, right? Well... I mean, other than being subjected to the entire

story where I had to act surprised and outraged and like I wasn't actually there for the whole thing... good?

I mean, I was able to get some solid teasing about Robin in, which I got punched for, but hey! It was worth it! But... on an entirely different note... Babs finally told Dick Grayson what happened to her mom. In fact, she told me more than what she told Robin that night. Everything from the hours beforehand to what Joker actually said to her to the blood staining her apartment's floor scarlet.

And I finally told her what happened that night when we first met. What? I have told her so much about my family; I know she knows what happened. I mean, it was all over the news. But I finally told her what I saw and heard that night. All of this, of course, was done in a nest of blankets and pizza boxes on the floor of the Commish's office, Miss Williams looking on like she did two years ago, only this time, she smiles to herself.

Kitten doesn't come back to school. Of course, everyone has their gossip and whatever, but Bruce told me a couple of days into my recovery that her father decided it was best to move to Blüdhaven, Gotham's sister city down south. Not that Blüdhaven's much better, but oh well. I hope she's happier there.

My schedule changes a lot throughout the recovery process. I get to sleep in more, but you better believe Alfred doesn't work me any less hard in the gym. It's just different things, but let me tell you, after broken ribs and sitting around for a week or so, anything above a five-pound weight is torture, plain and simple. Well, okay, at least at first. And soon, I'm holding myself up on the still rings, not that far off the ground, Alfred helping me hold my casted leg up and off the ground.

Ace sleeps in my bed. I know, I know! He's supposed to be a guard dog patrolling the fence and the grounds. But when your guardian is Bruce Wayne, the family 'guard dog' can just as easily transfer to being your own personal 'bodyguard-dog,' if you know what I mean. Usually, I'd be able to defend myself if someone got past security and snuck into my room. But like this? Ha! Yeah, as if. So yes, Ace is my bodyguard/service dog now, I guess. In fact, Principal A.P even cleared Ace to stay with me at school, curling around my feet during classes and growling at anyone who he doesn't know if they get too close. You know, like Matt or the media that tries to sneak in to steal pics of Babs and me. I mean, really, I don't even know what they're expecting to get. Is us sitting on a bench eating lunch so fascinating? I mean, it's not like I'm going to lean over and give her a smooch. I mean, sure, I've thought

about it... You don't need to know how much, but a) I don't think I'm ready for that yet, and b) I don't want another broken bone, so... yeah. But I mean, really, just how juicy is a shot of us holding hands?

Suffice it to say, life's back to normal, but better. My big, hulking cast should be off in a couple of weeks, and I should be starting to act as a lookout on patrols soon. I can't wait to get back out there. Actually, Lucius said that he's taking my brief 'vacation' to design me a new suit, complete with a genetically locked utility belt and tools fitted into secret pockets in my vest and leggings. That will be awesome—at least until some villain figures it out and decides to take my shirt and pants off when I get caught. I mean, I don't really want to fight crime in my underwear.

For now, though, I do what I used to do before being allowed out as Robin, run point from the cave. It's strange, sitting back in that seat, looking through Batman's HUD display, pulling up maps and files from the computer, so he doesn't have to. I almost like it, but nothing can beat being out on the streets with Batman.

Only three weeks left, Grayson. I sit in the back of the limo, my foot propped up on the seat, rifling through the notes I stuffed in my school bag. What? If you really have nothing else to do, why not take on

more homework and even get ahead? I mean, who doesn't want to try and get a Ph.D. before they graduate? Anyone? No?

"How was school today, Master Dick?" Alfred pulls us out into traffic, guiding the limo into the flow, glancing at me through the review mirror.

"You know, the usual." I squint at some hasty notes about 'cults in our world today' and shift back to some about forensics. Huh. And here I thought I had decent handwriting. Oh well. "Babs and I dissected a frog together. That was... interesting."

"Ah, yes. Quite." I can feel Alfred's eyes on me. "And how is Miss Gordon?"

I can't help the smile that tugs my lips. I can just see her now, her nose wrinkled, her lips puckered, and her cheeks turning almost as green as the frog. She'd done it without a problem, but I don't blame her. That smell could make anyone's stomach queasy. "She's good. Apparently, we're competing to see who will graduate first."

