

ROBIN BEGINNINGS

ROBIN BOOK ONE

MADIGAN THOMPSON

*To Charissa, Haniah, NN Readmore, and Cheyenne. Thank you so much
for being among the first to read this and cheer these stories on.*

Y'all are amazing!

I'll swing
By my ankles,
She'll cling
To your knees
As you hang
By your nose
From a high-up
Trapeze.

But just one thing, please.
As we float through the breeze—
Don't sneeze.

The Acrobats- Shel Silverstein

CHAPTER ONE

I FLY WITHOUT A CARE IN THE WORLD

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” Lights flash and fizz, dancing off the glistening waterfall of colors. “Children of all ages!” Music blares, drowned out by the thunderous applause. “I present to you—” Drums boom. “The Fantastic, Fearless Flying Graysons!” I smile and wave, my ears ringing with the noise, my grin glistening in the spotlights. Below, I see the red, gold, and black speck of Ring Master C.C. Haly, his arms raised like a music director as he gestures up at us. “Marvel at their aerial acrobatics as they soar through the heavens—”

As Dad launches off the platform, my heart pounds. His hands grasp the swing, sending him whooshing through the air. At the peak of his arc, he lets go and catapults into a triple flip, just grabbing the second swing. “All without the safety of a net!”

Safety—how can you fly if you know there's something beneath? How can you be free if a net is waiting to catch you? Gosh, I'm getting sentimental in my old age!

The crowd claps madly. Mom's next, flipping onto the swing and following Dad, sailing towards him. Dad catches her wrists and flings her

upwards, where she twirls like a top. She falls backward, plummeting towards the ground. The crowd gasps as she falls, then she's caught by Uncle Rick, who zips out just in time. I smile at the antics, the deadly feats.

All part of the act.

“Watch as they perform their daring dance—” C.C. Haly continues, “Joined by the youngest member of this extraordinary family!”

That's my cue.

I beam for the audience, giving them a small wave, my lips twisting into a smirk. I've been the main attraction since I was old enough to be part of the show. After all, who doesn't want to see a kid flying with the best of 'em? I catapult off the landing, my heart rattling in my chest as I soar, reaching my arms toward Mom. Her face swings over to meet mine, her eyes glistening a brilliant sapphire like the sequins on her leotard, beaming. Her hands latch onto my wrists, and I drop. My stomach rises as I swing down. Then, I am rocketing upwards, a bird set free to fly.

I flip, my body whirling, my blood pumping. The crowd roars like lions. The lights catch the bling on my leotard, casting sparkles around me. It's kind of girly, I know. There're probably boys my age in the

crowd snickering at how sissy I look in my skin-tight green leotard bedazzled with jewels, decorated with the big G on the front. But I don't care. I am in flight, bursting with life. I was born to do this, a Flying Grayson through and through.

Sweat pours down my face, but I don't care. My upper arms burn from the strain, but I don't mind. I see the kids from the fairgrounds this afternoon in my mind's eye. Their smiling, laughing faces. Their joy when they saw me, a kid too, but a kid who can do trapeze in his sleep. I remember the barrage of questions, the cartwheels, the fits of giggles. Yeah, take that, guys! I may look stupid, but I am stupidly famous! At least Mom doesn't put me in the glittery makeup she wears.

When I launch into the grand finale with my family, this is what I think, not the canons, not the boom of fireworks overhead, not the thunderous applause. I think about the kids in the crowd— and Mom's sparkling eyes. The wind rushes my hair around my face, lifts me, and sends me twisting through the air, ducking in between my family as we end our routine.

When my feet touch the platform, I'm red, drenched with sweat, but I wave vigorously, bowing alongside my family. If they were snickering before, they clap now. I'd dare any one of them to come up

here, just to climb the platform. If they can do that, jump off the landing to catch the swing, and flip through the air like a flying squirrel, they can laugh. Maybe.

Confetti and glitter explode around us, and the crowd leaps to their feet, cheering until I think my eardrums will explode. All of our troupe races back into the center ring, giving our guests a fond farewell. I can't wipe the stupid grin off my face as the clowns spray the guests with water, some even going so far as to chase them out of the red and white striped canvas big top. Maybe if I have to retire from trapeze work, I can be one of the clowns. They have too much fun.

The specks of people file out of their seats, chatting about things that I'll never hear except one noise—the noise of goodnight, of a job well done—another superb performance from my family. C.C. Haly bids the crowd and their city of Metropolis farewell and good night.

While most kids worry about grades or sports scores or what kind of new toy they have, I worry about how well my entire circus performs. We're professionals, but you wouldn't believe the things that have gone wrong. Like when someone stuck the lion's mouth shut with candy apples. And trust me, you do *not* want to see Lionel on a bad day.

A hand ruffles my hair; the raven locks find their way into my eyes. Mom's probably going to cut it soon. A deep voice rumbles against my back. "Well done, Dickie Bird." Dad pats my shoulder, his hands large and strong. "That was quite the show we put on."

Dad's tall, powerful, and everything I want to be when I grow up. Even still, it seems impossible to get that many muscles. We do look alike, though. Raven hair, pale skin, bright blue eyes. We'd look like photocopies of each other if my eyes didn't have a darker blue from Mom and if I didn't have her nose.

"Yeah, good job, Champ." Uncle Rick elbows me in the ribs. I tilt my head up to see him wink. "Give it a few years, and you'll be the show's star while us old-timers retire."

Uncle Rick looks a lot like Dad, so it's hard to pin down what's different about them. Maybe the face? The eyes? A couple of inches difference? Well, at least Uncle Rick looks younger. I mean, he is, but he looks it too.

"Gosh, old-timers? Not you two!" I clap a hand to my forehead, my mouth falling into a perfect 'O.' "That would be a terrible tragedy for the Grayson brother twosome!"

I know, I know. I say ‘gosh.’ But what would be better? Gee Willikers? Great Scott? Goodness? Holy Old-Timers? I am not *that* lame.

“Haly better watch out.” Dad strolls to the platform's edge, looking down at the hustle and bustle below. Haly bellows orders, directing our troupe into something natural, like cleaning my room. The packing up of the entire circus. No, really. We have this thing down to a science. And, let's be honest, if you get your room cleaned quickly and well done the first time, you can move on to more important things, like practice. “You could replace him as ringmaster with those alliterations!”

“Now, now, boys.” Mom pulls me into a hug, which I accept, a sigh of satisfaction escaping my lips. Boys my age would be embarrassed, pushing their mom away to look cool. But there're no kids around to impress. And honestly, nothing can replace a motherly hug after a good night's work. “We need to get down and help pack up.”

Mom's beautiful but seems out of place standing next to us men. Her skin's a rich olive, her hair the color of fresh bread. While Dad and Uncle Rick are tall, lean, and angular, Mom's small, rounder, and thick like a female gymnast should be. Don't tell her I said that. She's not fat. In fact, I don't think there's any fat on her, but her legs are like tree

trunks, and her arms would send our strong man crying for his mommy. She's really pretty, though, like an angel.

“We were good, though!” I insist as we clamber down the sturdy ladder leading to safe ground. Away from our perch, back down to the everyday boring life. If you call a circus boring. “And I didn't miss the last rotation on my quadruple!”

“You did an amazing job, Little Bird,” Mom says as she drops to the sawdust-covered ground, reaching up for me, “But you still need to practice your transitions. Someday you might overshoot, and I won't catch you.”

That'll never happen. I know it won't. We aren't called the ‘Flying Graysons’ for nothing. Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick will always catch me. They always have. If they didn't, I'd be a pancake covered with glitter. Just put ‘He tried’ on my gravestone.

I skip the last ten ladder rungs, choosing instead to backflip off them, landing in a pose on the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust. Someday, maybe, I can show other kids that move outside the circus. Maybe kids my age? Then I'd be cool. “Now, Dick—”

So, you might be wondering about the whole ‘Dick’ thing by now. I know, I know! It's embarrassing. But it's the only nickname I have

because someone already stole ‘Rick.’ My real name is Richard. But let’s be honest, what kid wants to walk up to someone and say, ‘Nice to meet you, my name is Richard?’ So I go by Dick. I’ll get teased either way, so I might as well go with the one that could be taken as a joke over the lame one. Maybe when I am older, I’ll go by Richard. Who knows?

“Aw, com’on, Mary!” Uncle Rick protests, landing with a firm bounce next to Mom and Dad. “Let the kid have his fun. It helps keep him limber. Unlike you, Old Man!” Uncle Rick slams a hand into Dad’s sturdy stomach. I let out a loud laugh, and Mom cracks a smile. If anyone else makes a joke about Dad’s age, his eye starts ticking, and he rubs a hand along the streaks of grey at his temples. But for Uncle Rick and Mom, an exception is made. It has to be made for Uncle Rick because of his younger brother’s privilege. And no one tells Mom what she can’t laugh at. And what about me? Well, if Mom and Uncle Rick laugh, so do I. So Dad joins in on the fun.

“Oh yes, look at me!” Dad limps around, holding a hand to his back. “I am so old and feeble!” Dad grabs me around the waist, lifting me as I burst out in a fit of giggles. I am not that little anymore. In fact, I am almost to his shoulder, but when did that ever stop him? “Oh, Dick! You have to take my place! Take care of your mother!”

“Aw, Dad!” I plant my feet on Dad’s stomach and kick away, landing back on the ground with a slight hop. “You’ll die before you retire!”

I can see it, too—Mom and Dad, both grandparents, old and crotchety, performing as they always have. In fact, I can’t picture it any other way. Then again, Mom and Dad probably want to retire. Somewhere nice like Romania, where Mom’s family is from.

“I sure hope not!” Mom wraps her arms around Dad’s waist and nods to the exit of the big top. “Now, don’t we have something we need to be doing?”

We all move towards the rest of the troupe, knowing our assigned jobs. Mom and I pack up our trailer while Dad and Uncle Rick help take down the larger equipment sets. I’d like to help with the animals, but Raya would kill me. Or feed me to her lion. Whatever mood she’s in at the time.

Haly’s International Traveling Circus is a hit everywhere it goes, a beacon of fun times, an escape for the audience. At least, that's what the posters say. The troupe itself is like a dream. We are a team, a family, most of us growing up in the circus. And while some kids move on, most

stay and follow in their parents' footsteps, like my parents and Uncle Rick. And Raya and me.

While I like traveling the world, waiting to see what fantastic location the train or boat will take us next, I've always loved the United States the most. That's where Dad's family is from, and the people, with their carefree attitudes and huge smiles, are so much fun. Tell them something about a different country, and they eat it up.

Metropolis itself is something that I've never seen before. It's a sprawling city, white, clean, and spotless. It's brand new, too, because it's replaced with something better after every fight the Man of Steel gets into. Then there's Superman himself. I saw him on the way into the city, a blue and red blur. I could've sworn he waved at me, but Raya said he was just waving at our train as it chugged into the city borders.

The people of Metropolis are friendly too, standing patiently in line to meet my family and me, gushing over us, asking how we like the city, and wishing us well in our performance. A step up from other cities.

Now, as I lug the contents of my room onto the train, I can't help the regret creeping into my stomach as I gaze off at the skyscrapers looming on the horizon. What would it be like to live in a place like this?

A paradise? But I'll pack my room, get on the train, and watch the world whizz by as we zip off to another city.

“Need help, Little Richard?” Pidge, known to the public as ‘The Strong Man,’ hefts three large crates, his red face grinning at me. “I could take that in for you.”

Despite what the posters say, Pidge isn't the strongest man alive, but he's still pretty strong. He's played more for laughs, especially now with guys like Superman and Amazons like Wonder Woman flying around.

Still, it's a little embarrassing to have him offer. I can hold my own weight for hours on a trapeze, which is more than a lot of people can say. I lift my trunk, my toned muscles flexing, not trying to show off. Gosh, that would just be embarrassing. No, trying to prove a point. “I got it, Pidge, but thanks! Don't pull a muscle!”

“Okay, yeah, sure.” Pidge shakes his head, allowing me to climb the creaking metal steps onto the train first. “Whatever you say, Kid.”

I grin as I dash through the carpeted cars, making my way to my family's cabin. I slide my trunk under our bunks before jumping onto the top bed, clearing the distance in one hop. I bounce on the mattress, peering out the window at the city. The moonlight glints off its white

spires, and the starlight dances in the window panes of a thousand buildings. Sissy, I know! But hey, can't a guy appreciate the pretty stuff too?

I wonder where we are going off to next! I should remember the tour itinerary, but I figure that Mom and Dad will tell me when we are underway. I pull my knees to my chin and sigh, rocking on my heels.

The train creaks under me as the troupe bustles below, taking down tents, folding equipment, and guiding the animals into their pens.

I close my eyes and listen to the din around me, trying to focus on one conversation at a time. Lilia, the 'Bearded Lady,' is chattering about some boyfriend she made in Central City and how he's coming to see us perform at the next stop.

Gross.

Siamese Twins Yin and Yang laugh about something Haly said about Metropolitan citizens being Big Blue's Boy Scout troop.

Raya's arguing with her parents about her lion's blanket. Then she complains about leaving Metropolis so soon. The girl can't stay quiet for two seconds.

I can just hear her voice: "*Now, Dick.*" She'd say, lifting her tiny nose and tossing her pigtails. "*You should be out there helping your*

family pack. I don't care if you got your part done. We all have to pitch in! We will be late, and it will be all your fault." Bossy girls. I don't, and I won't ever understand them.

But finally, I overhear the Flame Breather Marco mumbling something right under our car. "Poor kid." He mutters, rolling several large metal hoops along the grassy turf. "Poor kid. Gotham again. It's always in Gotham. But his father won't let it happen— no, no. Ah... poor kid."

Gotham? I ignore the rest of what Marco says. Gotham City, home to the legendary Caped Crusader, Batman himself! Forget Superman! I've always wanted to glimpse the infamous man who stalks the night, catching wrongdoers and saving innocents. He doesn't need to fly, wear a flashy costume, or even give big speeches.

The Batman just is.

Besides, Gotham is a legend in its own right! Gangs, super-villains who don't have any powers except for their loose screws, a flourishing underworld, a colossal statue in the bay called Lady Just, or something. Dad called it a cesspool when I was little. His family's from there, but they're all dead except Dad and Uncle Rick, so I've never been.

I press my nose against the glass when the train lurches forward,
the circus finally aboard, my heart rattling. We're heading to Gotham
City— home of the Batman!

CHAPTER TWO

MY CIRCUS GETS THREATENED BY THE MAFIA

“I don’t like this, John.” Mom whispers, not for the first time.

“We shouldn’t be going to Gotham.”

“It will be fine, Mary,” Dad murmurs, “It’s time.”

“No.” Mom’s voice trembles. Trembles like it does when she’s trying to keep something inside.

Mom and Dad only have conversations like this when I’m supposed to be sleeping, when I’m not supposed to be listening.

The train chugs on, the wheels whooshing over the tracks, turning off onto curves, whizzing through the countryside. I stare at the blurred world outside my window, curled under my sheets. The lights of the cities are fireflies, winking at each other in some sort of game. I count them but lose track at thirty-two. It doesn’t work anyway. I am still up, listening to things I am not supposed to hear. Things I won’t ever understand.

They’ve been going on like this all night. Going on about how Mom doesn’t want to go to Gotham, how Dad says it’s time, but they never say why. So I wonder. Why? Why does Mom not want to go to

Gotham? Dad's family isn't there anymore—they're dead. And last I heard, Mom liked Dad's family. So why? Is it because psychos like the Joker run around the streets? Is it because of dangerous neighborhoods like Crime Alley and the Narrows?

Or is it something else? My brain can't seem to put the pieces together. They've never gone on like this before. It's almost like something's going to happen, something horrible, something—

The cabin shakes, and the mood shifts. Uncle Rick lets out a snore so loud and long it rivals the trumpeting from the elephants a couple of cars down. I stifle a laugh, but my parents don't say anything from the darkness below. What's wrong with them? Did I do something wrong?

I pull the blankets around me, letting out a deep sigh. Some kids look forward to growing up, but honestly, the more I grow up, the more I want to go back to when I was younger. When I didn't really pay attention to my parents' arguments. Then again, I still don't pay that much attention. Who wants to worry about taxes, budgets, family drama, and all that boring stuff, anyway?

My eyes droop, my head snuggles into the depths of the thick pillow, and my breathing steadies. Whatever the problem is, Mom and Dad can work it out. We'll have fun in Gotham, performing our socks off

in front of a tent full of people. And who knows? Maybe I'll actually catch a glimpse of the Batman.

I don't want to sleep. At least, that's what my body tells me. It wants to jump up and down, keep looking out the window, searching for any sign of Gotham, even though I know we won't arrive until later in the morning. But while my body's demanding I do a few cartwheels around the cabin, pumped high on adrenaline, my eyes feel like someone's dropped bricks on them, and my mouth opens in a huge yawn.

My mind drifts right from waking to a dream.

My family and I sit around our trailer's breakfast nook, munching on Mom's famous pancakes. Mine is drenched in syrup and butter, while everyone else's is topped lighter. I never thought that you could taste food in dreams, but here I am, savoring the buttery, sugary concoction. Mom doesn't cook too much since we're always on the move and have cooks assigned to the troupe, so it's a special morning when she does.

It doesn't take long to realize that Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick are all grinning at me, their eyes twinkling like the spotlights of the big top. Am I the only one who gets annoyed when adults look at you with that 'I know something you don't look?

"Whaw?" I mumble through a mouth full of food. "Whaw iw it?"

“Well,” Mom clasps a hand over Dad’s, her face beaming,
“Someone came over to say hello.”

I gulp down my pancakes, looking around expectantly. “Who?”

“Behind you!” Uncle Rick muffles a laugh with a large hand and points over my shoulder.

I look up and scream. Thankfully, it isn’t out of fear. In fact, it is the closest I’ve ever gotten to that ‘fangirling’ scream. Not that that’s less embarrassing. But at this point, I don’t care. Behind me stands a dark figure dressed in a cape and cowl, the pointed ears so sharp I could cut my finger on them.

“Batman!” I exclaim, bouncing to my feet. “Wow! Gosh, this is so cool!”

“Surprise, Dickie Bird!” Dad claps his hands and guffaws, Uncle Rick quickly joining in. I stare up at Batman, my tongue flopping around in my mouth. What do you say to a man, a myth, a legend? To someone who’s so larger than life that they fill the entire trailer with their presence? I think I’m mute now, no sound coming out as I flap my lips. And maybe I *am* mute— at least until the words explode out of me like a daredevil from a cannon.

“How many Batmobiles do you have? How far can you shoot your grappling line? How do you always see the Bat Signal? How—”

Bang, bang, *BANG!*

I flail, jerking out of the dream and into the real world. A world where Batman’s probably going home for the morning, his night done. A world where my eyes see tiny little dots dancing around in the light like gnats. The real world where the train’s whooshing along below me and C.C. Haly’s pounding on the door. Mom and Dad are already up, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. Mom’s sitting on her vanity stool, applying makeup.

Bang, bang, *BANG!*

“We’ll be arriving in an hour!” C.C. Haly’s trumpets through the door. At least someone on this train enjoys early mornings. “Up and at ‘em. Let’s move, people!”

“Ugh.” I flip over the edge of my bunk to peer at Uncle Rick, who slams his pillow over his face, absently waving an arm. “Does he have to do this *every morning?*”

Dad jerks the pillow from him and tosses it up to me. I catch it, balancing over the edge of the bunk by my stomach alone. Some people call this move the ‘Superman,’ but let’s be honest, Superman doesn’t have to fly with a metal rod supporting his stomach. I grin down at Uncle

Rick. “Maybe if you got up on time, he wouldn’t have to.” I snicker, raising the pillow over my head.