"Ah." I glance to see Alfred's lips twitch, his eyebrows quirking up. "Miss Gordon is a bright young woman. She will go far."

I lean back, letting my papers fall back into my bag. I think Babs will win our little competition. Because Alfred's right, she is brilliant. In

fact, at fifteen, she's already looking into going to Gotham State University with her associate's degree and a gold medal from the Olympics.

I can't help my smile. She's amazing and smart and puts up with a doofus like me? I mean, really, what did I do to deserve her?

Alfred and I chat the rest of the way home; Ace curled up as usual right around my good foot, ears swiveling. We talk about school, about what I think Babs is going to go to college for, and if I should follow her to the Olympics, the answer's 'no' on that one. I mean, really, I don't need more attention than I already have, and about little things like how Bruce and Catwoman did not, in fact, go on a date, but that she's been hanging around our patrol areas more.

Worst of all, I think he actually is starting to like her. So much so, actually, that he finally followed her and found out who she is. I mean, what? Am I actually going to have a Cat Burglar as my... what would she even be? I can't see her as a 'mom,' oh gosh no. But also, ew. Come on, Bruce!

Alfred drops me off right at the door to the manor, letting Ace and me out of the limo. This is normal. But what isn't normal is Bruce standing on the porch waiting for me, that slight smile tugging his lips. I

jam my crutches into the drive and swing up the steps, stopping right in front of him.

“What is it?” I cock my head, looking behind him, expecting someone, a guest, or something.

“Nothing.” I can’t for the life of me read his expression, other than amusement and mischief and all things not good. I raise both eyebrows. Bruce chuckles. “Just change into normal clothes, Chum.”

Well, now. I think my eyebrows just hit the ceiling. Normal clothes? “You mean for going out and about ‘normal clothes?’” I lean forward on my crutches. “Are we going to ice cream?”

“Not quite.” Bruce steps aside, waving me in. “You’ll see.”

“Fine.” I give him a look as I swing past him, Ace trotting beside me, ears swiveling as if he hears something other than Bruce and me. But that could be anything from squirrels scampering down the drain pipes to the AC turning on. I make my way to my room, slipping out of my school uniform and tossing on a pair of everyday jeans and a green T-shirt with ‘Hugs, five dollars (college is expensive)’ written on the front. Did Bruce get this for me? Yes, yes, he did. Do I think it’s hilarious?

Yup.

I pull on a red plaid button-up shirt but don't button it, instead rolling up the sleeves to my elbows. Then I swing my way into the bathroom and muss my hair. Not quite into the Robin style, but not in the slicked-back Dick Grayson and school and parties style, either.

I nod at my reflection. There. I look like a normal human being. But... what's the occasion? I mean, I usually just throw on workout shorts and a T when I'm running around the house. Are we going to a sports game? Dinner? I shrug and make my way back out of my room. Alfred waits for me in the hall, hands clasped behind his back, his lips twitching. I raise an eyebrow. "Alf?"

"Follow me, if you please, Master Dick." One second he's there; the next, he's gone, speeding off through the manor with his quick, purposeful stride. I mean, really, I'm on crutches over here! I leap forward, going as fast as I can through the halls, around the corridors, until I'm standing right before two huge ornate oak doors. I pause.

I've only ever been in the ballroom five times before, once when Bruce and Alfred showed me the manor and the other four times when Bruce hosted a party here. I look over at Alfred, who places his gloved hands on the polished silver handles. "Master Dick." He pushes the doors open. "May I present Miss Gordon."

The door swings open with a heavy whoosh, leaving me to blink in the light of the three enormous crystal chandeliers that dance and clink overhead. The ceiling swoops up, tall Victorian pillars leading to a molded ceiling that runs with vines and flowers. The ballroom stretches out three times the size of the banquet hall and is by far the biggest room in the house. Thick sapphire velvet drapes with gold tassels glitter and swoop over the pillars, almost like I just walked into a castle from a fairytale. Huge floor-to-ceiling windows span one side, looking out over the flower garden whose flowers shine their brightest before wilting before winter.

The patterned floor stretches out before my feet, polished until I can see my reflection on the planks. A small stage for an orchestra sits in one corner, complete with a grand piano. And in the center of it all, dressed in a flowing purple dress sparkling in the lights, her hair swooped up into a glittering copper bun, her cheeks flushed rose pink, her emerald eyes shining, her lips spread into a beaming smile...

Is Babs.

I stare at her for a moment, blinking. This can't be real, right? I mean, Babs is here, in a dress, and I'm... I hobble toward her, my crutches clicking on the hard floor. When I reach her, I stare. I know now

that when I woke up in that first room in the Maze, I wasn't dreaming when I thought she was an angel.

Because she is.

"You look beautiful." Surprisingly, the words slide out without a stutter or a squeak. I smile at her, my eyes sweeping her dress. It isn't one of the options she had picked. This one looks more like something a young woman would wear at high-end parties. "I love your dress."

"Bruce got it for me." Babs' hands pick up layers of the flowing, gossamer fabric, giving it a swish. It flutters like dragonfly wings, catching millions of lights. Her eyes sparkle more than the crystals overhead ever could. "Real crystals. He said I would need it if I was going to come to more parties and benefits with you."

"Oh yeah?" My heart skips a beat. Bruce did this. Of course, he did. I shouldn't be surprised. When Bruce Wayne gets an idea in his head, he goes above and beyond. Something warm and fuzzy wraps around my chest. "Well, now you're making me feel out of place." I laugh, pulling on my T-shirt. "Maybe I should go change."

"No!" Babs shakes her head, her smile brighter than the sun flooding through the windows. Her eyes twinkle with mischief. She

clasps her hands in front of her. “I like it when you dress like this. You seem the most... you.”

Alfred’s suddenly at my side, holding out a hand. I look from Babs to Alfred. “Are you serious?” This can’t be happening. I have to be dreaming. But it is. So I hand my crutches to Alfred. As soon as he’s gone, faded back into the Manor, the music starts to swell around us, echoing and building. No words, just a gentle, sweet little waltz.

My first Homecoming dance, sort of? Here goes nothing.

I hold out my hand to Babs. I may be in a cast, and it may not be what I was expecting, but it’s worth it. “May I have this dance, Lady Babs of Gotham?”

Babs laughs, the sweet sound joining in with the music. Her hand, soft and cool, slips into mine. My fingers tingle. “Of course, Sir Richard, Prince of Gotham.”

Prince, huh? Well, I'm flattered.

I pull her close, but not too close because I know Bruce and Alfred are both watching. I place one hand on her hip and grab her other, traditional style. I hope she can’t feel how clammy and shaky they are. In fact, I hope she doesn't look too closely at my face. I think it might just burn away from overheating. Her other hand rests on my shoulder, and I

take one step, small and careful. No big dance moves. I don't think Babs would appreciate me hurting my leg because I did something stupid. But she doesn't mind the small steps. Or the limp.

“Dad's taking us to Bat Burger for dinner.” Her voice glides with the music, her dress twirling, brushing the floor as we step. She smells like lavender and pizza. Huh, I wonder what I smell like? BO and dog slobber, probably. Oh well.

“Finally!” I carefully place my cast one step after the other, slowly turning us around in circles. I never cared for waltzes, but with Babs? I'll make an exception. “You've been talking it up so much, I was afraid you'd eat all their food before I got there!”

“Oh ha, ha.” Babs gives me ‘the look,’ but I don't mind. Why would I? I mean, she looks so adorable when her eyes narrow, her lips purse, and her eyebrows raise.

I snort, choking back a snicker. It doesn't work that well. Soon, we're both laughing. It feels good to be here with her, you know, not in a life-threatening situation? To just be... Us.

I wish I had thought of this before. Maybe we could've avoided the whole Joker debacle. dance for a moment in silence before— “You know, when I was with Robin, I thought of you a lot.” My heart stops for

a moment. Babs looks up at me, smiling. Does she know? She's smart, so smart that sometimes I wonder... "You two are a lot alike."

I laugh, shaking my head, trying to ignore that tiny spark of suspicion in her eyes. "Really, Babs, that's the greatest compliment you could ever give me." I wiggle my eyebrows at her. "I mean, we all know how much you like Robin."