Uncle Rick doesn’t notice until it’s too late. All chaos breaks out in the Grayson cabin. I have to say, pillow fights are our specialty. Even Mom, who smears her lipstick as I accidentally fly into her, joins in. Cushions swing like bludgeons. I lose a nice plump one when Uncle Rick rips it, sending tiny feathers poofing into the air. The pillow fight quickly turns into a sneeze fest as the tiny terrors tickle my nose.

This is the life.

We’re off to a new city, the sun is rising bright and beautiful, and the cabin smells like breakfast and clean pillow cases. By the time we walk into the dining car, we’re laughing, joking, and I forget about my parents' conversation last night. Who cares about that now?

Though I could be mad that breakfast isn’t pancakes, I still drool over the fluffy eggs, the crispy bacon, and the golden toast. Raya sits beside me, her orange juice sloshing in the crystal glass as she slaps a magazine next to her, causing me to shove a forkful of eggs up my nose.

“Gosh, Rays!” I snort out the eggs, batting her arm away but unable to hide my smile at the sight of her scrunched-up nose. “Personal space, much?”

Raya Vestri and I've been friends since we could toddle. But I use the term 'friends' very loosely. Neither of us has siblings, so in a way, we became each other's siblings. And let me tell you, while most girls are bossy, a girl who thinks she's your older sister is even bossier. I mean, what kind of girl forces a guy into one of those frilly clown costumes and sits him down for a tea party with lions and pythons?

"Gross." Raya scoots a couple of inches away from me, her eyes snapping. "Couldn't you have used a napkin?"

I wipe my nose on my arm, sticking my tongue out through my grin. Nowadays, I don't give her the satisfaction of doing something she wants. Stupid, I know. She'd say, *'Wear a life vest, Dick! You'll drown!'* and I won't wear one just 'cause she said so. It's almost like she's daring me.

"I could've. But where's the fun in that?" I peer down at the magazine. "Whatcha readin'?"

Raya slaps a hand over the glossy booklet, her dark cheeks flushing. "None of your business."

I roll my eyes. Honestly, why does she sit next to me if she doesn't want to be around me? You'd think she really is my sister or something. I turn my attention to the view whizzing past, showing my

toast into my mouth. It's a bad idea. Just as I take a big bite, we zip past something I've only ever seen in the European countryside. "Is thwat a cwastle?" I spew bread crumbs all over the window, scrambling to get a better view.

The train curves along the coastline, the tracks dangerously close to the sheer cliffs. Across the water, you can see the dark blotch that's Gotham City. But on my side's a forest—a huge, sprawling forest with gravel roads, glistening rivers, and rolling hills. And in the middle of it stands a castle. A huge, stone, mammoth of a castle. Manicured lawns roll around it, filled with hedges, fountains, topiaries, the works.

"Whoa..." I gawk, my bread forgotten.

Raya crawls over, too, ever smug. "That's not a castle." She sniffs, her voice almost cracking as a blush explodes on her cheeks like clown paint. "That's Wayne Manor!"

I turn to her, now understanding the blush. Billionaire Bruce Wayne, or as Raya calls him, the hottest guy in the world, lives in that castle. He's way too old for her. Gosh, she's only my age! But even still—

Raya shoves the magazine in my face, her fingers clutching it like it's a first prize ribbon. "See? *See?*"

I blink, finally gulping down my pulverized breakfast. On the magazine's cover is a headshot of a young man about Uncle Rick's age. Only, he can't actually be a man. He's too handsome, too perfect. His face seems sculpted, the features fine-tuned over years and years by an artist. A strong jawline, perfectly shaped nose, eyes spaced just right—not to mention his physique, just like Dad's. He's pale, flawless, and totally photoshopped.

But one thing does catch my eye as I raise a brow at the picture. His eyes are a cold, startling gray. In fact, they seem so severe and stern that they almost throw off his charming, devilish smile.

I roll my eyes. “Gotham's most eligible bachelor?” Really, Rays?”

Raya clutches the magazine to her chest, her eyes sparkling like chocolate candies. “Really! You can't tell me he isn't just—”

“So fake.” I wave her off, sliding back down to sit in front of my half-eaten plate. “That's either makeup, touchups, or—”

“Or nothing!” Raya scowls, bouncing down onto the cushion with a huff. “He's hot, and you're just jealous!”

My cheeks heat up so much you could fry an egg on them. Am I jealous? Maybe. Maybe I'm jealous of his perfectly styled hair, his

shining teeth. Maybe I'm jealous of his rugged good looks. So what? I shove my mouth full of eggs, scowling at Raya through my squirrel cheeks.

I eat the rest of my meal in silence, listening to Raya prattle on and on about Gotham's elite, the scandals she finds romantic, the kidnappings, which she also finds romantic, and the serial killers, which she finds boring. Why do girls always find the most exciting bits boring?

We cross the bridge to Amusement Mile, home to all of Gotham's fun times. Our circus grounds are across the island, so I have time to escape from Raya's jabbering and change out of my pj's. What? Did you think I wear a leotard all the time? Now that *would* be sissy.

By the time I slip into a T-shirt and shorts, dragging a comb through my tangled rat's nest, we stop at the station right in front of the grounds. Then it's a royal commotion on the train.

Packing up we can do in a night; setting up takes way longer. All day, actually. So I spend the rest of the morning helping Mom set up our trailer, helping Raya's family move the animals to their assigned cages, and trying to sneak off with Marg's first batch of cotton candy. That doesn't go well. Sticky blue fingers and lips are a dead giveaway. I still haven't found a solution for that.

By the time I'm eating dinner with my family, everything's set up and ready for tomorrow. All that's left is rehearsal. Except—

“Dick.” Mom’s voice could tame a lion. She glares at me from across the table, one eyebrow raised as she watches me push the Brussels sprouts around my plate. Okay, grown-ups should know by now that Brussels sprouts are nasty. Asking us kids to eat them is like asking us to wash our mouths out with vinegar. So Mom shouldn’t be surprised when I don’t shovel them down. Besides, Uncle Rick isn’t eating his either!

“Can I go now?” I don’t whine, I plead with her, opening my eyes as wide as possible, puckering my lips. This always worked when I was younger, and thankfully— or embarrassingly— my face still hasn’t lost most of its baby fat. I still look ‘cute.’ Of course, that’s what every twelve-year-old boy wants to hear.

“Aw!” Uncle Rick ruffles my hair. “Look, Mary! It’s a *wittle* puppy! Can we keep it?”

“Dick.” Dad’s eyes beg me to humor Mom. If he were as young as I am, his face would also be a ‘puppy face.’ But he isn’t, so it doesn’t. Besides, he hasn’t eaten his Brussels sprouts either.

I drop my act, sighing down at the green things on my plate. “If I finish, can I practice early?” I peer up at Mom, letting a smile tease the

corners of my mouth. Her eyes are hard, lips pursed, hands steepled like an evil mastermind.

Finally, she sighs. “Yes.” I open my mouth, but she points at me, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “But only if you finish all the Brussels on your plate.”

My stomach drops, and I gulp. I glare down at the tiny monsters mocking me from the plastic slab. Here goes nothing. I grab all of the green devils and shove them into my mouth. What do they taste like, you might ask? To put it in the mildest terms, barf. They taste like barf. Barf and weeds, and all things nasty. Who thought that eating them would be a good idea?

I don’t even chew. I just sit, my cheeks bulging. “Mnow cwan I gwow?” I splutter, trying not to make a face. It doesn’t work that well.

Mom sighs, nodding. *At last, freedom!* I catapult out of our trailer, taking the time to spit the Brussels into the bucket waiting under our small water pump. I spring into the air, clearing four feet easily. I ignore the laughing clowns as I barrel towards the big top, pulling my grips from my back pocket.

When I enter the big top, standing vast and empty, I expect an evening of practice, and more than that, practice on my own, swinging

out over the center ring, albeit with a net underneath just in case. What I'm not expecting, though, is a group of men waiting for me, smiling.

The one in front is obviously the head honcho. He's dressed in a three-piece suit, the tie shining blood red in the only spotlight. He's so tall, so sharp, that he might as well be a knife. One eye glitters blue, and the other shines brown, instantly catching me in their stare. His smile belongs to a snake, not a person. He just screams, 'gang leader.'

The men surrounding him are the same. Movies and shows lie. In them, all the goons and henchmen are fat, dumb, and funny. These guys are as big and buff as my dad, sporting tattoos, scars, and guns. A lot of guns. They smile, too, when they look at me. But I'd rather face Raya's lion when he's hungry than these guys.

I freeze in place, ashamed of the O my mouth drops into. My grips slip from my grasp, but I don't care. These guys aren't supposed to be here.

"Well now, where ya running off to, Sonny?" The man in charge drawls, putting his hands on his hips. His outer jacket opens with the motion, revealing pockets and pockets of knives. We have a knife thrower, Old Scott, with his wife, Vanessa. But these are killers' knives.

I step back, my face frozen as if one of the clowns slapped a mask over it. A sad clown, I think. “You’re not supposed to be in here.” I surprise myself. Even though my voice is shrill in my own ears, I manage to speak. “Did you get lost at the Zoo? Took a wrong turn? Maybe at the monkey business attraction? Or were you just so embarrassed by your bad tattoos that you thought you could join the circus? Get a few laughs from the audience?”

I don’t know where the confidence comes from, but I hold onto it, grasping it with all I have because it *is* all I have.

“Look at that, boys!” Dual-eyes leers down at me, his face ruined by his sneer. “We have ourselves a comedian!”

None of the men snicker. Instead, some smirk, while others look down at me as if I’m a mouse who’s wandered his sorry way into their serpent’s cage. A meal, that’s what I am—someone’s dinner.

“Please leave.” I hold my ground as Dual-eyes steps closer. I would run, but I can’t. I want to scream, but I won’t. Something’s stuck in my throat. Something’s tying down my sneakers. So much for confidence.

“Daw.” Dual-eyes puts a hand on my shoulder. “He’s polite too! What a pleasant mix.” His other hand darts up and grabs my chin, his fingers squeezing my cheeks. “Say, aren’t you that Grayson kid?”

Getting your cheeks pinched by a doting grandmother is one thing. Getting your entire face squeezed by a gangster with a jacket full of knives is another. I splutter through his fingers, flinching under their clammy touch. I’d rather be kissed by a fish than be near this guy. He just oozes red flags. Is this what it’s like everywhere in Gotham? If it is... this city’s losing its appeal.

Dual-eyes jerks my head this way and that before spitting something smelly and black on the sawdust beside me. “A cute little brat. Heh.”

“Dick?” I want to whip around at the sound of Mom’s voice, to whimper for help, but Dual-eyes yanks me closer to him. His hand lets go of my face, only to clamp down on my other shoulder, spinning me around to face the big top’s entrance.

Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick stand there. Mom’s hand is over her mouth, her eyes wide and popping. Dad’s shocked, but his eyes twitch, his knuckles cracking as he clenches them into fists. Uncle Rick looks as

if he might explode at any moment, his face so red it would put a tomato to shame.

“Ah,” Dual-eyes’ hands squeeze my shoulders. Too late, I realize that his thumbs are on my pressure points. The pain is sudden and visible. Dad growls, holding out his fists, but Dual-eyes pretends not to notice, “The Fearless *Famous* Flying Graysons. You really are larger than life.” He shakes me, and I let out a whimper.

Coward. Coward. COWARD!

“Let my son go.” Dad’s words are measured, even. He doesn’t show any fear. Why can’t I be like him?

I let out a shaking breath as the rest of the troupe files into the big top, C.C. Haly leading the way. He looks strange, not wearing his ringmaster getup, but I couldn’t be more glad to see him. Behind him, everyone’s brandishing weapons. Not your standard guns or knives, no. The clowns carry water guns, and Marco, the fire-breather, has two torches. Pidge, the strong man, hefts his heaviest dumbbells. Raya and her parents brandish their whips. Well, Old Scott’s carrying his knives, but he already had those.

I want to yank myself free and run over to Dad. But Dad seems to know exactly what I’m thinking. His eyes meet mine, and he shakes his

head. *No*, the motion says, *wait*. I don't understand why, until I remember the guns that Dual-eyes' gang has pointed at my troupe.

"Ah, ringmaster." Dual-eyes shakes me. I scowl as my body swings like a rag doll. Raya's never going to let me live this down. "This your kid?"

"Who are you?" C.C. Haly doesn't bother answering, his normally jovial voice hard for once. Chills race up and down my back.

"What do you want?"

"Well, now," Dual-eyes pulls me closer, my head bumping against his bony chest, "No need to be so uptight, old man. My name is Zucco, Tony Zucco at your service, and I am here with a proposition that I know you won't refuse."

"Oh?" C.C. Haly would've sneered, but he isn't that kind of man. Instead, his eyes narrow. "And what might that be?"

"Protection, my good sir." Tony Zucco lets go of one of my shoulders, only to slip his hand into his jacket. I know what he's getting. I know what's going to happen. I lock eyes with Dad, my eyes asking the same question over and over. *When?*

Tony Zucco slides out a knife. The serrated blade tickles my throat as his fingers dig into my shoulder, biting muscle. I flinch, biting

my lip hard. “You’re in Gotham now, good folks.” Tony drawls, toying with the knife, the cool metal teasing my skin. Mom looks like she might tackle Zucco right now, her eyes snapping like firecrackers.

From where she stands with her parents, Raya looks like she’s going to cry. Why? Is she afraid she’ll lose the only kid at the circus she can boss around?

Tony Zucco continues his speech, the knife so close that I hold my breath and refuse to swallow. Any movement could cut me. “And Gotham is a hazardous place.” The knife slips closer, the teeth of the serrated blade beginning to poke into my skin. I want to close my eyes, shrink away, do something. But all I do is stare at Dad. And wait. “So dangerous, in fact, good people like you will need protection.” Zucco sighs and *tsks*, his fingernails biting, boring into my shoulder. I do my best not to whimper again. “And this I offer, a service provided by my boss. For the right price, of course.”

There’s a long pause. So long and so agonizing that I almost take a deep, heaving breath. Something warm and wet trickles down my neck, tickling me, leaving me to twitch. But that only makes the stuff run faster. The pain builds up in my neck and shoulder. Mom lets out a hiss.

“Now, why would we need protection?” C.C. Haly’s words are measured and slow. He throws out his arms. “Why would we need protection when I can introduce you to the Strong Man?” Pidge tosses the first dumbbell, and all hell breaks loose. Haly introduces each member of our troupe, even down to Raya. And when he gets to me, Dad nods. He’s rushing towards the gang with the others, flipping into the air, slamming down on the men with lethal force. Uncle Rick and Mom follow.

When C.C. Haly cries out my name, I don’t even think. I flip upwards and back, my foot smacking the knife out of Zucco’s hand, my arms snapping onto his arm, prying myself free from his grip. I launch myself into the air, grabbing his shoulders, then vault over his head, twisting around to slam my heels into his shoulder blades, letting him fall into the sawdust.

Guns fire as I bounce to a stop and duck down, but the fight is over as quickly as it began. Dad kicks Tony Zucco in the ribs, sending him sprawling, caught by his retreating men.

“We need no protection, Zucco.” Dad snaps, placing a hand on my shoulder. It’s so different from Zucco’s biting grip that I want to jump up and down right here and now. But I don’t. I give Zucco a huge, stupid

grin, beaming on behalf of Dad and my troupe. My brave, incredible dad.

“Get out.”

I expect Zucco and his thugs to run out of the big top, screaming something about a miniature lion tamer with a deadly whip. Instead, Zucco looks right at me and smiles.

A smile that only belongs to a snake.

CHAPTER THREE

I SIGN AN AUTOGRAPH FOR A BILLIONAIRE

It's hard to believe that we managed to rehearse after that. I surprise myself with the way I throw all I have into practice. You'd think after being threatened with guns and knives, our circus would be shaken, worried, and call the police. But no. Mom and Raya fuss over me, though, bandaging my neck, Raya talking my ear off about recklessly rushing into dangerous situations. But how was I supposed to know that a gang was waiting for me in the big top? Who walks into their house expecting to find a grown horse just chilling in their bedroom?

Yeah! My point exactly!

My neck stings, and my shoulders ache from where Zucco's fingers dug into the muscle. But I make the most of it, waving off the terrifying encounter when everyone questions me about it. I don't talk about how much I wanted to scream; I talk about the jokes I tossed their way and laugh with the others at my banter.

No one talks about the threat. And yeah, it was a threat. Pay us, or else we will make you need protection. Protection from them. What kind of sicko came up with that idea? It's either super dumb or super brilliant.

But either way, it's super wrong. I can just imagine Zucco and his goons walking into a toy store or something, pulling guns on the poor workers who don't have any way to defend themselves.

While I cover up my jittering hands, not everyone's fooled. In fact, when we clamber into the trailer for the night, Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick all look right at me. I want it to be comforting seeing how much they care. I want to go on about how glad I was to see them rushing in to save me. But all I think about as they look down at me, those worried expressions on their faces, is how helpless they think I am. How much of a child I am.

Sure, I'm still a kid. And sure, I can be caught off guard, but having my own parents look at me with such concern on their faces, well, it rattles me more than any mafia ever could. That look says, *'We need to wrap you in bubble wrap and lock you up in a tower so no one can hurt you ever again.'* Well, I'll just hide in a tower, grow my hair out, and wait for Wonder Woman to save me. Just call me *'feldsalat'* because I'm not going by Rapunzel.

"Dick..." Dad pauses, unsure. They're all unsure. Of what to say. Of how to treat me. And I don't blame them. How do you treat a kid who just had a knife to his throat? But honestly, the more I look back at it, the

more I think about how cool it was to see Dad, Mom, and Uncle Rick kick butt. How cool it was for me to kick butt. Gosh, no one should ever mess with our family.

I look at Mom and Dad, at Uncle Rick. The silence drags on for too long. I can hear loud pops and splashes from the clown's trailer. A pre-circus/post-kicking-mafia-behind party. The thought of them all squeezed into one room, hosing each other down with water guns full of sparkling cider.

I put my hands on my hips and beam up at my family. Sure, I feel better now, but I still don't want to talk about what happened. At least, not the scary parts. Not yet. So... "Dance party?" I put my hands together, leaning forward. "Please?"

Uncle Rick's laugh cracks through the cabin like Raya's whip, dissolving every last shiver in my shoulders. Mom rolls her eyes as Dad wiggles his eyebrows at her. "Mary?"

"Oh, fine." Mom walks over to our speaker setup, her hand hovering over her phone. "What song?"

"My song?" I bat my eyes at her, trying to suppress my grin. "Please?"

“Oh yeah!” Uncle Rick shrugs off his towel, stretching his muscular arms. “Give me that Bobby Day!”

Mom presses play, and the first “Tweedle-lee-dee-dee-dee!” blasts out of the speakers, and our trailer explodes. Mom starts to twist, her arms moving side to side. Dad does his little dance. You would think that a guy who knows trapeze would have rhythm, but the way he shakes his legs like he’s trying to kick a soccer ball and moves his hands like he’s doing disco makes no sense.

Uncle Rick matches Mom, swiveling his hips, going up and down, belting out the song. Me? I jam, pumping my arms into the air, pointer finger up.

“A pretty little raven at the bird-band stand!” I belt out, swept up with the music. “Taught him how to do the bop, and it was grand!”

“OH!” Uncle Rick grabs my hands as the song gets to the chorus, pulling me into the jig. “Rockin’ Robin!”

Mom, Dad, and I do the ‘tweets’ as Uncle Rick belts, “Rock-Rockin’ Robin!” again. I can’t stop myself. Dad looks so silly, doing his dad dance, Uncle Rick’s unabashedly crooning into Mom’s hairbrush, and Mom sings in a lower key on purpose, losing her rhythm to do the

dad dance with Dad. I burst out laughing, choking out the next chorus with Uncle Rick.

At the end, we all whistle along before howling, the rolling laughter filling our trailer. Uncle Rick bows, Mom and Dad lean on each other, breathless, and I'm tempted to press repeat on the song.

By now, you may be wondering why Rockin' Robin is my song. Well, Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick call me 'Little Bird' or 'Dickie Bird' or sometimes, 'Robin.'

Rockin' Robin played at my third birthday party and was the first song I actually danced to, at least in front of people. Everyone thought it was so funny and cute, and I loved the song so much that they started calling me 'Robin' or 'Rockin' Robin.' Ever since then, whenever the song comes on, whether on the train, in the middle of a store, or even in the bathroom, I can't help but cut a rug, no matter how many people stare or laugh.

We all settle down after the dance fest, slipping into our pj's and turning in for the night. The trailer's bigger than our train cabin, long, white, and fluorescent, but Mom's covered the walls with so many photos, posters, and awards that you don't even notice. She makes it a

home. And though Uncle Rick and I have to share a bunk, Mom and Dad get their own room.

At least tonight, I won't have to listen to them argue. I'm sure they will. Not even the laughing fits from a night of family fun can erase the worry lines around Mom's eyes or the frown growing on Dad's lips. Things will be better when we leave Gotham. I tell myself, scrubbing my teeth until they shine, splattering the bathroom mirror with toothpaste. Everything will be back to normal. We'll be away from the gangs and the dark alleys.

Uncle Rick slips into bed first, pulling on his blankets with a sigh, watching me leap into bed. I hear him rustle the sheets as I settle down, taking deep breaths to calm my pounding heart. The sheets feel good on my sweaty legs, and the mattress comfortable for my aching shoulder. The light clicks off as Mom and Dad close the door to their bedroom, leaving the flickering bulb of the streetlamp next to the trailer as my nightlight.

I'm not afraid of the dark; I'm afraid that Uncle Rick will ask a question, something like 'So, how're you doing, Champ?' but he doesn't. Instead, the first snore vibrates my mattress.

I close my eyes, the familiar noise lulling me to sleep. There're no dreams tonight, not even a glimpse. Only darkness, but not the darkness that suffocates you. It wraps around me, cozy, like my blanket. It's soft, safe, and nothing like the big top's darkness earlier today.

Though I don't think I dream, when I wake up, I remember something strange. I heard a voice, one I'd never heard before in my life. But it said my name, clear as day.

Bang, bang, *BANG!*

C.C. Haly pounds on the door, calling for us to get up. The circus will be up and running in an hour and a half, just enough time for us to get ready. As always, Uncle Rick groans, shoving his pillow over his face. But there'll be no pillow fights today.

I slip out of bed, bounding across the trailer and into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. If Uncle Rick wants to take forever to get out of bed, it's only right that I get the bathroom first. Early bird gets the worm, after all.

Circus days I could do in my sleep. I get up, take a shower, slide into my white tights and leotard, this one a bright sapphire with the huge G emblazoned in silver on the front, and try to do something with my hair. If bedhead were an illness, I'd be a terminal patient.

After about three minutes of dragging my comb through my hair, only managing to make the raven rat's nest stand straight up, I stomp out of the bathroom, muttering. I ignore Uncle Rick's snickers as he takes his turn, dropping down into the breakfast nook, looking up to see Mom and Dad emerge from their room.

Dad's dressed like Uncle Rick and me, simple leotard, white tights, and trapeze boots. Mom's outfit is exactly like ours, but some fabric gathers at her back, forming into some sort of ruffled tail. She also wears her makeup, the rich colors sparkling in the light, the eye shadow making it look like she's wearing a mask studded with jewels instead of just colored powder and gunk. She looks like a peacock, not the ugly brown female ones; no, she looks like a male peacock, the pretty blue and green ones. I can almost see the ruffle on her back fanning up and out.

"Oh, Little Bird." Mom frowns down at me, her eyes scrutinizing my messy hair. "What am I going to do with you?"

"I don't know." I lean forward, offering up my head. "You could send me to a professional stylist? Oh! Or you could just shave it all off." I like my hair, but sometimes, I think that having no hair at all would be better. Maybe then, I wouldn't have to suffer.

“Absolutely not!” Mom briskly takes the comb to my hair, yanking it again and again until it’s neatly parted in the middle, and my ears burn from the comb. Torture, I tell you—pure torture.

We eat breakfast quickly. No pancakes this morning, though I score a good bowl of cocoa puffs before they’re whisked away from me. Honestly, who thought that berries and yogurt would make a good breakfast?

Scandalous.

The morning light shines through the windows, a salty breeze blowing in from the sea, making the flags snap as they billow, and the balloons dance in a kaleidoscope of colors. The smells of funnel cake, caramel, buttery popcorn, and all things fried and delicious hang over the tents. The turf spreads out flat and spotless, the tents, booths, and stages pristine, standing empty and waiting for the crowd, waiting to be walked over and covered with signs of use.

Closer to the big top, the animals are awake in their cages, making a racket that almost rivals the crowd waiting at the entrance.

Almost.

Though my family and I walk right to our stage, posed in front of a massive poster of ourselves, with prop boxes and a large stack of signs

on the side, I can just barely see the mass of people shuffling around at the gate, waiting for C.C. Haly to let them in.

At the stroke of nine, the entrance opens, tickets are purchased and punched, and the circus swarms with guests. Every city is different, and while the City of Gotham is full of psychos, everyone here seems so happy, laughing, pointing, and running around to get to their favorite attraction.

Maybe it's because their city is so dark that they treasure a light, airy place like Haly's Circus. Do they have so many dull shadows in their city that they marvel at this tiny wonder? I don't know, and I don't have time to think about it for more than a few seconds because the line of people grows in front of our attraction.

The day's mostly a blur, shaking hands, dropping into the splits, doing cartwheels, posing for photos, and signing my name under Uncle Rick's. I try to remember the faces, to save them for later. Save them so I can puzzle about the woman whose nose looks like a hook, the man dressed in a clown costume, or the kids who dance around me, their gapped teeth grinning.

One family walks up to us, their faces so full of joy that I instantly beam at them. Their son, a boy about five years old, stands

between them, clutching a rolled piece of paper and a small Polaroid camera. I thought those things went out of fashion centuries ago, but apparently, they're making a comeback.

While Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick meet the parents, shaking their hands and chatting about little things, I kneel in front of the boy, grinning at the wonder in his huge, doe-brown eyes. "What's your name, Champ?" I hold out my hand for the poster. He passes it to me, ducking his head, though his eyes dance. I take the sign and unroll it, gazing at the older design. It's from my first year of being an official Flying Grayson. It doesn't seem like that long ago, but when I look at myself in the picture, I remember how tiny I was.

"My name's Timmy." The boy finally returns my smile, his gums riddled with gaps, the teeth he does have flashing. "And you're Dick Grayson! Mommy told me about you!"

"Oh yeah?" I quickly write 'To Timmy, keep smiling! Dick Grayson' on the poster, handing it back to him. "And what did your Mommy say?"

"That you're the best trapeze people in the world!" Timmy hugs the poster like a teddy bear, his face so innocent, so cute, I want to pinch his cheeks. Gosh, when did I become such a grandma?

“Thanks, Timmy!” I point to the Polaroid. “Want a picture?” The adults are done talking; Timmy’s parents look at him expectantly. I raise an eyebrow at them and flash a smile. “Can we?”

“Please?” Timmy holds up his camera; his face is so shy as he looks at my family that I bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

“Okay, one picture, Tim-Tim, then we need to let the other people in line have a turn.” Timmy’s mom says, her hand clasped in her husband’s.

“Alright, Champ,” I hold my hand for the camera, “let’s do this!” I pull Timmy into a hug, squishing our faces together, raising the polaroid in front of us, trying not to squint in the sunlight. “Say ‘Flying Graysons!’”

Snap!

The photo prints, and I hand it and the camera back to Timmy, standing up and ruffling his hair. I wink at the little boy as he scurries off with his parents, my grin splitting my face at the fading sound of his babbling.

The day passes by, people laughing, music blaring, and my hands speed through signatures. It isn’t until almost dinner time that something huge happens. And I mean, really big.

I'm not someone who eats my words, and I know I'll forever get teased for this, but as soon as I spot a young man about Uncle Rick's age with perfect sculpted features, styled coal-black hair, and piercing grey eyes, I know. Raya's going to faint into the python pit because into Haly's Circus walks none other than Billionaire Bruce Wayne himself.

This guy isn't photoshopped. In fact, he's even more larger than life in person, if that's possible. He's smiling, laughing, and cracking jokes, his smooth, easy-going voice reaching me even above the din of the crowd. I shouldn't be surprised, but I squint at him when I notice not one but two pretty women clinging to his arms.

People dart out of his way or in his way to snap photos. He humors them, even going so far as to pose for some of them, clapping them on the shoulder and sharing a few words. Now I understand Raya's fascination with him. Well, fascination is a simple word. It's more like an obsession. And while I don't blush, squeal, or fangirl, like some girls in the crowd, I gawk.

He must've noticed me because I find myself staring into those sharp, steely eyes. I blink, ignoring how dumb I must look with my mouth open, my arms hanging limply at my sides. No way this is happening. No way a billionaire is coming to our circus.

In no time at all, Bruce Wayne's standing in front of me, chatting with Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick. They talk about the circus— Mr. Wayne apparently came here when he was a kid— about Gotham and about little things like the huge crowd and the pains of people asking for photos all the time.

I don't even hear him until Mom nudges my shoulder. I look up at her, a small "What?" sliding out before I can stop it.

Mom nods at Mr. Wayne. "Mr. Wayne said hello, Dick."

I turn to him, unable to keep the heat from rising in my cheeks. "Hi, Mr. Wayne. Sorry, I got distracted." My mouth prattles on before I can stop it. "How many cars do you have? What's it like living in a big castle?" My voice lowers into a whisper, and I lock eyes with him. "Do you have alligators in your moat?"

I want to disappear as my family, Mr. Wayne, and his girls all burst out laughing. The only thing I manage to do is cross my arms over my chest. "I mean," I continue, trying to make the best of it. If they're going to laugh, I might as well keep it going, "What's a castle without a moat full of alligators? They're perfect security."

More laughter. Mr. Wayne pats my shoulder, his smile finally reaching his eyes. They soften. He looks so different, almost... nice. "No,

Mister Grayson. I don't have alligators. I do, however, have a German shepherd with teeth like an alligator.”

“That’s lame.” The heat disappears, so I keep going. “Do you at least have a petting zoo?”

“No baby goats on my lawns.” Bruce steps back, shaking hands one last time with Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick. “Alfred would pop a blood vessel. But now that you mention it, it would be kind of nice to have some more animals around the place. All we have now are wild animals and strays, like birds, cats, and bats.”

He shakes my hand last, giving a parting wave as he walks off into the circus. I watch him, watch him weave through the grounds with his confident stride, his carefree attitude.

But when Bruce turns into a different isle of tents, my eyes are drawn to something else. Something, no, someone slides out of the big top, hidden in the shadows. It could be anyone, C.C. Haly with last-minute preparations, the Vistris getting the animal cages set up, Mr. Friends finishing with the glitter cannons—

But as I stare at them, the person glances back. It’s as if they’re looking right at me. It could be my imagination, but I swear I see dual-colored eyes winking at me from the shadows.

CHAPTER FOUR

A BOLT RUINS MY LIFE

Do I have my own dressing room? Yes, yes, I do. Is it embarrassing? Yeah, pretty much. But I enjoy it. I inspect my reflection in the full-length mirror, running a hand through my hair, making finger guns at myself. Stupid, I know. But hey, when no one's watching, why not goof off?

I'm still dressed in my leotard, but Mom's decided to add some more pizzazz to the outfit. As if a leotard isn't enough, I have to wear a stupid mask. I pull at it, the feathers tickling my nose.

But at least Uncle Rick and Dad have to wear them too. Mom has her makeup, so she gets a free pass. But honestly, I can't decide which would be better—or less embarrassing.

Speaking of Mom and Dad, I hear them now, across the room, whispering. I don't want to listen. I shouldn't listen. But I do.

"John, we can't do it." Mom's voice chokes. "I can't do it. We should retire and move on from the circus. Live a normal life."

“You know we can’t do that, Mary.” Dad’s voice rolls in deep waves. I can just imagine him rubbing her back, trying to keep her from crying. I want to run out there, but I don’t know what I’d say.

What do you say to comfort someone if you don’t even know why they’re upset? Besides, who even wants to see a woman cry? They get so weepy and messy and sobby that I never know what to do.

I peer from behind my curtain, watching as Dad enfolds Mom in a hug. “We have to carry on the Grayson legacy. Don’t you worry. He’ll be okay.”

He? ‘He’ who? Me? Why would they be worrying about me? I mean, apparently, I am good at stumbling into dangerous situations like gangs and stuff, but we took care of that. And why would they even want to leave Haly’s Circus? I thought they’d retire eventually, but so soon?

My stomach launches into a double flip, twisting over itself. “Leave?” I can’t stop the words from tumbling out. I might as well’ve shot a gun for how my parents react, jumping in unison and whipping over to see my head poking out of the curtain. “We aren’t leaving the circus... are we?” It’s stupid, I know, but my voice shakes.

“Oh, my baby Robin—” Mom steps towards me, her arms out, “Were you listening to all that?”

I nod, stepping out of my dressing room and towards her. My hands don't know what to do, so they fidget, picking at the sequins on my leotard. "You two... were arguing and—"

"We aren't leaving Haly's, Dickie Bird." Dad strides up to us, his hand resting on Mom's shoulder, his smile untangling the knot in my stomach. "This is our home. Mom's just... worried about how dangerous it can sometimes be."

Mom sinks to her knees in front of me, smoothing my hair away from my face and straightening my mask. "That's right. That Zucco guy, that whole thing was scary. We just... we want you to be safe, Little Bird."

I want to point out that they were arguing before we even came to Gotham, but I don't. I lunge for a hug, burying my face into Mom's shoulder, my mask prickling my cheeks. I don't even know what to say. That it *was* scary? That I *am* worried? That I don't want them to argue anymore? That all I want is to turn on my song and dance? But I say nothing. Instead, I turn my head to the side as Dad joins in on the hug, his strong arms swallowing Mom and me. "I'm safe with you guys here," I whisper, sighing as Mom squeezes me tighter.

Laugh it up. I get it. I'm such a sissy, such an emotional simp. But I don't care. Get threatened by a gang leader, and come back after your parents talk about leaving home and moving away from all your friends and what you love, then we'll talk. You can't tell me that no one hugs their parents at a time like this.

Uncle Rick ruffles my hair, interrupting the moment. When he smirks, the pressure on my chest lifts, and my heart steadies. We're staying at the circus... with our family. Zucco is gone; C.C. Haly, Dad, and the others saw to that.

"Darn right, Champ! You're safe to look like an adorable little bird zipping over the crowd." Uncle Rick winks from behind his mask. "All the grandmas will want to shower you with candy, and all the girls will want to dress you in frills."

"I'm not the only one who looks like a sissy, Uncle Rick," I smirk at him, then at Dad. "All you guys need are baby bonnets."

"Sissy? Why, you little—" Dad tickles my side, and Uncle Rick slams into us, howling with laughter.

Mom tries to pull us apart, her giggles making her sound like Raya as she smacks Dad on the shoulder, telling him and Uncle Rick to act their age. How can she tell them to act their age when she's giggling

like a schoolgirl? Do girls and boys never really grow up? Because sometimes, I think that adults are just big kids.

From outside the dressing room, C.C. Haly bellows from his place in the center ring, his voice booming over the loudspeakers. The crowd cheers, stomping their feet, having the time of their lives. I hear C.C. Haly welcome local Billionaire Bruce Wayne to the circus, with thundering applause and catcalls breaking through our laughter.

As C.C. Haly bids the Vestri's animal antics farewell, I know it is time to stop goofing off. It's time to put on a show. Miraculously, we tidy up just in time to walk out into the center ring, no sign of our family tussle noticeable as we climb the ladder, unnoticed by the audience, who's preoccupied with one of the clowns rolling along on a trike, trying to escape a giant tortoise. Don't ask. I don't even know.

I stand on the landing with my family, posing in front of them, waiting for the spotlight to find us. Below, C.C. Haly grabs the crowd with his rolling, jovial call. "Ladies and Gentlemen, children of all ages, I ask you to turn your eyes to the heavens."

The spotlight sweeps up, the filters casting a blue and silver glow over us. The crowd leaps into applause, thundering, cheering, screaming our names. "From their perch above—" I wave at the crowd as the music

swells, as the drums boom. My heart rattles inside my chest, and my arms itch for the feeling of the bar between my fingers. “I present to you—”

Dad gets ready to jump, his teeth shining in the lights, his mask not hiding the twinkle in his blue eyes, “The Fantastic, Fearless Flying Graysons!”

Like always, Dad leaps onto the bars, launching into our routine. Mom follows, like a swan, she glides through the air, catapulting into flips. They’re amazing out there, in their dance above the crowd.

I remember the first time I saw them up there as a little kid. I wasn’t old enough to get anywhere near the ladder, though I learned to walk on a high wire. I sat on the ground, looking up to where my parents were supposed to be. Instead, I saw a soaring hero and a graceful angel. And I know that’s not just me. The crowd oohs and ahhs, clapping as they twirl.

As Uncle Rick swings out to catch Mom, I get ready for my part of the performance. I’m aching to get out there, to fly with my family. But I stop when I hear a horrible creaking, grinding noise. It cuts through me like a knife. I look up.

The hooks that attach the trapeze lines to the poles are missing the bolts that are supposed to hold them in place. My mind whirls like a top as I look back at Mom, who's swinging towards me.

She sees it. Dad sees it. Uncle Rick sees it.

All I see is Mom falling, her sapphire eyes wide, her arms outstretched, reaching for me. She screams my name as she falls, as they fall. I don't know what I'm doing as I skid my knees at the edge of the landing. I don't know what I'm seeing as I stare down at their bodies on the sawdust—their bodies that aren't moving—something red pools around Mom's head.

What're they doing down there? Why aren't they moving?

Why didn't I catch her?

The crowd gasps and screams. The big top explodes as parents rush their kids out, as people surge from the stands in waves. But I don't notice. I'm sliding down the ladder, my fingers numb against the biting metal. I'm wandering towards where they lie, unmoving.

Why haven't they gotten up? Why aren't they waving at the crowd, laughing at the reaction to their daring joke?

Why... why didn't I catch them?

“Mom?” My voice’s far away like someone else is speaking. Her arms are limp, her body twisted in a way it isn’t supposed to twist. Dad’s neck is bent weird, his eyes open as he stares at me. No... he doesn’t stare because... because...

“Mom! Dad!” I surge forward. I need to get to them! I need to make sure they’re—

Hands grab me, pull me away. I thrash, I try to fight, but everything’s cold, gone. “No! No! I have to help them! They fell!” My words are strange, alien. This isn’t real. It can’t be real. If it were, Mom and Dad would be over here in a flash, their voices assuring me that this is just a joke. Part of the act.

Why didn’t I catch them?

“Dick...” The voice belongs to Mr. Vestri, his strong, dark arms holding me back, holding me tight. “Dick...”

No, no, no... The word keeps banging around in my head as if it would help. But it doesn’t. My lips tremble as I’m pulled back, my stomach knotting itself. *That didn’t just happen. They’re okay... they have to be! Why didn’t I catch them?*

All I can see as the circus performers swarm their bodies, as the on-staff medical team rushes in, is Mom’s limp, white hand. I can still

hear her voice in my head. It's so real, so warm, that this has to be a dream. There's no way this cold, pale world is real.

No... no... no. Not real... wake up, Dick! This isn't real!

"Officer." Mr. Vestri's voice rumbles against my back, but I don't look at who he's talking to; I look at the carts wheeling in, and Uncle Rick strapped down on a stretcher, where Mom and Dad don't move but are set into large black bags.