"Oh, be quiet." Babs squeezes my shoulder and leans forward. The whole world stands still when she pecks me on the cheek. But unlike last time, when it was blink, and you'll miss it, this time, the kiss lingers a little longer, sending my cheek tingling, "The only reason I liked Robin," Her voice tickles my cheek, her breath brushing my hair, "Is because he reminded me of you."

Babs pulls away, but I'm a statue. All you would have to do is blow on me, and I'd topple over. She smiles at me, and everything's right with the world. "You're the best Almost-Boyfriend ever."

"I know." I shake myself and shrink back, holding my arms to defend my face, laughing as she punches me. "Hey, hey! And you're the greatest Almost-Girlfriend a guy could ask for."

“Doofus.” Babs huffs, shoving me. Gently, of course, still wearing a cast over here. But even ‘the look’ can’t hide the twinkle in her eye or the small smile tugging at her lips.

“I know.” I grab her hand again and pull her back to continue our dance. “But hey, at least I’m a loveable doofus.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Darn right.”

Then I pause again, just for a moment. The music swells into a cascading waterfall around us, and the light sparkles on every crystal on Babs’ dress. I meet her eyes. Those bright, emerald eyes sparkle up at me, warm and gentle. Something fills my chest like fire, but it doesn’t hurt. It burns, flickering and comforting, like the fires in the sitting rooms. It wraps around me like an old patchwork quilt.

So I pause, my feet falling still, my arms guiding Babs to a stop. And when I look into her eyes, I know. So I lean forward, my heart pounding a million times a minute, my palms so slick with sweat that Babs might just slip away from me. But I lean forward and press my lips against her soft, rose-pink cheek.

A small kiss, just like the one she gave me. A quick kiss. But fireworks might’s well have exploded in the ballroom. For a moment, it’s

just Babs and me, the music and the soft light shining on us like the sun itself is smiling.

Then, I pull away, my lips still tingling, and smile at her. I know, I know, I'm so lame that I didn't go in for the full-on thing, but like Babs said to Robin—baby steps. And right now? I could honestly care less.

Babs' cheeks flush a deeper pink, and her hand squeezes mine. The next moment, we go back to walking in slow, awkward circles, my cast clunking on the polished wood, trying not to step on her toes.

Someday I will tell Babs the truth. I know I will. She deserves to know. Someday. But not today.

Today?

We'll just be normal kids.

EPILOGUE

In the depths of Arkham Asylum, the guards sweep the halls. They aren't supposed to engage with the inmates, but no one can help stop by one particular cell. This cell that once rang with mad laughter now sits quietly.

Two guards halt in their sweep, laughing, sneering, peering through the bars at the curled-up figure in the straightjacket who sits in the middle of the floor, surrounded by mad scribbles, rocking back and forth on his knees.

“Ha! Look at that! He's quiet for once.” One guard sneers, hitting the bars with his baton.

“Couldn't get the Bat or the Bird, huh, Jokester?” The other one snickers, leaning in toward the cell. “Typical. None of you loonies ever stand a chance.”

The guards walk off, laughing and joking, but they don't even notice the shadow that steps out behind them. The shadow dressed in thick-plated combat armor, armed to the teeth with twin katanas strapped to his back, guns hanging from his belt, straps of bullets and knives, and other weapons brandished and ready. A dual-colored mask hides his face, one side a deep black that fades into the shadows, the other a glinting

copper. Only one eye shines white from that mask, narrowing as he approaches the cell.

“Ah... the Terminator. Hehehehe...” A white hand appears at the bars of the Joker’s cell, fingers wiggling in greeting. “I was wondering when you would be showing up.”

“The other half of your payment,” the hulking man passes the hand another roll of cash and a key. “As promised, after a perfectly executed operation.”

“You know,” The hand twirls the key carelessly, the voice sliding up and down in singsong, “I was wondering, why pay me to do my own little thing? Not that I wouldn’t love to get paid to do what I love best, their screams were worth it, but I got what I wanted.” A bloodshot eye shoves up to the bars, blinking at the man with the dual-colored mask. “What’s in it for you, Strokey?”

The man turns his back to the cell, walking back into shadow. “It was a test.” Deathstroke’s voice barely echoes deep, cold, and hushed down the hall. “And the Boy Wonder passed it.”

THE END

Xarotm Muzngs lxus g yngjuckj vkxin, hknotj mxgtozk gtj rosk