"Dick, is it?" A strange voice speaks. Mr. Vestri's gone. A strange man dressed in a white button-up shirt and tan jacket kneels in front of me, his hand heavy on my shoulder. I know he's an officer from the badge swinging around his neck. "Can you tell me what happened, Dick?"

I don't answer. I stare at him, at his white-streaked red hair, at his bushy mustache. "Dick... I know this is...hard. But I need you to help me. What happened?"

"They're...?" I look at the ambulance, the surge of flashing lights. The whispering of the crowd and the sobbing from my troupe rings in my ears, and I know.

I know. He doesn't even need to say it, but he does. "Yes."

I don't want to stay here. I can't stay here. I run forward, past the man, past the crowd, stumbling towards the ambulance as it barrels through the grounds, sirens blaring. I don't know what I'm going to do, what I'm even doing, but I keep running.

My vision blurs, but I don't care. *They can't be gone... they can't be gone... not like this... not ever.* "Mom!" My voice croaks, and I trip, but I keep going, my heart pounding, jumping in my chest. "Dad! Uncle Rick!"

Gone, gone, gone... No! No! No! Why didn't I catch them?!

"Dick!" I ignore the calls. I have to get to them! They can't leave me! "Dick!"

I bolt forward, shaking as the ambulance tears out of the grounds and across Amusement Mile towards the bridge, picking up speed. *No!*

Hands grab me, and I thrash. I might scream, I might hit, I might cry, but I don't know. I sink into the arms that hold me, that pick me up. I shiver in the blanket they wrap around me, ignoring the hands taking off my mask, letting the world see my puffy eyes.

Words are blurred. Raya's hug is lost. I can't even look at her. I can't look at any of them. How could this happen? It isn't their fault... I know this. The only people I could yell at are dead in an ambulance. Dad

and Uncle Rick set those lines themselves. They checked them a dozen times. This isn't possible... this isn't real. *Why didn't I...*

“—can't take him!” Haly's voice is far away. He can't be the man standing next to me; that man's a red and gold blob. “This is his family, right here! This circus is his home!”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Haly, but you don't have custody. We have to take him.” The police officer can't be the one whose hands are on my shoulder; those hands are phantoms.

“And leave him there? Alone, with people, he doesn't know? At a time like this?” Mrs. Vestri can't be the one who speaks up; she's too far away. “We're friends of the family!”

“I'm sorry, ma'am, but we need to find out who has legal guardianship. Until then, he has to come with us. There's no way around it. Don't worry; we'll make sure to take good care of him until this gets sorted out.” The phantom hands squeeze my shoulders, but not like Zucco. Not like—

My head jerks up. I don't know what I'm looking for, but I find it. No one else notices the man standing with the evacuating crowd, the man with the dual-colored eyes. The man holds up a small sign. A sign that reads *'The Fantastic, Famous, **Falling** Graysons.'*

He smiles at me, draws a hand across his neck, and points. Points right at me.

But all I do is stare. I stare at him when the policeman takes me and puts me in the back of the car. I stare at him as we pull out of the grounds, lights flashing. I stare at him when I leave Haly's Circus behind— not realizing the horrible truth.

I'm never going to see it again.

CHAPTER FIVE

I MEET A GIRL CALLED BABS

I don't look out of the window as the police officer drives. Drives away from the circus, away from home. Away from everything. I don't count the bridges, gawk at the twinkling lights, or snicker at how dark and dirty the streets are.

I sit, my hands in my lap, my eyes on my trapeze boots. I didn't even get any of my stuff from our— my— trailer.

Dead... Zucco did it. *He* took the bolts. *He* killed them. I can still see him, smiling like a snake, his dual eyes glittering as he laughs. He's holding a knife. Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick are behind him. They don't move. He draws back the knife— he throws it at me—

I don't know I'm having a dream until the police officer calls my name, his hands shaking me, his eyes soft through the glistening glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

Tears squeeze out of my puffy eyes, and my nose runs. I shake so much I fall forward, collapsing into his arms when he tries to get me out of the car. I want to ask what's wrong with me— but I know what. And I don't want to think about it. I sit in his strong arms, my back shaking, my

breath heaving, getting snot all over his nice shirt. I want to apologize; in fact, a small “Sorry” squeezes out of my lips, but he doesn’t hear. He’s too busy rubbing my back.

Has he done this before? How many kids have their parents murdered in this city? Is that why I’m here and not in some home yet? Isn’t that how they do it in the movies? Drop kids off at the doorstep of some orphanage or house they’re stuck in for the rest of their lives, waiting for someone to come for them? Is that what’s going to happen to me?

“Can you walk, son?” The officer’s voice is deep, rumbling, but soft. He knows what he’s doing; he’s got a purpose. But my purpose crashed to the ground when those lines slipped.

I’m never, ever going back to the circus. They won’t let me. I know they won’t. How can a bunch of performers, who already have enough on their plates, meet all the stupid requirements to take me back?

My shoulders heave, I choke, my nose blocked, stuffed as my eyes leak. I want to be embarrassed. I want to run away. I don’t want this man to see me cry. I don’t want to get his shirt any more tear and snot-stained than it already is. I want to do something! But I don’t. I’m

stuck in his arms. A twelve-year-old boy, shaking and sobbing like a toddler.

So the police officer carries me in. His hands are light on my back and legs, carrying me like I'm made of glass, but he manages to get me into the station. The lobby's massive, filled with a sprawling desk in the center and small cubicles on the sides. And stairs, lots of stairs, and doors leading everywhere.

My whimpers echo. Heads turn, but not many. So this does happen a lot. No wonder Mom didn't want to come here. Who wants to live in a place where orphans are brought to the police station every other night?

The smallest thought of Mom hurts like someone's pressing a blazing poker against my heart. It burns, it stabs, and it doesn't let up. But I can't change what happened. At least, that's what I tell myself. They're gone, and there's nothing I can do. Nothing anyone can do.

But... I should have caught her...

I whimper in the police officer's arms as he climbs a set of stairs, wishing myself back into a dream. Wishing that I could go back, only hours before, to when we were together, happy.

But this is real. This is happening. I, Dick Grayson, am an orphan. I don't have a home, a family, or a life anymore. Throw a pity party, why don'tcha? I won't go. I have to do what Mom and Dad would've done.

Keep going. Forget them? Never. Forgive? Nope. In fact, when I think about the accident, them plummeting to their deaths, all I can think about is Zucco. Laughing. I want to punch him in his gaunt face. I want to threaten *him* with a knife. I want to see *him* cry. See him get what he deserves.

I clench my fists but say nothing as the police officer takes me into a room. This one's carpeted, warm lights fill the space, casting soft shadows. There's a desk in this one, too, and a door that says 'Commissioner' on its frosted glass panel.

A woman sits at the desk, typing on her computer, stopping to take a sip of her latte. She looks up when the police officer carries me in, the door swinging shut behind us. The drink clatters onto her desk, and she's on her feet instantly as if the policeman just yelled, 'Hands in the air! This is a stickup!' Wait, no, that's what the bad guys say, right?

"Oh, Commissioner!" Her hair's like butter, her eyes like little blue birds. Her hand reaches for the phone. "Child Services?"

Is it wrong that I almost laugh at how quickly she knows what to do? It sure feels wrong. So I duck my head, rubbing my eyes furiously. There's nothing left to cry.

“Yes, Miss Williams.” The police officer, no, the *Commissioner*, sets me down. My legs wobble, but I manage to stand. “Put them through to my office. And once you're done, how about getting him a blanket, spare clothes, and some hot chocolate from the lounge?” He turns to me. “How does that sound, Dick?”

I jump at the sound of my name. I know he said it before, but these people are strangers, not just strangers wanting autographs or pictures. They're the only people I have right now. They're in control of everything that happens to me. So I nod. I'm not thirsty or hungry, but I can't say no. Besides, a blanket sounds really nice right about now. Call me a baby, but right now? I just want to hug something. Anything.

The Commissioner nods back and then turns, talking over into the corner. “Barbara, I need you to keep him company. We're staying here tonight.” The Commissioner nods back and then turns, talking over into the corner.

I follow his gaze. In the corner, a girl around my age sits on a small loveseat. She's almost drowned in a purple hoodie, tall striped

socks yanked up to her knobby knees, her mac'n'cheese hair pulled down in two frizzy braids. She smiles at me, green eyes taking in my puffy eyes, snotty nose, and my bedraggled uniform. I can't help but shrink back, my cheeks burning.

If it were Raya, I'd be lectured about how sad and unpresentable I look. I'd be told to go and get washed up, to clean my face, fix my hair, and, for goodness sake, stop crying. Gosh, I miss Raya. Fresh tears squeeze out of my eyes. Pain pounds at my temples. I need water.

Barbara doesn't do what Raya would do. She nods quickly, and from the way she looks at the Commissioner and the way their hair is almost identical, I figure she's his daughter. They've got that same kind of take-charge look. Barbara pats the seat next to her, and the Commissioner pushes me forward, his rumbling voice at my back. "Barbara, this is Dick Grayson. Dick, this is my daughter, Barbara."

I nod at her and try a smile. It should feel wrong on my lips, but it doesn't. In fact, it starts to lift the pressure suffocating my chest. Well, if smiling helps... *Keep going. Keep smiling. That's what they would've wanted.*

Barbara smiles back, scooting over so I can sit down. Behind the Commissioner, Miss Williams is talking rapidly on the phone, all while

typing frantically on the keyboard. She holds up a finger and nods to the Commissioner, who heads for the office. The door slams shut, and though it isn't abrupt, I still cringe.

CRACK! *Keep smiling!* Blood seeping onto the ground... *Keep going!* They're gone... *Why didn't you catch her?*

Miss Williams stands up, her fingers shaking as she clasps them in front of her, her smile trembling as she looks down at us. "I'm going to go— um— get you the things you'll need— um— Dick." She straightens her jacket. "Barb, do you want anything?"

"Pizza?" Barbara cocks her head, batting her eyelashes. "And hot chocolate? Please?"

"Alright." Miss Williams runs a hand through her hair, nodding. "Hang tight— um— kids, I'll be right back."

I watch her leave, her high heels thumping on the carpet. Barbara and I sit in silence for a moment until I can't stand it anymore. "So... do you go by Barbara?"

"Do you go by 'Dick'?" Barbara squints at me before handing me a tissue from the box sitting on the corner table. So, she's not going to lecture me about how I look. I miss Raya, but this is a breath of fresh air.

No fussing, no pestering, no demanding answers, just handing me a tissue and asking me about my name.

“My full name’s Richard.” I accept the tissue, giving my nose a good, long blow. Stay strong. Keep going. *Why didn’t you save them? Why didn’t you catch her?* “Which is way better than ‘Barbara.’ What do your parents want you to be when you grow up, a crazy old cat lady?”

“We already have one of those in Gotham.” She says, kicking her legs, glancing over at me. “And for the record, my nickname is way better than yours. Though yeah, ‘Barbara’ is worse than ‘Richard.’”

“What’s your nickname?” I toss the tissue into the garbage can, finally able to breathe without boogers hanging from my nose. I want to wipe my nose again, maybe on my arm, but I don’t want to gross this girl out, not when I need her.

“Babs.” Barbara grins at me, her freckles sparkling in the soft light of the office. “The kids call me that because I talk too much. But I like it.”

I like it too. And yeah, she’s right. It is way better than ‘Dick.’ “I don’t think you talk too much.” I pull my legs up to my chest, grinning back at her. “You should see me when I talk about something I like. I can go on for hours.”

“Me too!” Barbara, or Babs, pulls a small notepad from her pocket, showing me the sharpied Bat Symbol on the front. “I could talk about him forever. My dad works with him, you know.” She nods to the office. “Commissioner James Gordon, protector of Gotham, a friend of the Batman.”

I try to keep my eyes from popping out of their sockets. “Have you ever met him before?”

Babs sighs, tucking the notebook back into her pocket. “No. He won’t come over for dinner. And every time I try to call him on the Batphone, he never answers.”

For one thing, a Batphone? That’s excessive. And for another, I can’t help myself. I deepen my voice to a rough growl, holding my hand to my ear. **“Hello, Commissioner?”** I grunt. **“What? No, I asked for ham and cheese sandwiches. I’m allergic to peanuts.”**

Babs bursts into giggles at my Batman impression, her feet slamming into the loveseat. “Keep going!” She protests, waving at me. “Oh, please keep going!”

I smile, then dip my head into a shadowy scowl. **“Miss Gordon.”** I drone, looking at her with such a glare she howls, putting a hand over her mouth to muffle the commotion. **“What have I told you about using**

the Batphone? It's for emergencies only. I don't have time for interviews."

"That's him! That's him!" Babs claps a hand on my shoulder, shaking it. "You got him down!"

I grin and lean back in the seat. *Keep going. Keep smiling. Make others smile. Don't worry about—*

The door to the office opens. Commissioner Gordon stands there, looking at me with such a pale, tight look that I want to hide in the cushions. No... what is it now?

"Dick..." He runs a hand along his temples. He reminds me so much of Dad. I have to fight the pressure building behind my eyes, "I'm sorry. Your parents have both been confirmed dead. Your father has a plot set aside for the family in Gotham Cemetery. I'll make sure you get the address so you can... go... for the funeral."

I wait for him to go on. My parents are dead. But what about Uncle Rick? I can't say anything. I can't look at Babs, who's shifting around in her seat.

"Your Uncle... he's alive, Dick." My heart jumps in my chest. I rub my palms on my thighs. I want to shout, bounce on the cushion, and dance for joy. But the look on the Commissioner's face stops me.

Something isn't right. "But he is on life support." The Commissioner rubs his neck. His eyes dart everywhere except my face. "They had to take him away to a special facility. And since he can't take care of you, let alone himself—"

I hold my breath. So... I really am alone in the world, aren't I? But I need to keep smiling. Keep going.

You could've saved her...

"He has been removed from the picture and, since you don't have next of kin or any known relatives— I'm sorry, Dick. But we have to put you in the foster system."

I swallow hard, forcing myself to nod. Uncle Rick's alive... but he's not okay, I'll probably never see him again, but he's alive. But... What about me? "The circus?" I know it's pointless, but I ask anyway.

The Commissioner shakes his head. "They have to go through the same process as everyone else. And it doesn't look—"

I nod before the Commissioner can finish. I already know. "So... I'm just..." I gaze around the office, drinking in the soft lights, the leafy potted plants, the cushiony loveseat, then turn back at the Commissioner, "staying here?"

“For the night, yes. I have a woman coming from the Gotham City Home for Boys. They can’t take you tonight. It’s too late to get everything settled now. She’ll take you to the Home in the morning.” The Commissioner puts his hands on his hips, trying to smile. “She’s going to be helping you, Dick... making sure you get to a good place— a safe place.”

I’m glad he doesn’t ask me what happened in the big top. I’m glad he doesn’t sit me in a witness chair and question me. I’m glad when he pats my shoulder and tells me not to worry, he’ll take care of me. Gosh, I’m glad he doesn’t put me in Juvie.

I’m even more glad when Miss Williams comes back, her arms loaded with blankets, pillows, and new clothes, stacked with two thermoses and a pizza. I rush over to help her, smiling at her. It’s a mistake. The way she looks at me, her eyes damp, her mouth pressed closed, lips trembling, almost makes me cry. I ignore the burning in my eyes and settle down with Babs, slipping the oversized T-shirt over me, using the cover to slide out of my leotard and tights. The shorts sag. I pull the string in their stretchy band all the way tight, barely able to get them to stay around my waist.

Babs ignores the clothes; in fact, as soon as we sit down in a nest of blankets, we're both shoveling down pizza and slurping our hot cocoa. We don't talk, at least, not until the pizza boxes only have grease stains left and the thermoses sit empty on Miss Williams' desk.

"So... you lost your parents." Babs and I settle down in the blankets, curling up like cats. I flinch at the declaration. It's going to be like this from now on, isn't it? Instead of people looking at me and seeing a twelve-year-old trapeze artist, they're going to look at me and see a poor little orphan boy. "I lost my mom, too."

I jump and stare, searching her large, emerald eyes. They're wide, glistening. She *knows*.

"I'm sorry." I don't know what else to say. What *can* you say? What sounds right when a person's lost so much? "Gosh... I know that was pathetic." I snort, burying my face in my pillow. "Sorry isn't really—"

"No, it's fine." I peek up at her. Her smile's small, her mac'n'cheese hair sticking all over her face. "I'm used to it. You'll understand. They mean well, but it's just..."

"It hurts." I rest my chin on the pillow, inspecting this girl. This girl with the oversized hoodie, with the Batman journal. This girl who

wolfed down half a pizza in less than fifteen minutes. “It hurts so much. The way they look at you. But then you feel bad for getting angry ‘cause most of them mean well.”

“Exactly.” Babs turns onto her side, facing me, blowing some hair out of her eyes. “What were they like? Your parents?”

I bite my lip until I think it’s going to bleed. It’s not a question I want to answer. But I find myself telling her all about my family. About the pillow fights, the dance fests, the early mornings, late practices, and the good times. And the more I talk about it, the more I miss them. I want to laugh, to turn to my parents as they smile at the stories, Uncle Rick injecting the details I left out. But they can’t... because they’re gone.

They’re gone...

“What about your mom?” I’m done telling Babs about my family. It’s her turn. “What was she like?”

“Fearless.” Babs doesn’t hesitate, closing her eyes as if she is picturing her mom right now, a small smile teasing her lips. “Fearless and funny. You’d think that dads have all the bad puns? Oh no. Mom was a hoot. She loved flowers too. And pizza. We had pizza all the time.”

I nod, tilting my head all the way back to look at the empty pizza boxes. That makes sense. “How...?”

“The Joker.” Babs doesn’t say anything else. She doesn’t need to. His name holds power. I’m curious what actually happened to her, but I’m not sure I want to know. The Joker’s a lunatic, a madman, a serial killer. Honestly, she could’ve died from anything from a gunshot to a poisonous whoopee cushion.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but as soon as I do, I want to wake up. My parents are falling, Zucco’s laughing, they plummet towards the ground—

CRACK!

I run to them screaming, but their bodies are broken. Red runs around them... but this time, Mom reaches out for me, her once lovely eyes now dead and white, her voice hoarse. “Dick... why didn’t you catch me?”

They all stand up like puppets on strings, their hands reaching toward me. They moan— they look at me with such loathing that I can’t stand it. A hand grabs me; something is wrapping around my ankles—

I wake up to screaming. Something’s trapping me. It’s only when someone shakes me that I realize that I’m the one screaming, that I’m wrapped in my own sheets, and that Babs is sitting on the loveseat, her

eyes wide, her mouth pressed in a thin line. If she wasn't worried or pitying me before, she is now.

I look up at the person shaking me. She's a woman I haven't seen yet, but from her 'school teacher' look and the identification tag hanging around her neck, I know she's the woman who's going to take me away. Behind her stands Commissioner Gordon and Miss Williams, whose hands shake around her coffee cup, tears welling in her eyes.

I clear my throat, looking at the woman in front of me. Her tag reads 'Sophia Corvi Gotham City Home for Boys.'

"Sorry... I had a nightmare. You're... Ms. Corvi?" My voice is hoarse, dry. My head aches so much that I want to lie back down. But if I close my eyes...

The woman smiles at me, taking a step back and nodding. "Yes. And I will be taking care of you, Dick. We'll get you situated."

I point at the floor, raising my eyebrows. "Here?" It's hopeless, I know, but now more than anything, I want to stay with Commissioner Gordon and Babs.

Here, where it's safe.

Sophia laughs, and it's a lovely sound, like the chirp of birdsong. It reminds me of Mom. "Not here. I was able to get all your things from the circus. They're in my car."

I glance back at Babs before looking up at Ms. Corvi. "We're leaving? Now?"

"No. Not yet." Ms. Corvi checks her watch. "I'm waiting for a call. Then we'll go to my office at GCHB."

I stand up, tugging my oversized shirt, trying to ignore my sweaty, spiked-up hair. "Then what?"

"Don't worry, Dick." Her hand's on my shoulder, her eyes soft and black. Her smile soothes my jittering hands and slows my pumping heart. No wonder she's in this business. She's handling all of this like a pro. "You're young. I'm sure there are a lot of good people just waiting to take you in. You won't be at the Home for long."

I nod, smiling back. *Keep going. Keep smiling.*

And hope.

CHAPTER SIX

IT'S A HARDKNOCK LIFE FOR ME

I sit in Ms. Corvi's office, trying not to kick her desk. It doesn't work. My feet won't sit still. I want to cartwheel around, crashing into the filing cabinets. I want to sing, dance, and shout at the top of my lungs. Do anything to distract from where I am and what I'm doing. Instead, I sit, my feet kicking my chair, then kicking Ms. Corvi's desk.

She's on the computer, on the phone, and looking through stacks of papers all at once, doing things I'll never understand.

Before I left the police office, I had to make my 'official statement' on my parents' death. Detective Yin's nice, but her almond-shaped eyes bored into me, prying every detail from my mushy brain. Everything from Zucco's threats to his walking out of the big top to when I noticed the shaking lines, the bolts missing. I don't say anything about seeing Zucco leaving the circus with the crowd. I don't want to talk about the way he looked at me. When I'm done, Yin just nods, shutting off her recorder and guiding me out of the room. Honestly, how can someone question a person about a murder with such indifference? These people need serious help.

After that, I said goodbye to Babs. I hope I see her again. I need to see her again. She's nothing like Raya. She's laid back, likes pizza, and doesn't twitter about lame stuff, like clothes and how much of a doof I am. She likes Batman.

The drive over to Gotham City Home for Boys was nice. I looked out the windows this time, soaking up Gotham in the daytime. During the day, it doesn't look half as creepy, but it does look... sadder. While they're nice, new buildings, there're a lot of old ones with creaking shutters, peeling paint, and broken, rusting chain link fences. Garbage litters the streets. Graffiti covers the walls, anything from simple encouraging phrases to outright threats and gang signs.

The GCPD stands near the center of Gotham, in a section that Ms. Corvi calls the East End. We headed south, across Finger River—yeah, stupid name, I know—over into Old Gotham. I wondered at the colossal skyscraper that stood over all of Old Gotham, asking what it was, but Ms. Corvi only laughed. That's when I saw the name on the sides. Wayne Enterprises. Go figure.

My little tour of Gotham was short and sweet. The building Ms. Corvi escorted me into is squat, old, and crammed full of kids. There's a play area for the smaller kids, a back lot full of cracked concrete, old

trees, and an ancient playground, but other than that, it might as well be a prison. As the name suggests, all the kids are boys, anywhere from babies to seventeen-year-olds. Makes sense. This place is so full, so miserable, so bright that I'd leave as soon as I turned eighteen, too.

I'd said I didn't want to go to Juvie, but I almost think Juvie would be better than this. All the kids, old or young, dress in the same teal outfits, a large black GCHB fading on the front. The 'caretakers' wear suits, too, looking more like prison guards than anything else. Definitely not the kind of people you could come to with a problem or when you need a hug.

When I walk in, I'm sized up and found lacking. They don't know who I am. All they know is I'm their next meal. I try to smile, to be, I don't know, likable? But all I get are glares and smirks from the older boys and pitying looks from the younger ones.

If I have to stay here... no. I won't stay here. I can't stay here, here in this place that smells like day-old BO and mystery meat. Here in this place filled with screams, shouts, and wailing. Here in this place that shouldn't be real, but is.

For some reason, “*It’s a Hardknock Life*” keeps playing in my head. Maybe I am like Annie, shipped off to a home that doesn’t care about me, that will work me like a slave. This is a world of unknowns.

So I kick the table and the chair, humming along to my life’s newest mantra. “No one cares for you a bit—” I hum, “When you’re a foster kid. It’s a hard-knock life.”

That’s depressing, but hey, I didn’t write it. At least I’m in the office with Ms. Corvi and not outside with the others.

Ms. Corvi puts down the phone. I haven’t been watching her much, but the look on her face is enough to make me stop kicking the table, to lean forward and pay attention. She looks so baffled that I have to bite my tongue to keep the flood of questions back. Is this good news or bad news? Am I saved or condemned? Am I being overdramatic? No, not really. This is my entire future we’re talking about here.

Keep going. Keep smiling.

But... you could’ve caught her...

“So... we have a taker.” Ms. Corvi makes it seem like I’m up for auction, which I don’t like, but the way she’s rubbing her temples and trying to smile makes me give her a pass. So I wait for her to finish. “But

it will be at least a week before the paperwork comes through. Maybe more. We have to keep you here.”

Keep me... here? I bite my lip hard. I don't want to go out there into the sea of bodies, into the shark tank. “Can't I go back to the police—?”

“No. It's a miracle you were able to stay the night there at all.” Ms. Corvi rubs her temples, trying her best to look upbeat. It's a good effort, well, okay, not really, but I can't blame her for trying. “I'm sorry, Dick. I'll get you your uniform and... find a place for you.”

So, on the floor then? I want to say something, anything. But I can only nod. Nod as we walk out of the office, and duck my head as we weave our way through the halls. The boys leave Ms. Corvi alone. She's their only hope for escape, after all.

But me? I get jostled, elbowed, and tripped so much that I have to suck on my bleeding lip by the time we get to the bathroom.

One of the caretakers wordlessly hands me an old, faded, way too big uniform. *I don't want to wear this. Please don't make me.* I want to plead. More than that, I want to scream for my parents. But they're gone. No one's coming, at least not for a while. But why not? Can't they take

me now? I walk into the bathroom and change. I don't want to look at my reflection in the mirror, but I do anyway.

I'm a mess. Scrawny, gaunt, tired, with blood still dripping from my lip. I'm practically swimming in my clothes. I frown at myself, then try for a smile. I don't pull it off.

Keep smiling... keep going. Just a little longer.

I walk out of the bathroom, expecting to be greeted by Ms. Corvi, but she's gone.

So I'm alone. Or at least left wishing I'm alone. "So, newb. What happened to your folks?" I look to see one of the older boys, his leering smile reminding me so much of Zucco that my arms tremble as I hold back a punch.

"None of your business." I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm sure you've heard millions of stories. Nothing I say would be the newest gossip for the day."

"Wait!" Another boy leans forward, squinting at me. "Aren't you that Grayson kid? From the circus accident on the news?"

My face blazes as I step back towards the bathroom, my legs fighting to bolt the other way. Forward, away from them. They can't. They can't mock their deaths. They can't—

“Ha!” The big boy leans forward. His hand swipes for my face, and I smack it away. I want to leap over the crowd, do a flip, anything to get away. But I don’t. “So... you’re a circus freak? What? Did your parents worry about you so much that your wittle cries distracted them?”

“The FALLING GRAYSONS!” A kid bellows from the back, tall and lanky, with such a steely gaze my eyes burn. They see it and pounce. “Yeah, yeah! Falling Graysons!”

The cheer picks up and ripples across the crowd, mainly by the older boys: my face flames, and my fists clench. My eyes sting, but I bite my lip hard. Where’s Ms. Corvi? Where’re the caretakers? What kind of place is this?

“So, Circus Freak.” The first boy leans forward. “You gonna cry for Mommy? Well, she ain’t coming. And, well, none of us have mommys.” He says something dirty about Mom—something she’d never want me to say about anyone.

So I punch him. My fist slams into his gut, powered by all the time spent working out my upper arms, fueled with that burning fire pumping through my veins. “Don’t you DARE say that about MY mother!” I hiss, my eyes narrowing. “Don’t you dare talk about anyone

that way! So what if we're all stuck here? That doesn't mean you have to be jerks to everyone!"

The crowd of boys lets out 'oohs' and other catcalls, calling for my demise. But most of the younger boys look at me in awe. Well, at least I have that.

A hand grabs my neck and slams me against the concrete wall. I wince, squinting up at the big bully. I think I'll call him King Kong...

"Yeah, okay, Circus Freak." King Kong sneers at me. "Here's something you'll need to learn real quick. Think of it as a little... initiation." I choke against the fingers squeezing my neck, but I stare right into King Kong's beady little eyes. "Here in Gotham? It's every boy for himself. Maybe when you're older, you'll be cool enough to join a gang. Or maybe—" King Kong smiles, his teeth rotting and nasty, "You'll get taken in by a family who'll dump you out to live on the streets or work you so hard you'd BEG to come back here." He pulls back his fist, and the crowd cheers him on. "Because, Circus Freak, no one cares about us."

I tighten my abs, not dropping my eyes for a second. If those smaller kids looked at me like that... I have to show them I believe what

I say. I have to show them that this big bully is wrong. More than that, I have to show myself.

BAM! The punch lands, but it's not me who grunts; it's King Kong. He drops me, holding his hand, glaring daggers at me. "You're wrong." I stand up, rolling back my shoulders, standing my ground. "People do care. We're worth something. Your problem is you're too scared to hope." I want to believe that with all my heart. I know that there are people out there who love me. Who care. But someone has already claimed me.

Do they care?

I smile, winking at King Kong and lifting my shirt just enough for them to see my toned stomach. "And, about your hand," I drop my shirt and cross my arms over my chest, my grin contagious, "I'm from the circus, King Kong." My voice is light, twittering. "If you can't hold yourself up on a trapeze for, oh, I don't know, three hours? Then you can't hurt me."

"Oh yeah?" Sneers King Kong. He doesn't notice, but a lot of the boys are snickering, whispering the nickname 'King Kong' behind his back. I think it'll catch on. But I can't worry about that. Ol' Kong is cracking his knuckles. "We'll see."

I slip through the crowd so fast that not even the caretakers coming to break up the fight, too late, might I add, notice me. I want to make a break for Ms. Corvi's office, but I know she's not there. She's off... finding a place for me. So I duck into a dark corner and slide down to the floor, hugging my knees against my chest.

They don't have to know I'm scared. They don't have to know I can't stand it here, that I do want to cry... That it does hurt, but not in the way they think.

I try to ignore everyone the rest of the day, but they won't leave me alone. When it's not punching, it's words. Always words. Whoever came up with the phrase, *'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,'* is a liar. Every word, every insult, is a stone. It hits, I flinch, but I smile, laughing in their faces, cracking jokes that make the younger boys grin. I want to give them hope, something to rally around. Someone needs to be the light in a place as dull as this. Gosh... I really *am* getting sentimental in my old age. I should write a book.

I eat with them, and for once, I actually know how old people suffer. What kind of horrible person takes a bunch of food, tosses it into a blender, and slops it onto a plate, calling it good? Well, our GCHB cook, apparently.

I long for Mom's pancakes as I gag down lunch and dinner.

Keep going... Keep smiling... You could've saved her... instead of treated, we get tricked...

The caretakers let us outside after meals, leaving us to run around the fenced-off area, climbing trees, killing each other in basketball. I avoid King Kong and the older boys and instead use the larger limbs of the trees to show off to the younger boys, flipping around, swinging from limb to limb, then dropping down in a hero's dismount. They laugh and cheer, and I grin.

Why couldn't I save them?

After we're called in for the night, we're brought to the dorms. Ms. Corvi isn't there waiting to show me where she's put my things. Instead, one of the caretakers, who might as well be a huge, bumbling bear named Tom, pushes me towards a spot on the floor with a holey blanket, a ratty pillow, and a tiny bag of toiletries.

I want to ask where my belongings are, but I bite my tongue. I take my toothbrush and toothpaste to the bathroom and back as quickly as possible. I slide into the blanket, my back pressed against the freezing, tiled floor. I want to be grateful for this place, the pillow and blanket, but

I can't help but long for my own bed. Even the blankets and pillows on the carpeted floor of the police department sound nice.

I close my eyes and pretend to sleep as the other boys get into their beds or their spots on the floor next to me. I ignore the commotion of the older boys, belching and laughing loudly as they come back from the bathroom.

The light clicks off, but my eyes snap open. No one speaks; in fact, some boys are already snoring, but I'm wide awake. I fell asleep quickly last night, probably because I was so tired. But tonight? I can't. I don't want to. If I close my eyes, the dreams will come. I bite my lip. It's not fair. Why can't I dream about my family happy together? Why can't I see their smiling, laughing faces? Why can't the corpses be buried in the ground?

The wind moans through the room, and the first drop clinks onto the fire escape right outside. Then, from a few drops to a thousand, the sky cries on us. I like to think that it's crying for us, with us, but that's stupid. That's sissy...

While the wind groans and the rain beats against the windows, someone starts humming. It echoes off the walls, filling the air. I shiver under my blanket, burying my head into the pillow that smells like cats.

Then the voice starts to sing, and all the snores hush. All the boys hold their breath. *“Beware The Court of Owls, that watches all the time,”* The voice croons, *“Ruling Gotham from a shadowed perch, behind granite and lime.”* I pull my blanket over my head, shutting my eyes tight. If this is Gotham’s version of a lullaby, no wonder they’re so messed up. The voice doesn’t stop. It keeps going. *“They watch you at your hearth, they watch you in your bed,”* I bite back a whimper. I want Mom... I want Mom! This horrible lullaby reminds me of the one she used to sing to me when I was little, the tune set to an old music box. *“Speak not a whispered word of them, or they’ll send the Talon for your head.”*

I can hear her voice, crooning along with the ancient out-of-tune ting of the box. *‘Who, Who, Who?’* Mom’s voice sings. *‘Who will talk to me, Who will answer me, Who knows why I sing, who?’*

I press my hands on my ears over the blanket, but it does nothing. The song isn’t out there anymore. It’s in my head. It hurts. *‘Who knows the reason why I sing this lullaby, Who, who, who?’*

Her voice is so close, but it’s gone, gone, gone. No one will talk to me. No one will answer me. *‘The owls are flying, I hear them all crying, Through the trees and the curtains as they hurry on home.’*

I want to go home... I want to go home... My eyes squeeze so tight that it hurts. Her voice keeps singing, so sad, so distant. *‘With my feet on the limb and my eyes sad and lonely, I sing who, who, who?’*

I plunge into a nightmare. I’m standing on the landing, watching my parents swing in front of me, flying like birds. But across the way, on the other landing, stands Tony Zucco. He holds a knife to the cables. He’s a snake, his eyes glittering. He cuts the line.

My parents plummet. Mom reaches out for me, screaming my name. I catch her, grunting, trying to pull her up, but she’s too heavy. She yanks me down, and I’m falling, falling, falling. “You should have died with us.” Her whispers fill my ears. My eyes burn.

CRACK!

I gasp, jerking away, pain singing in my side—bright lights beam in my face. I squint through the black spots to see Kong and his cronies leering at me. “Did the wittle Circus Freak have a nightmare?” His voice crawls along my arms, sending shivers rolling. “Hey kid, let me tell you somethin’,” He bends down and ruffles my hair, his eyes glittering like Zucco’s, “They won’t ever go away. But you’d better shut up and keep quiet in here. Unless—”

Crack! He kicks me again, leaving me on the floor, clutching my ribs, biting back a groan. Some of the boys who woke up to my screams snicker, but most stay silent, concealed in shadow. I curl up on myself, gritting my teeth. I won't moan. I won't show them it hurts.

But... I can't stay here... I can't...

I know what I said about hope. That people do care about us. But I can also understand why King Kong and the others act the way they do. They've been stuck here all their lives. Most of them probably never even knew their parents, or were dumped here by their parents.

But I do have people waiting for me, wanting me back.

I wait until everyone's snoring before I creep over and slip Kong's flashlight off his nightstand. I crawl over to the window, bare feet sticking to the tiled floor. The rain's still pounding outside. If I open the window, they'll know. I bite my lip, looking around the room for any way to get out. Caretakers patrol the halls, and security cameras are everywhere, making sure we don't beat each other up too badly. But there, over in the corner, a draft whistles from a cracking brick fireplace.

My heart pounds as I creep toward it, carefully stepping in between the boys splayed on the floor. When I reach the fireplace, I crawl inside, peering up. All I see is darkness, but wind and rain come through,

brushing my hair back from my face, and dripping into my eyes. The cover's ajar.

Taking a deep breath and holding the flashlight between my teeth, I press my back against one wall and prop my feet against the other.

This 'd better work—

I inch up the chimney, wishing I could hold my nose. The smell of soot tickles me, threatening a sneeze that'd blow my cover. But I keep climbing until I reach the metal cap keeping me from freedom. I straighten, my fingers seeing in the dark, pushing, pressing. My teeth dig into the flashlight. Metal on metal grinds and groans, but the cover slides to the side. Rain pounds into my face. I splutter, but I manage to hang on. Off goes the cover, and I'm out, a drowned rat in the downpour. I yank the lid back in place, then spit out the flashlight, clicking it on. The roof of the Home stretches out around me, leaving endless options. Well, endless options for a ninja or a monkey. I make a break for the fire escape, my feet sliding as I clamber down the rungs, shivering.

Maybe I should've brought shoes with me—

I drop down onto the pavement with a grimace. The rough ground cuts into my feet, red running with the rainwater. I ignore it. All I know is I need to get back to Haly's Circus. Yes, that's where I need to go.

I break into a sprint. I don't know where I'm going, but I dash forward. I've got to get as far away from here as possible tonight. Then I can find my way back to Amusement Mile in the morning.

My feet stumble, sloshing in the puddles. My teeth chatter, and my hair clings to my face as rain pours down my nose, sliding off the tip in a steady stream. It bites through my uniform, sending shivers so big down my spine I jerk around like the clowns after a party.

My mind numbs with the rain too. All I know is I have to get away. I have to get home. So I keep my head down and keep running.

Thunder booms overhead, rattling my ribs, and lightning flashes, raking across the sky. I shouldn't be here. I should be in my family's trailer, safe and sound, waiting for the morning to bring the third day of the circus. But I'm here, and the trailer's far away.

I don't see the man until I crash into him. My feet trip, sending me falling back, my butt cracking hard onto the rough pavement. My flashlight rolls to the side. I wince, shaking my head, my hair whipping around like a dog's fur. The guy curses, though he's still standing. But he's not cursing anymore when he finally peers down at me, the light of my flashlight illuminating my face.

“Say now,” His voice is almost drowned out in the rain, “Aren’t you a little young to be wandering the streets at night, boy?”

“Aren’t you a little old?” I shoot back, scrambling to my feet and hugging my stomach, blowing water away from my lips.

“Heh! You got spunk. I’ll give you that.” He leans forward, and when the light touches him, I shrink back, my heart missing a few beats. He’s dressed in a green rain jacket studded with black question marks, his ratty T-shirt a dull, dirty purple. At first, I think he’s the Riddler, another one of Gotham’s loonies, but he looks nothing like the pictures. And he’s not wearing a mask.

He grins, showing his yellow, gunky teeth, shaking his head at me. The rain runs off the brim of his bowler hat, which went out of fashion a long time ago. “Naw, I’m not the Riddler.” What, can he read minds? Or is that a reaction he gets a lot? His hands grab me so fast that I don’t have time to think. I’m being lifted, yanked forward. “I work for him, though. And Boss has been wanting some civilians to play with.”

I scream. Mom always said to shout to get people’s attention if someone ever grabbed me. I didn’t with Zucco, but I do now. I scream, gargling on the rain, thrash, and kick, landing a solid one right between

the man's legs. I'm dropped as he moans, but run away as he roars, leaving my flashlight behind.

Thunder growls overhead as I dash through Gotham, hands grabbing for me. A voice behind me yelling something about 'the Riddler's territory.'

I turn down a street, hoping to find an open store I can hide in, a nice, safe place to sneak into, only to realize I'm not on a street. I'm in an alley—a dead end.

I scramble towards the dumpster, diving behind the black bags of trash. The street lamps cast a long shadow that creeps toward me. I hear a click, and I know what it is.

A gun.

"Now, now, boy." The man steps closer, each footfall echoing through the rain. "Come on out. I'm not gonna hurt you—"

I squeeze my eyes shut, pulling my legs up to my chest, burying my face in my knees. My shoulders shake, and my lips tremble. *I want to go home! I want to go home! I want Mom! I want Mom!*

BANG! The gun fires, but not at me. The sounds of punching, kicking, and finally, the crack and groan of someone hitting the ground

ring through the alleyway. I don't hear the footsteps, but suddenly, something's looming above me. Something vast and dark.

I don't move. Maybe, if I stay here, stay still, they won't notice—a hand touches my shoulder, and I'm on my feet, my legs slamming into a hard, armored chest. The sharp edges of the plates cut into my feet, but the person stumbles back, a small grunt escaping their lips. I land, or rather, crash into the trash bags, scrambling to get back up to my feet.

“Don't run.” The deep voice growls. Chilling. I stop. **“You won't make it far on a night like this.”**

I look up, and I can't believe my eyes. Standing before me, framed in the rain and the flickering lights of streetlamps, is the Batman. He's so huge, so dark, so imposing, but I step forward, not back. I'm hugging myself, trying to find words. We stand like this for a while, neither of us speaking.

Finally, I splutter. “I'm not going back there.” I lower my head. I can't meet those white masked eyes. Those eyes that narrow, harden. “I won't go back. I can't live in a place like that. I can't...” This is not how I want to be when I meet a hero. I should jump up and down, asking so many questions. Instead, my head hangs, my eyes interested in his black, plated Kevlar boots.

I know he sees the faded letters on my teal outfit because he doesn't ask. **"You have to go back."** That's not what I want to hear. I want him to agree with me, to take me home. Isn't he supposed to be a hero? **"You need to sit tight until—"**

"Until what?" I look up at him, my eyes searching, searching for something, anything. "Until some people come and take me away? Until they dump me out into an alley like this?"

"No." Batman's voice shouldn't be comforting. It should be scary, unsettling. But it chases away the shivers. **"You need to stay there until something happens. Something you're not expecting."**

His hand grabs my shoulder, but I don't flinch. Instead, I stare. When did he get so good with kids? When was he ever... gentle? Not from what I've seen or heard on the news. "When?" The word is quiet, lost in the rain, but he hears it.

His hand squeezes my shoulder. **"Soon."** He points to the alley's entrance. **"I'll take you back."**

I nod and follow the Batman. I follow him back down the streets, back through Gotham, and, in the morning, I stumble into the Home, shivering and sneezing, much to Kong's delight and Ms. Corvi's worry.

Like Batman says, I wait. I wait for a week and a half until it happens.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BUTLER, THE BILLIONAIRE, AND THE BEDROOM

“Who?” I try not to bounce in my seat, to hit Ms. Corvi’s desk with my feet. ‘Try’ is the operative word. It’s useless. “Who’s coming to get me?”

“Bruce Wayne.” Ms. Corvi says the name as if it’s some mystery to her. As if she can’t believe it. And I’m right there with her. Wait, wait, *billionaire* Bruce Wayne? The Prince of Gotham? The owner of the enormous tower? Of the castle? The recluse who only shows up to parties and has more than one girl on his arm? *That* Bruce Wayne?

“So... I’m being adopted... by a billionaire?” I lean forward, looking Ms. Corvi square in the eyes. “Is this a TV show? Where’re the cameras?”

This has to be a fake. A fraud. I trust Batman, but let’s be honest, nothing this good ever happens to anybody. Unless he has some sort of sixth sense or whatever.

Ms. Corvi shakes her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. “No, no. Oh goodness, no. We would never do that to you, Dick. No... apparently, he was there. The night of the accident? And he—well—”

I don’t know what to think. Why would a guy like Bruce Wayne take in a small orphan boy who he only shook hands with once? Did I make that much of an impression on him? Or does he... does he... I sit back in my seat with a thump. I know what it is. He feels bad for me. He saw me lose my parents, and he feels bad. And since he has the money, he can just throw it to some kid.

“So... I’m going to be what? His foster son?” I try to keep the tears from welling in my eyes. I don’t know what I think. Am I grateful? Yes, absolutely. Am I angry? Maybe. Am I relieved? Definitely. I don’t care about the money, the castle, or the fame. All I care about is that I’m going to an actual house. Somewhere with someone who wants me, away from this horrible place....

But... he’s still a stranger.

Keep smiling. Keep going. I pound my heels against my chair. *You’re going to like it at Wayne Manor. Just you wait.* But then, I remember the circus. Raya, her parents, Pidge, Marco, Lilia, the clowns, Old Scott, and Vanessa... and C.C. Haly. I saw them at the funeral... was

that only yesterday? And it was hard to even look at them. Raya cried, well, wailing's more the word, about how her parents wanted to take me, but I was already spoken for. C.C. Haly told me that they fought for me but lost.

I try to stop the pressure building up in my chest, the stew boiling in my belly, but it's there, and it won't go away. So I smile at Ms. Corvi, trying to look like a little orphan should. Happy at the fact that someone's coming for me. Heat builds in my face, pushing against my eyes, but I ignore it.

"No," She clears her throat, placing her hands on her lap. Her attempts to smile are weak, which doesn't help. "Not a foster son. He explicitly said he's taking you in as his ward, and the court approved it this morning. I wish I had known sooner—"

I don't listen to the rest of what she says. It's a bunch of terms I don't understand, like guardianship, the Will, the court, yady-yada. But I hold onto one word. What's a *ward*?

My thoughts snap back to Ms. Corvi as she stands up, pushing back from the desk, letting out a brisk 'hm.' "Well, then." She smooths her hair and motions for me to get up. "His butler is coming to pick you up. Might as well have you ready, right?"

“Right.” I try to beam to keep my steps light as we walk out of her office and back into the common area where all my things are waiting, three large boxes of clothes and personal belongings.

The rest of the boys are in the dorms. Ms. Corvi and the caretakers always keep them there, apparently, when someone comes to take one of us away. And I know why. The dirty looks that Kong threw at me, the spiteful nicknames, all of it would be a disaster waiting to happen if they were down here with me.

I don't have to wait long before a huge, sleek, brand-spanking new limousine pulls up in front of GCHB. The man who steps out of the driver's seat looks like he stepped out of an old spy movie. He's dressed in one of those black three-piece suits, complete with a bow tie and smart white gloves. Honestly, what kind of guy dresses like this? At least, in the last oh, I don't know, hundred years?

He's old, maybe in his early sixties. Thinning peppered grey hair smoothes under a cabby hat, sleek and black. Above his thin lips is the neatest, cleanest mustache I've ever seen. I can hear his polished oxfords from inside as he clicks purposefully towards us, the bell dinging as he steps through the door.

I gawk, ignoring the way my mouth opens; no, *hits* the floor. So, this is what a butler's like. I didn't even know that they had butlers anymore. Who'd even wish to be one when they grow up? Did this guy wake up one morning when he was around my age, thinking, '*You know what I want to do for a living? I want to be a butler!*'

"Master Richard." His clipped British accent almost makes me laugh. No way this guy's for real. Then again, he's the kind of person who wouldn't take it too well if you said that to his face.

"Uh, call me Dick." I try to straighten my hair and wipe my eyes, but it's too late. He's looking down at me with a raised eyebrow, his lips pursed. Not a frown, more like... an assessment. "That's... my nickname." I try a smile, yanking on my too-large shirt.

"Very well, Master Dick." The butler bows, actually *bows*, to me. This is too much. I have to bite my tongue hard to keep from laughing. I think I might actually like this guy. "I am Alfred Pennyworth, at your service." He straightens, a slight twitch teasing the corners of his mouth. "But you may call me Alfred." He motions to the limousine waiting outside. "I am to take you to Master Bruce's Manor, your new home."

“Thanks.” I manage, turning to look up at Ms. Corvi. She gives me an encouraging smile and thumbs up before handing Alfred some papers.

I ignore their conversation and watch the staff lug my things into the limousine trunk. Even from here, I can tell they’re sweating over accidentally smudging the paint job or denting the trunk. Or maybe even just breathing on the thing.

Maybe I *am* like Annie. An orphan, taken in by a billionaire. I just hope he doesn’t expect me to sing and dance— at least, not at first.

I’m glad to leave the Home, but my heart squeezes at the thought of leaving all these younger boys here. Maybe they’ll believe what I said. Maybe what’s happening to me will give them hope. Or maybe, they’ll roll their eyes, hunker down, and keep going like they always have.

“Master Dick.” I jump. Alfred’s suddenly at my side, his gloved hand on my shoulder. “Say your goodbyes, then come out to the car. Back door, if you please.”

I nod, turning, holding out a hand to Ms. Corvi. “Thanks.” I shake her hand, trying to ignore how my sweaty fingers are against her smooth skin. “I know that this whole thing was—”

I don't want to talk about running away. I don't want to talk about the beatings, the teasing, the punches, and the screams. I just want to forget. Forget and get away from this place. So I don't finish. I can't.

Ms. Corvi glances through the windows, making sure Alfred's standing by the car door before turning to me. Her whisper tickles my ear. "You have my number, Dick. I'm your person. You don't feel safe? Call me. You think that something's wrong? Call me." She puts a hand on my shoulder, her eyes pleading. "This is very important. Your safety is our top priority. Do you understand?"

Is she concerned about the Billionaire? Yeah, I'm sure she is. But what about the monsters living under this roof, doing who knows what when her back's turned? Gosh, I don't understand this lady at all. But I nod anyway, my stomach churning. "Okay, Ms. Corvi. I will." I beam up at her, pulling away. "Thanks again!"

"I'll check on you soon!" She calls, waving me out the door.

I walk away from the Gotham City Home for Boys, a huge weight lifting off my shoulders. I want to run, to catapult into the limo, to get as far away from here as possible, but I bite my lip instead, chirping a small 'thanks' to Alfred as he holds the door for me.

The inside of the limo's a dream. No, really. The seats are so comfortable I could disappear into them, and the entire back is full of everything a kid would want. There's candy, but not too much that I'd go into a sugar coma from eating it all, but there are snacks too. Crackers, cheese, apples, and a whole fridge full of drinks. Soda, juice, milk, even sparkling cider.

Someone knew exactly what I'd need right now. You know, actual food that doesn't taste like sloppy baby gunk from the can?

I nab a box of Wheat Thins and collapse into the seat by the window leading to the driver's cab. Alfred is already situated, the mirror tilted just enough so he can stare at me with those unforgiving but kind, smoky blue eyes.

"All ready to go, Master Dick?" His voice is clipped but not curt. The car doesn't move. Is he really waiting for me to say something? Do I actually get to boss him around?

It feels... wrong. "Uh... yeah. All ready, Alfred." The limo pulls smoothly from the curb and into the side street traffic, a graceful raven sliding into a flock of loud, obnoxious birds.

I munch on the crackers in silence until I can't stand it anymore. Alfred doesn't even have the radio going. Something beeps, and I jump,

knocking over a container of tootsie rolls. I want to hide as they slide all over the car and the seats. Alfred's going to have to clean them up.

"Yes, sir," Alfred speaks to someone I can't hear. "I have him with me now. We are on route, sir." There's a pause, and Alfred nods curtly. "Good, then. Everything is prepared."

You would think he was planning a queen's gala, not the homecoming of some strange little boy he'd never met. The limo falls into silence again, but I don't let it last as long this time. "Alfred?"

"Yes, Master Dick."

"Can you... Tell me about Gotham?" I don't know what else to ask. I don't want to know about Bruce, I don't want to know about the castle or the riches, I don't even want to talk about Batman. What happened that night when he found me will stay my secret. All I want is a distraction. Something to keep this tugging on my stomach away. So I duck my head, trying to hide from Alfred's piercing gaze. I expect him to roll his eyes or raise an eyebrow, but he nods.

"Long before you were born, Master Dick," Alfred starts, and his voice changes. He doesn't sound like a stuffy English butler anymore. He sounds like one of those cool voice-overs narrating a nature documentary. I lean forward and listen. "The United States was founded and devastated

by the war known as the American Revolution. While this fair country was formed, the cost was great. The new country was young and struggled to get on its feet.”

I know this from history class, but it’s weird hearing someone from Britain talking about America like this. Still, he does live here. I want to ask, *‘but what does that have to do with Gotham?’* but I don’t have to. Alfred continues. “This area was one such place where the colonists struggled mightily. In fact, they were about to abandon their homes for a more promising future— until the First Families of Gotham arrived.”

I peer out of the window. It’s hard to imagine all this land empty, void of people except for a few cottages and a small village. Without the skyscrapers, without the dark alleys. Without the gangs and fear and death.

“The First Families were rich, powerful, and revered by the people.” Alfred speeds us across Dini Bridge and towards the mainland. “They founded Gotham, brought the people together, and worked as one to make this city great.”

I peer in the rear window, back at the city that stands like a shadow against the bright sea. Yeah, well, some ‘great city’ they made.

Even still, I can barely see the huge, shining golden statue in the bay, one hand holding a book, the other hand holding out a sword. Lady Justice. She stands as a beacon, a promise of a time where good people like Batman, Commissioner Gordon, Babs, Alfred, and Ms. Corvi change this city for the better. Back to the way it was supposed to be.

“While a few of the First Families left or died out, five remain. Some still retain social standing and are recognized now as the Five Families of Gotham.” Alfred peers back at me from the driver's seat. We're zipping through the countryside now, nearing that forest I saw from the train, what seems like a lifetime ago. “Those families are the Elliots, the Kanes, the Crownes, the Cobblepots, and—”

“The Waynes.” I interrupt, crawling forward to peer out the front window, gawking at the sight before me. We glide up and down hills, turning into the woods, only to come out in front of large iron gates emblazoned with a stylized W. Beyond the gates are the sprawling grounds, and beyond those stands the castle. Okay, so from up close, it looks more like a Victorian-style manor house, but it's the size of a castle. Gargoyles glare down at me from the eaves, but other than that, the manor looks... welcoming. The flowers spread their petals, the grass rolls in vibrant green, and the windows glisten, not at all dark and gloomy.

There's a buzz from a small box, and the gates open for us. A dog walks alongside the drive, big, black, and muscular, threatening. But he doesn't bark or attack. Instead, he peels off to race across the grounds, chasing something brown and furry, making a dash towards the hedges.

"That is Ace, our guard dog." Alfred peers back at me, a small smile teasing his lips. "He is a good and loyal creature. He will accept you as part of the family. Just give it time."

I feel like a puppy, peering out at the house that's as big, if not bigger, than the entire fairgrounds. The front door itself is about as tall as my family's trailer... but that's just a façade. I know because the real doors, only slightly larger than usual, open, and Mr. Wayne steps out. He's dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, which seem wrong on him. He looks even younger, even more like a photoshopped model. But when I step out of the limo, unsure what to do with my hands, his smile isn't the smirking, go get em' ' , I'm so rich' grin. It's genuine and welcoming.

Human.

"Dick." He walks down the steps of the Manor, meeting me halfway as Alfred rummages around the trunk for my belongings. "I wish we didn't have to meet again like this."

“I know.” I don’t know what else to say. This person isn’t the laughing, joking person I met at the circus. I manage a small smile before turning my attention to the house, my mouth hanging open. “Wow.”

Bruce laughs. It’s small, but it’s real. “No moat. Sorry about that.” He pats me on the shoulder. “It was a nice idea, though.”

I blink at him, then remember what I said when I first met him. About the alligators. He remembers. I grin, sticking my hands into my pockets. “I guess I’ll live. Still beats the socks off the Home.”

“Yes...” Bruce frowns, his eyebrows furrowing, his eyes going so cold and steely. I want to step back. “I wanted to take you home the night of the accident, or at least in the morning, but the court doesn’t accelerate anything, even for money.”

I gawk at him. He wanted to bribe the court to get me sooner? What kind of guy is Bruce Wayne? Why does he want me so bad? I force back a shiver. It’s almost... creepy.

Then, I remember that he’s taken me in. That he’s giving me this manor as a home. And all I’ve done is complain about there being no moat and about the foster home. “Thank you, Mr. Wayne.” I suddenly hold my hand out to him. Someone’s playing tug of war in my chest or

switching between the air conditioner and the heater. “Thanks... for taking me.”

His smile’s strange. Knowing, but kind. Soft, but hard. Just like him. Or not like him at all. He takes my hand and gives it a firm shake. “My pleasure, Dick. And please, call me Bruce.”

I’m so glad he didn’t say ‘call me dad’ that I sigh, my fingers dropping from his, only to pull at my oversized shirt again.

Bruce clears his throat and claps his hands, turning to Alfred, who’s unloaded my things from the limo. “Right, let me take those to Dick’s room while you show him around, Alfred.” So, Bruce actually does do things around here. Even more interesting. I smile as he picks up my boxes, lugging them up the stairs. I watch him disappear. Vanish.

“Well, Master Dick.” Alfred holds out a hand to the Manor. “Shall we?”

Bruce joins us some halfway through the tour. I never thought a place could have so many rooms. And so many empty ones. There are some hundred bedrooms, each bigger than my trailer, two ballrooms, a banquet hall, a screening room, a three-level library as big as a house, and an in-home gym complete with a rock wall, indoor track, and so much equipment it might as well be a maze. I don’t know whether to be

happy or hide when I see the trapeze wires hanging over my head, a net safely underneath it. Did he have those installed just for me? Is this a kind gesture or some kind of sick joke?

There're so many offices that I lose track, only remembering Bruce's office and Alfred's study, which is so spotless you have to hold your breath to keep from disturbing the perfectly pleated curtains. There's a traditional living room smaller than the rest of the Manor, much homier, and right next to the kitchen, which could easily be used for a gourmet cooking show.

By the time we get to my room, I don't think I can be more surprised by this mammoth of a house, but when Bruce opens the doors and waves me in, I want to jump up and down.

It's every boy's dream, literally. A four-poster bed, my own TV and gaming system, my own bookshelves, desk, and miniature mounted basketball hoop, complete with two brand new balls sitting on racks. There're two doors leading off from the main room. One opens to a bathroom with a tub I could do laps in, complete with hot jets, full-length mirrors, and so much counter space I know I'll never use.

The other door leads to a closet. And when I say closet, I don't mean a sliding door that leads to a small room with hangers for shirts and

stuff. I don't even mean a walk-in closet. I mean a whole department store of T-shirts, shorts, shoes, suits, workout clothes, hats, gloves, coats, scarves, jackets, hoodies...

If I were holding something, I would've dropped it. Everything's my size, even the tailored suits. And everything's something I'd want to wear... except the suits. I don't like talking about clothes, shoes, or anything, but I'd be lying if I didn't say I'm not impressed, no, blown away by this. Don't laugh. You'd be blown away, too, if you walked into a closet bigger than your old trailer.

I turn to Bruce, trying to snap my mouth shut. No such luck. "Mr. Way—I mean, Bruce... this is all... for me?"

"Yes." Bruce smiles. He doesn't laugh. He understands. But how? Hasn't he grown up with all this stuff? "It's going to take some getting used to, the big house, all these things, but yes. This is yours."

Mine... I look back at the closet, the room. All these things, just for me. Mr. Wayne spared no expense. He took the time to think about what I'd like... what I'd need. And yet... "Thanks, Bruce."

He nods, just nods, and leaves. I watch him disappear again, lost in the huge house. Where does he go? What does he do?

Alfred stands at the entrance to the closet, stiff as ever, though, is it just me, or is there warmth in his smoky eyes? “Clean up and get dressed in proper clothes, please, Master Dick. Master Bruce expects you at dinner in the banquet hall at six-thirty sharp.” Alfred looks around the room before turning back to me. “I assume you will find ways to... amuse yourself until then. Remember, Master Bruce’s office is off limits unless he summons you.”

And with that, I’m alone. Outside, Ace barks. But inside, it might as well be a morgue. I tap my hands on my thighs, turning my attention to the clothes.

All of this stuff... and Bruce seems nice enough... but... I close my eyes and sink to the floor, rocking on my heels.

All I want... is a hug.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NIGHTMARES, FRIGHTMARES, NOTHING SCARES ME

I do find ways to amuse myself until dinner. At the Home, I couldn't really do anything except hide from the older boys and hang around the younger boys. At the circus, much of my time was spent working, practicing, and spending time with my family. I don't want to be alone, but I realize I haven't ever really been alone before. It's strange.

So until dinner, I run through the halls, launching into handsprings and seeing how many I can do in a row. I slide down the banisters, shoot hoops in my room, and rummage through the clothes. I change into jeans, a plain white T-shirt, and a baggy blue sweatshirt that makes my eyes look even brighter and bluer. Raya would be proud, but I raise my eyebrows in the mirror. Either it's a coincidence, or Mr. Wayne— er, Bruce, really was paying attention when we first met.

I run into Alfred a couple of times, once in the portrait hall, dusting and polishing the vases on the fireplace mantel, and once in the kitchen preparing dinner. He seems to be everywhere at once. Maybe he has a secret Butler's maze that winds through the Manor? Either way, the look he gives me as I slide on my socks through the portrait hall, skating

along the shiny hardwood, is a look I'll never forget. It's fondness, plain and simple. A look Dad would give me when I did something funny. Or like Mom would give when I did something cute.

I know he's worked for Mr. Wayne for a long time, but how long's it been since a kid's been here, messing up all his hard work? How long's it been since a kid's laughter has echoed in these halls?

And I do laugh. I laugh because I'm away from the Home. I laugh because I need to. If I don't laugh, if I don't smile, it hurts all over again. So I laugh as I collapse onto one of the hundreds of couches, bouncing up and down on the plush cushions, looking up at a large painted portrait of a family of three. There're a lot of paintings in this Manor, from the old Waynes glaring down at me from portrait hall or strangers that could be friends, other families, or just random people.

But this one's special. The man looks like Bruce, but older, his temples sporting gray hair like Dad's did. The woman's beaming and beautiful, a string of pearls around her neck, delicate hands resting on the shoulders of a boy, not much younger than I am. His hair is dark, his features practically perfect. Steely eyes look out at me from under black eyebrows. But those eyes are sparkling, filled to the brim with joy.

This can't be Bruce... But it has to be. Underneath the portrait, a small placard reads *'Thomas, Martha, and Bruce Wayne.'* I turn onto my stomach, staring up at the picture. Raya never said anything about Bruce's family. Why aren't they here? Did they just leave Bruce the Manor? Did they retire to a private island? Or are they—

“Thomas and Martha.” Alfred's next to me, holding a feather duster, an apron covering his three-piece. Honestly, how does he get around this place so fast? I glance at him, but he still gazes at the picture. His voice is clipped as usual, but his eyes have such a melancholy look that I know. He knew the Waynes and knew them well. What happened to them? Where are they now? “Bless their souls.”

Alfred shakes his head but doesn't say anything else. So, they're dead, then?

I sit up, hugging my knees. I'm sure Bruce won't want to talk about it. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who talks about anything more than parties and shallow stuff like that, at least in front of people. I'm sure he cares a little enough to take me in.

But... was it because he thought I needed a home? Some place safe to live? Or just because he could?

Alfred straightens and clears his throat. “Yes, well. It is time for dinner, Master Dick. Chop, chop.”

The Wayne Manor Banquet Hall fits not one, not two, but three full-sized crystal chandeliers. The hand-crafted table could seat my entire trope, which makes sense because Wayne Manor hosts many parties and charity benefits, at least that’s what Alfred tells me. I can imagine it teaming with people, eating, laughing, dressed in fancy suits and dresses, and clinking their glasses together.

But when I walk in now and sit down at the end of the table where Alfred has set a china plate and real silverware, like forks, spoons, and knives made of *actual* silver, the hall stands empty, my chair’s squeaks echoing again and again. There’s a place set and ready next to mine, but no one sits in the chair.

I look from the seat back to Alfred.

“Is... is he coming?” I don’t know what to think. Part of me tries to reason that a billionaire like Bruce Wayne has a multi-billion-dollar company to run. The other part of me insists that he’s not here... because he doesn’t care. He just took me in so I could have a place to stay. But maybe he’s like the elderly professor in The Lion, the Witch, and the

Wardrobe, a nice man who gets wrapped up in his work and would want to spend time with me if he could only get away from his office.

Alfred sighs, pulling a small phone from his suit pocket, dialing, and putting the phone to his ear, even as he ladles a generous serving of soup into the bowl sitting on my plate.

“Master Bruce?” Alfred sounds like he’s talking to a child, not a grown man who’s actually his boss. His tone’s sharp, stern. “Yes, dinner is ready. Yes... I understand— no, no. It’s just—” Alfred gives me a knowing look. My heart buzzes with warmth. At least Alfred cares, “Master Dick is asking for you.”

It feels weird having someone pass on my wishes to another person as if I can command a situation, as if my words actually have power. I can just see it now, Raya standing, waiting in the huge front room, gazing nervously at the swooping stairways and vaulted ceilings. Then, Alfred would come to the top of the stairs and motion towards the hall leading to my bedroom. “*Master Dick is asking for you.*” He’d say.

I smile into my creamy soup, which I find out is the first part of a three-course meal. Alfred still speaks on the phone as he grates fresh cheese into the soup, stopping when I hold up a hand. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it, no matter how cool it might be. “No, no, Master

Bruce. I know your work is important.” Alfred makes no effort to hide the barb in his words. “But, if I may be so bold, this is his first night.”

I finish the soup, savoring every creamy, spicy bite. After the slop the GCHB served, this is pure paradise. Next up on the menu’s a plate full of salad. I don’t usually like veggies, but right now, I’ll eat anything and everything that’s put in front of me, as long as it’s not brown and mushy.

Alfred’s off the phone, handing me the ‘salad fork,’ which honestly looks like every other fork lined next to my plate. Okay, what person came up with all of these things? Why can’t eating just be kept to a fork, spoon, knife, and fingers?

“He is on his way.” Alfred raises an eyebrow as I pick up a tomato and pop it into my mouth, crunching down. “He will be with us shortly.”

I chew hard. I don’t know why, but for some reason, I wanted Bruce to come because he wanted to, not because Alfred forced him. Speaking of which, what’s Alfred to Bruce anyway? I thought he was a butler, not some kind of father figure. Which begs the question: Where *are* Bruce’s parents? Are they dead? But if his parents raised him, then why—?

Bruce slips into the banquet hall, his T-shirt covered in what looks like grease, his eyes drooping. What's he been doing all day? Working in his hundred-car garage? My stomach twists into knots. Maybe he doesn't care about me.

Bruce sits beside me, giving me a small smile before Alfred serves his soup. There's silence in the banquet hall save for the clinking of china and chewing. I try not to stare, but I do.

Finally, the worst thing happens.

"So... Dick, what do you think about the Manor?" Bruce's looking right at me, his eyes still sagging but sharper than ever. Is he really expecting me to answer that? How can I answer that? What should I say? *'Well, gosh, Mr. Wayne, the Manor's really nice, and I have all this stuff, but where were you all day? You know I'm a lonely orphan and could really use a hug right about now?'*

I can't say that, so I go for something else.

"Yeah!" I grin as I stuff some romaine leaves into my mouth, crunching down on the crispy lettuce. "I never thought a house could be this big! Gosh, my whole circus could fit in just this room!" I swallow before gazing around the echoing space again, then turn back to Bruce.

"What do you do with all this space?"

“Let it sit, mostly.” Bruce’s smile is genuine again, like he’s really trying. “I host parties, but most of the time, it’s just Alfred and me.”

“And... the women?” I don’t know why I ask. In fact, my cheeks burn so much I could fry the strange dish Alfred sets in front of me. All that stuff is just gossip that Raya twitters on about.

Bruce chokes on his salad, slamming a hand against his sternum as Alfred snorts. Well, that was something.

“Well... no. No, of course not.” Bruce rubs the back of his neck. “I take them out on dates. Or they come for the parties. I never—” He narrows his eyes at me, assessing my smile. He really is different from what the press makes him out to be. They see him as one thing. Well, a couple of things. A spoiled billionaire who’s arrogant shows off at charities and always gets what he wants.

But the way I see it, he’s just a mystery. He’s not shallow... at least, I don’t think he is. And he’s not arrogant, at least not on purpose. I don’t even know what kind of man sits across from me. Is he nice or selfish? Is he smart or simple? Does he like parties or not?

“Well,” Bruce sets his hands gently on the sides of his plate, “There won’t be any guests for a while.” He leans over to me, his eyes hard. “There won’t be any reporters, charities, or any... other people. Not

yet. But Dick—” Bruce tries to catch my eyes, and I let him. I know he’s being serious now, “There will be rumors. Don’t listen to them. You are the son of John and Mary Grayson, understand?”

Why would I not understand that? That makes no sense. What kind of rumors? Why would people— I stop, a half-eaten enigma sitting in my mouth as I realize what he’s saying. “Wait... they’d think that you’re my... my *dad*?” I point at him, trying to keep the horror from my face. It doesn’t work. Bruce laughs. Laughs, but without humor.

“Something like that.” He waves Alfred over so he can fill Bruce’s plate with the strange, melting, delicious things I’m eating. “There will be a lot of rumors and gossip. The media is relentless. Don’t let them get to you, Dick. Almost everything they say is a lie.”

I want to duck under the table, hide. He’s right. The news likes to sniff out the most scandalous things, which most of the time aren’t even true, like that one rumor about my family. I don’t remember what it was about exactly, but boy, did my parents have a field day yelling at all those nosy reporters.

So instead of hiding, I laugh. My laugh’s very different from Bruce’s. Mine’s full of good humor, but it echoes off the walls creepily as

if someone's waiting to jump out at us from the shadows. Bruce gives me a thoughtful smile before we go back to eating our food in silence.

After all, what should we talk about? All he knows about me are my days at the circus and my time at the Home, which I don't want to talk about. And all I know about him is apparently a show he puts on for the cameras. The man sitting in front of me is not the man I expected. How much of what I've seen is real?

So I turn to Alfred instead, pointing to the unidentified food on my plate.

"What're these things?" I ask through bulging cheeks.

"Do not speak with your mouth full, Master Dick." Alfred whisks dishes off the table, loading them onto a small cart. "And those 'things' as you call them are crab-stuffed mushrooms."

I want to let the mushroom-crab-thingy drop back onto my plate, but strangely enough, the flavor still explodes in my mouth, leaving me wanting more as I swallow. Maybe it's because of the slop, or maybe I always liked crab and mushrooms, but I just didn't know it. Or maybe I'm already turning into a rich person who likes all the weird stuff like snails and fish eggs. Who knows? I don't complain. I scarf down the rest of the 'rich people' food, licking my lips when I'm finished.

Bruce eats slower, looking down at his phone now and then, typing frantically on the screen. I wonder who he's talking to, what he's doing. But I don't ask. I still don't know where I stand between us. Am I just.... What did Ms. Corvi call me? His ward? What does that even mean? Does that mean I'm just living at his house and eating his food?

Or is he... is he more like a father? I want to ask. I want to ask so bad I have to stuff my mouth full of chocolate mousse to keep my tongue from flapping. The last thing I want to do is scare this elusive billionaire away on my first night at his house.

I'm not even halfway through the desert before Bruce stands quickly, pushing his chair away from the table.

"Alfred, I have to go to work. Something—" he pauses and looks right at me. But he doesn't smile. He doesn't frown. He looks at me evenly as if whatever it is is all my fault. But that can't be right, so I look closer. Behind that strange expression, I see protectiveness. A fierce protectiveness. Who *is* this guy? "Something came up."

I want to say something, anything. *'Thank you, see you later?'* But no. I keep my mouth shut.

"See you... soon, Dick." It's not even a 'see you tomorrow' or 'goodnight.'

Just ‘see you soon.’ But I smile, my grin stained with chocolate.

“See you later, Bruce!”

He nods but doesn’t smile back as he exits the banquet hall, running towards something and away from me. I sigh and stare down at my mousse. My eyes sting, but I shake my head. I can’t, I won’t, be angry. I should be grateful to be here, away from the Home, off the streets, with a full belly and a huge house-sized bedroom all to myself. But there it is. Who wants to live in a stuffy, old manor house all alone? No wonder Bruce’s gone all the time.

I thank Alfred and slip out too, heading back to my room. I don’t want to look around anymore, and though I don’t want to be alone, I’m not about to ask Alfred if he wants to spend time together. Or if I can hug him. I can just see that eyebrow raising, that mouth thinning into a frown. So I hide in my room, fingers jamming against the game controller until I can’t hold my eyes open anymore.

I slip into PJs, which I think might actually be silk, the pocket even embroidered with my initials, RG. I’m too tired to do more than brush my teeth in my bathroom, my reflection blinking back at me, its hair all over the place. What am I going to do with it now that Mom’s

gone? Maybe I can talk Alfred into shaving it off for me, but then again, he seems like the kind of person who would disapprove of that.

When I crawl into the soft, plush bed, I let out a sigh. I don't want to sleep. I don't want to be alone. It's too quiet, almost like everyone has evacuated the house. Alfred's off somewhere, and Bruce's doing who knows what. Even Ace's silent out on the grounds, probably patrolling the fence.

Some people love to have it quiet when they sleep. But in the quiet, I can hear C.C. Haly's voice announcing the Fearless Flying Graysons. I can hear the roar of the crowd and the booms of the cannons. And I can hear them calling for me, screaming my name as they fall.

I shut my eyes tight and hold my hands over my ears, but it doesn't help. The silence isn't the problem, not really.

It's me.

I stand on the platform, overlooking the crowd. In front of me, Dad, Mom, and Uncle Rick perform their daring feats, flipping gracefully like birds. Then C.C. Haly says something that chills my blood, turning it to ice in my veins.

“Watch as these amazing acrobats dip into the dive of death! Cheer as they plummet to their demise!”

I want to scream, I want to dive after them, gosh, I'd be fine with Mom dragging me down with her again, sneering into my ear. But I have to watch, stuck in place, watching as the lines snap, as they fall. But they don't scream this time. They laugh.

They laugh and laugh and laugh, smiling all the way down to the ground. *CRACK!* Now I'm down with them, my feet dyed scarlet. They're still laughing. They're grabbing for me.

No, no, no, no! I scream, I kick. *No! Stop it! No!*

Above, I hear another laugh. It's Babs, dressed in a purple leotard, her green eyes sparkling.

"I'm coming too, Dick!" She chortles, hanging onto the lines. "I want to see you and Mom again!"

NO! She drops, and I try to catch her. *CRACK!* They keep on laughing. They're pulling me down now, trying to take me with them, drag me away into the laughing darkness. But I don't want to go with them.

"Stay away!" Hands clamp around my wrists, digging into my skin. My voice rakes my ears. "Let go!"

“I told you I would get you too, boy.” Tony Zucco leers down at me, his voice slithering through my ears. I thrash more. “Time to join your parents.”

“No!” My head snaps back and slams into something solid. Dad’s holding me, his dead eyes grinning.

“You need to carry out the Falling Grayson legacy, son.” He says, blood leaking from his teeth.

I stop thrashing. Instead, I collapse into his arms, my eyes squeezing shut. But shutting my eyes doesn't work. Not with the horrible images burned into my eyelids.

“MOM!” I cry. I cry as they beat me, cut me, and whisper awful things into my ears. “MOM!”

“You let me die, Dick.” She says, her hands burning my skin, her nails cutting me. “Why didn’t you catch me?”

“N—no...” I don’t want to whimper. I don’t want to cry. I want to be strong. I want to be the person the smaller kids in the Home saw. The boy who feared nothing, not even the biggest bullies. The boy who had hope, who knew that he was loved. But I’m not that boy inside. At least, not now. No, no, no.

Coward! Coward! You lived, and they didn't. You could have saved them, but you just stood there. Coward, coward, coward! You saw that Zucco was sneaking out of the big top and waited to tell Detective Yin when she questioned you! Too late!

“You let us die, Dick.” Mom’s words are in my ear. Their hands are clawing at me, cutting me, breaking me. “You should die too.”

“—ick!”

I thrash against the hands that hold me down, at the fingers gripping my arms and legs. *No, no, no! Wake up! This isn't real! This is only a dream!*

“—ick! Dick, wake up!” I don’t know this voice. This voice that’s calm but earnest. Strong but gentle. Kind but commanding.

“Master Dick, you are harming yourself.” Who’s that? Something splashes on my face. My eyes fly open. I’m in a huge room, the dorm of the Home. No— no—

Slowly, I catch up to reality. I’m in my room in Wayne Manor, safe in my four-poster bed. Alfred and Bruce hold my arms and legs down, an empty cup in one of Alfred’s hands.

I stop thrashing, my face slick with sweat and water. My breaths come quick and shallow, my arms and legs shaking. Bruce and Alfred let

go, with Alfred stepping back into the shadows of my room and Bruce stepping into the light of my bedside lamp.

His hair's mussed, like he just took off a hat, his eyes tired, and is it just me, or is there a small cut on his jaw that wasn't there before? But he looks at me with such concern that I sit up slowly.

"Wh—" My voice's thick, dry, getting stuck in my throat. My eyes are puffy, and my face rubbed raw with tears, stinging from the sweat. I try again. "What happened?"

"You had a nightmare." Bruce's cool, large hand touches mine, and I wince. When I look down, I stare. My knuckles are bloody, my wrist bruised, but not by Bruce's hands. By my own.

"What..." I can't finish. I've heard about people sleep-fighting and lashing out from their dreams, but I always thought those were just funny stories. This is something else.

"I think you were punching the headboard." Bruce sits by my side, helping me up the rest of the way. I want to gawk as he awkwardly slides my pillow up and back, propping me against the incriminated headboard. "And you were grabbing yourself— trying to fight something off."

He doesn't ask what, and I'm glad. I don't want to talk about it. I wipe my eyes frantically, my hands shaking.

"Why... why do I keep having dreams like that?" I hate the way my voice trembles, the way my cheeks are slick with cold sweat.

"Because you went through a traumatic experience, Dick." Bruce's heavy hands rest on my shoulders, grounding me back into reality. "You saw something that no child should ever have to see. And now you are trying to process that. However..."

I'm glad he doesn't continue. But he makes sense. I bite my trembling lip and nod. It doesn't matter what I thought about him before. He's here now. And that's all that matters. Before I can think what I'm doing, I lunge into his arms, my arms around his thick, muscular chest, my head buried against his neck. I'm shaking so much I can barely hear the surprised grunt escaping his lips.

Then the unthinkable happens. He hugs me back. His arms are strong, firm, and solid. Unmoving. They wrap around me, his huge, powerful hands rubbing my back in comforting circles. His chin rests on my head, and I let out a shaky sigh. For the first time since that night... since those lines slipped from their places... I feel safe.

“I know what you’re feeling, Dick.” Bruce’s voice rumbles against my ear. “I lost my parents too when I was not much younger than you are. They were shot by a mugger in an alleyway. I had to watch.” I swallow the questions building up in my throat. I just focus on taking deep, choking breaths, on the hands rubbing my back, on Bruce’s voice. “That’s something I will never forget. But I had Alfred. He raised me, kept me safe.”

So... is that why he took me? Because when he saw me up there, looking down at their dead bodies, he saw himself? I still don’t say anything. Now I’m afraid I’ll shatter this moment and lose this Bruce Wayne, the one who actually cares about me.

“That’s what I want to do for you, Dick.” Bruce’s hands stop rubbing too soon. I feel exposed when he gently sets me back, looking at me with those eyes. Those eyes now look more like a weeping rain storm than hard steel. “I want to give you what Alfred gave me. A home. A family.”

I don’t know what to say. And what I end up saying doesn’t fit at all.

“Will they ever go away? The nightmares?” I hug myself, wincing. I should’ve said thank you and given him another hug. But Bruce doesn’t seem to mind.

He shakes his head slowly. “I don’t know, Dick. Give it time, and they might. But even if they don’t, Alfred and I will be here for you. We’re your family now.”

I let out a sniff and nod.

“Thanks, Bruce.” I study his eyes, and my lips manage to pull into a trembling smile. “For everything.”

Bruce slips off my bed, joining Alfred in the shadows.

“Of course. Alfred will stay by your side the rest of the night if you need anything.” Bruce clears his throat and straightens his rumpled T-shirt. “Goodnight, Dick.”

I don’t get the chance to say goodnight back. He’s gone, leaving Alfred to sit in a chair pulled up to my bedside. I swallow hard. So, Bruce does care. The memory of him calling us ‘family’ sends warmth gushing through my veins. But, if he believes that, then why’s he gone?

“Don’t be angry with him, Master Dick.” Alfred smooths his slacks as I lie back down, sinking underneath the sheets. Does Alfred read minds, too? I wouldn’t put it past him. “He does care and means

well. He just does not know how to show it around other people. He does have that little façade to keep up.”

I nod. The billionaire façade. The shallow, partygoer. The public expectation.

“Is that why he goes everywhere with two girls instead of one?”

“Yes. Master Bruce is a man of many secrets, many mysteries.”

Alfred chuckles, smoothing the wrinkles off his pants again before holding out a bandage for my knuckles. “He is very protective of those secrets. But the more you get to know the real him, the more, I believe, you will be able to discern *who* the real him is. And the more he will open up to you.”

I close my eyes as Alfred wraps my bloodied hand, his fingers thin and nimble like he’s used to wrapping up wounds. The real Bruce Wayne? I didn’t even give him the time of day when Raya twittered on about him. But now I have to know.

Who is Bruce Wayne?

CHAPTER NINE

I JUMP A FEW GRADES

In Gotham stand many towers reaching to the dark skies. Old and new, of the rich or the despicable. Sometimes both. In the Narrows stands a tower, the home of the late Carmine Falcone, who ruled Gotham with an iron fist, untouched by the law. Of his vast criminal empire, there was no equal; of his deeply rooted control, there was no substitute. That is, until the Batman began his caped crusade. Many in Gotham remember the war on the streets— the shifting of power. The potential it created for those in the shadows to step into the light, to claim their place.

Falcone was gone, but perhaps what he left was worse. A city divided, split, and fought over by the rising leaders of the underworld. And while the Batman kept simple muggers and criminals off the street, even he could not root out the corruption that runs deep.

Even the Batman cannot frighten the likes of the elite from their perches in the decaying streets of his city. Even Batman cannot see the fingers of influence that run deep.

The tower in the Narrows stands untouched, unthreatened, and untraceable. This mafia leader rides the wings of legitimate business.

Even now, he sits, a dark, portly shadow at his office desk, the light of his computer screen illuminating his ugly features. Before him stands Tony Zucco, one of his many enforcers.

“You failed me, Zucco.” His voice is warbling, croaking. “You were supposed to bring me the boy.”

Zucco’s arms clasped behind his back. “I thought they would bring him back to the circus. Everything—“

Crunch! Something slimy finds its way into the dark shadow’s mouth. He doesn’t speak until he is done chewing, and Zucco doesn’t dare to say anything until he does. “You thought? He was at a Home for a week, Zucco. Easy pickings.”

Zucco nods, his fingers trembling. “Yes, well, the GCHB is in the Riddler’s territory, so I thought—”

“Again, you thought?” The man sneers. “The Riddler and I are on good terms. Don’t lie to me. Tell me—” *Crunch.* More chewing. Zucco shifts in his boots, swallowing hard, “What really kept you away?”

Zucco’s voice is thick, strained. “The Batman... Sir.”

“Ah, yes, the Batman.” The man leans back, the screen’s light fading from his face. “I knew Riddler’s activities would draw the Bat’s

attention. You can always trust those... extravagant types to catch the eye of the law. Such a pity. But not an excuse.”

Crunch!

“S-sir.” Zucco swallows hard. “We can still get him. We—”

“Do you know who has the boy now?” The man croaks, hacking on something lodged in his throat.

“We... we followed him all the way to Wayne Man—“

“That’s right.” *Crunch!* The shadow chews again, slower this time. Sweat beads on Zucco’s forehead. “Wayne Manor. The very same manor we tried and failed to infiltrate. The very same Manor with the unbeatable security system.” The shadow leans forward, his beady eyes locking onto Zucco. “Do you understand what we have just lost, Zucco? What you have lost me?”

Zucco swallows hard. Out on the streets, he is in control. But here, his proper place is beaten into him. He shakes his head, his voice thick. “N-no, Sir.”

The shadow grasps the computer screen with his misshapen hands, turning it slowly. The bright light blinds Zucco until he squints, barely able to read the figures on the screen.

His eyes widen. “Sir... if I had known—“

“The kid is invaluable to us, Mr. Zucco.” The voice croons, turning the screen back around. “I want all your men on this. Do not dare try to infiltrate the Manor. Wait for the kid to come to you. I do not want to cross Wayne.”

“That useless piece of dough?” Zucco’s fingers tremble as he tightens them. “I am sure that you can—“

Click.

The sound is so simple, but Zucco flinches. Something sharp is under his chin, teasing Adam’s apple. If it were any other person, he would pull out one of the knives waiting for him in his jacket pockets. But no one pulled a knife on the boss.

“Leave. Wayne. Out. Of. It.” The shadow hisses, beady eyes glistening over a sharp nose. “Get the kid, or you will owe me twice what he's worth.”

Zucco would nod, but that motion would cut him. “I—of course, Sir.”

The point is away from his chin, but the threat is not out of the air. “Luckily for you, Mr. Zucco, I have a contingency plan should you fail.”

Zucco swallows hard. He knows that he will wish the boss had ended him if he fails.

No one crosses the Penguin.

“Time to wake up, Master Dick.” Lights snap on, and I groan, taking one out of Uncle Rick’s book and slamming my pillow over my head, moaning into the soft fabric.

How much sleep did I get after all was said and done? Not enough, I tell you. “No... Alfred.” My voice is muffled through the pillow, but I don’t care. At least it’s dark and comfortable under here. “It’s too early.”

“It is six-thirty a.m, Master Dick.” Alfred’s clipped tones are too peppy for this time of the morning, though I don’t think ‘peppy’ is really the right word. I can’t see the old butler as anything more than deliberate.

“Exactly!” My pillow’s snatched from me, leaving me to scowl at Alfred, squinting through the fresh sunlight beaming in from my huge, floor-to-ceiling windows. “I usually wake up at eight!”

Most of the time, people complain that they don’t get enough sleep. Well, how can they complain when they purposefully wake up this stupidly early? Early bird gets the worm, I get it, but honestly, how can the bird get the worm if it’s so tired it can’t fly straight?

“Not anymore, Master Dick.” Alfred drops my pillow onto my bed, his lips thinning into that now familiar line. I can’t tell if he does that when he’s upset, amused, or annoyed. Maybe all three? Maybe it’s just the ‘Alfred Special?’ “When you live in this house, you will wake up promptly at six thirty. Come on, chop, chop. There is much to be done.”

I want to roll my eyes or turn my back to him and hide under my blanket, but I don’t. I actually like Alfred. Maybe waking up so early won’t be so bad. Okay, so that’s a lie. It’s going to be horrible. But... what do we have to do? Alfred cleans and cooks, but what am I supposed to be doing?

My mind whirls with all the possibilities as I drag myself out of bed, stumbling into the bathroom. My reflection looks back at me, just as asleep as I am, bags under its eyes, a massive nest of tangled hair on its head, and a giant yawn cracking its face. Mom would think I’m adorable. Raya would pester me about how awful I looked. But... I can’t think about them. I can’t.

I put my toothbrush in my mouth, but I only manage to suck on my toothpaste. Apparently, my efforts are unacceptable. “Master Dick, what are you doing?”

Alfred's standing at the door to the bathroom, his eyebrow raised, his smoky eyes piercing through my brain fog. "Hm?" I mumble through a mouthful of toothbrush. "Immwa brwushwing mwy tweeth!"

"Goodness me." Alfred's oxfords click into the bathroom, and he opens a drawer. "Brush well, please, Master Dick. And let us see what we can do about that... mess on your head."

I grab my toothbrush and scrub my teeth, ignoring the comment about my hair. I've heard enough about it to last a million lifetimes. Instead, I watch Alfred take out a brush, a comb, and a small, round container. By the time I spit out the toothpaste, Alfred has assembled so many things on the counter that it might as well've been a hair salon. "What's all that for?" I stare at the clippers and shears sitting on the glistening counter. Maybe he'll buzz it all off and save me the trouble. If he does that, he will achieve the highest honor. Legendary status in the hall of grown-ups. Is this actually a thing? No. Should it be? Yeah, it should.

"Grab that stool, Master Dick." Alfred motions to a swiveling stool sitting in the corner. I grab it, setting it in front of the mirror. "I'm going to give you a trim."

“Just a trim?” I try not to sound as disappointed as I feel. Why can’t grown-ups ever understand that I’m serious about shaving it all off? What’s it gonna take, me joining the military? Alfred wraps a towel around my neck, clips the cape around me, and drapes it over my front. I gaze at the stacks of bottles sitting next to the sink and the towel Alfred’s draped over the edge.

“You are also in need of a good, thorough scrubbing.” Alfred sniffs lightly, turning me around and pushing me back, so my head rests on the edge of the sink, my eyes staring at the lights. I let him do this because I know he’s right. My hair’s a greasy mess. Shower times were cut short at the Home, and I figured I’d rather smell good than have clean hair.

The water splashes into my face as the faucet turns on, but it feels good. Alfred’s hands are purposeful, rubbing the shampoo into my scalp and cleaning every inch of my head. When I sit up, at last, I feel better already. Okay, yeah, yeah, call me a sissy. But having greasy hair isn’t fun, okay?

I close my eyes as the comb glides through my hair. I mean, glides. Usually, I have to yank it through, but whatever miracle shampoo

Alfred uses actually works because nothing tugs, pulls, or catches on my ears. Where's this stuff been all my life?

Laugh it up, why don'tcha? I can appreciate beauty products... sometimes. So what if this actually excites me?

I watch as my hair gets trimmed, as the bedraggled ends fall away, the sides shaved down to a proper length. The clippers feel so good on my head. Finally, when I look in the mirror, I don't recognize myself. I know my hair still parts in the middle, shorter hairs framing my face, the sides trimmed up, but Alfred has slicked it all back with hair gel like Bruce's, leaving it all neat. Sophisticated. I actually look like a rich boy now.

"Wow." I lean forward as Alfred unclips the cape, shaking the shed hairs into the trash. "I look so... different!" Maybe I won't shave it off after all. Maybe I don't need a professional stylist. I just need Alfred.

"You are most welcome, Master Dick." Alfred's polished tones remind me of what I forgot. You'd think I was untrained or something.

Oops.

"Thanks, Alfred." My cheeks heat up as I slip off the seat. What now? Should I help him clean up? Should I get dressed? Head to the

banquet hall? Can I go back to bed? Now that really would make me love him. “Um... Alfred—”

“Get dressed in workout clothes, Master Dick.” Alfred doesn’t meet my gaze as his broom darts across the floor, somehow catching every speck on the white marble tiles. “We are going to the home gym.”

I try to keep the dumb look off my face. I try to keep my mouth shut. But I can’t. What? Oh no, not now! Not this early! He can’t be serious! “What? The home gym? But—”

“No ‘buts’ about it, Master Dick. Now, off you go. Get in your clothes, and I will meet you there.”

Wow. Just, wow. I shake my head, mumbling about overbearing butlers who shouldn’t exist anywhere except on TV shows, as I enter my department store— er— closet. I take a tank top and shorts off the hangers and pull them on, tossing my PJs into the hamper. It feels good to get out of the sweat and grime and into something fresh, not ruined by nightmares.

The house’s so quiet when I step out of my room that I wince as my footsteps echo down the hall. Honestly, how can anyone live in a place like this without getting freaked out at every little sound? If I were in charge, I’d be blasting music everywhere just to keep the creaks and

shifting of the house away. Right now, I think a morgue would be louder and less creepy. If you came in here and didn't know what this place was, you'd really think this place's abandoned but kept up by a ghost butler who'd scare your socks off by showing up out of nowhere.

I get lost on my way to the gym, ending up in the library instead, which isn't so bad. I never really liked reading, well, that's not true. I do like reading. I just never had the time for it. Maybe now—

“Master Dick.” I jump so high I might as well've broken through the roof. Honestly, how does Alfred do it? Does he teleport? Phase through walls? “This is no time to dawdle. Off we go.”

I find that I can't argue with Alfred, which is strange because I'm supposed to be the boss around here. Right? Then again, the way he talks to Bruce and me, someone would think he's my grandfather, not my butler. And not just any grandfather, oh no, one of those with the suits and stuffy attitudes who expect so much from their wayward grandchild on their second day at their colossal manor. What? I'm not that upset. Not really.

We arrive at the home gym. I'm half-wishing that Bruce'll be here, waiting for me to join him. Maybe we'd have something to talk

about other than our dead parents and messed-up lives. But no, the gym's empty, the equipment waiting, just asking me to use it.

“Run eight laps, Master Dick.” I have to blink at Alfred a couple of times. I couldn't have heard that right. I thought he said run eight laps around the track. He's not that crazy, is he? I'm still asleep; that's what this is.

I look at the track, which is a standard size for indoors, wrapping around the home gym, the white lines separating the lanes perfectly, then I look at Alfred. “What?”

“Run eight laps.” Alfred holds out a large glass filled with a brownish-green liquid. “Then you may drink your smoothie.”

What? He's kidding. He's joking. Or at least, that's what I'd think if Alfred wasn't the stiffest person I've ever seen in my twelve years of living. What, does he have a plank of wood stuck down the back of his suit? “Um... why?”

Alfred's lips thin, and his eyebrows raise. “This is an assessment. If you are to be a part of the Wayne family, you need to be ready to defend yourself against kidnapers and muggers. Cardio is essential.”

I can't believe him. Who drops this on a kid on his second day at a strange place, the second day of being declared the ward of a

billionaire? Still, I don't grumble as I start to jog at the starting line; at least, I don't grumble much. By the time I'm on my seventh lap, my legs burn, my chest heaves, and my tank top runs with sweat. I just want to get it over with, so I run faster, sprinting the last lap.

Don't ever do that. Just don't. I collapse as soon as I cross the line, heaving on the squishy ground. I know some people kiss the ground after they fly, but honestly, I'm tempted to do it now. "H-how w-was th-that?" I wheeze, turning to look at the Alfred shadow looming over me.

"Ten minutes." Alfred hands me the 'smoothie' that looks like spinach and bark blended as he looks down at his watch. "Not perfect, but not horrible either. We still have a lot of work to do."

I sip the smoothie, my nose wrinkling. How do people drink this stuff? It's like someone walked into the fruit and veggie aisle, bought it all, then tossed it into a blender. I know a couple of rabbits who'd love it, maybe a few horses too. But I drink it anyway because Alfred's lips are already pressed, and I don't want to see what he's like when he's actually angry. Maybe he'd raise both eyebrows. "Wh-what?" I stammer, trying to keep my eyes from popping out of my face. "What work?"

“Up you go, Master Dick.” Alfred beckons to me, already halfway to the gymnastics equipment. Seriously, how does he move so fast? “More to do.”

I can’t believe this guy. First, he makes me do the vault, which I’ve never done before, then he makes me do the pommel horse, still rings, parallel bars, and horizontal bars. In fact, after an hour, I think I’ve done everything in the gym. Weights for every muscle in my body, some of which I didn’t even know I had, the climbing rope, which I’m good at, the balance beam, which I could do in my sleep, the rowing machine—honestly, how did people in ye olden days do this—, the climbing wall, on and on and on until I think I might drop dead.

I’m a kid! I want to yell at Alfred. I don’t need to see how much I can bench press other than for bragging rights! And there’s no one around to brag to!

When we go outside, my tank top’s off, my upper body slick with sweat. I wonder why Alfred even bothered washing and styling my hair in the first place. Though I have to say, having it slicked back is kind of nice when you’re trying to see where you’re going.

Outside, there are even more things to do, and thankfully, a lot of them are more exciting than the bench press. There’s a fifty-meter pool,

complete with diving boards, a basketball court, and a tennis court, all fenced in by a hedge that keeps them hidden from the back porch.

I have to say, living in a Manor house does have its perks. You never really have to go anywhere for anything. You want to watch a movie on a big screen? Boom, screening room. You want to go to the library? Boom, home library. You want to go swimming? Boom, outdoor pool.

Soon, I'm in a brand spanking new pair of swimming shorts and sitting at the bottom of the pool. Apparently, Alfred needs to see how long I can hold my breath.

My cheeks bulge as bubbles float from my nostrils. I've never really swam before, except in the huge tubs the clowns jump into. This is a whole different thing. The pool's massive, clear, and glistening. The water moves around me in comforting waves, the silence and coolness a relief.

I'd want to stay down here all day. Down here, where it's safe. Down here, I can dream about my parents and Uncle Rick without anyone seeing my face. Down here, where I can cry, and no one sees.

What? Did you think that I'd forget? Did you think that distraction helps? Maybe it does, and maybe it will. But I'll never forget.

I can't. Every time I see that trapeze in the gym, every time I do a flip or a cartwheel, I see them. I hear them.

So I'd stay down here, where I can think, but my lungs burn, my cheeks let out precious air. I push off the bottom, my bare toes digging into the bumpy grit, and break the surface, lazily swimming up to the poolside, looking at Alfred expectantly. "Well?" I want to ask more, like, what the heck is this all about? But I don't. I wipe my face and keep my mouth shut, waiting for the verdict.

"Three minutes." Alfred nods curtly, stepping aside and motioning towards the outdoor changing rooms. "Again, not horrible, but it could be improved immensely."

I raise an eyebrow, not making a move to slip out of the pool. I could sit here in the water all day. Here, it's nice and cool. Here, listening to the birds chirping, watching the sun slide higher into the sky. Here, where all the happy times are clear in my head. Their laughter with the bird's song, their smiles kissing me with the daylight. I know, I know. We've gone over this before. But can't a guy miss his family? Can't a guy be sentimental? Can't a twelve-year-old boy have feelings, too? I'm not Batman, for crying out loud!

“Are you gonna tell me why I need to improve?” I don’t know what else to ask. What was I going to say? *‘Hey, Alfred, can I please go back to bed or stay out here? All this stuff is super confusing, and all I want to do is sit in my room and play video games before running and cartwheeling through your house.’*

“It is simple, Master Dick.” Alfred steps back as I heave myself out of the pool, my arms burning, whining more than I am. “As the ward of Bruce Wayne, you need to be the best at everything. From defending yourself to the arts, you hold dear to intelligence.”

Well, now, no pressure or anything. “So... what you’re saying is... that all of this....” I want to whine, pout, and be angry, but all I manage is a surprise, “Is going to be a typical morning for me?”

“You need a distraction, Master Dick. To keep yourself busy.” Alfred hands me a towel, which I accept, wrapping it around my shivering shoulders. “And what better way than exercising your body and mind? Much better than rotting it out with TV and video games.”

He’s not wrong about the distraction part, but the rest? I open my mouth, then shut it. I have to bite my tongue hard to keep from pointing out that a good puzzle game can be stimulating. Mom and Dad thought the same way as Alfred, though. Practice was fun, helping out was fun,

and ordinary pastimes like TV and games were an afterthought. We went and went and went, not stopping until we went to bed or if we had a family movie night, which was a very special occasion.

So I keep my mouth shut as I dry off and pull on the clothes Alfred brought for me. I'm afraid we'll go into the gym for more training, but we don't. Instead, I bite back a cheer as we find our way into the banquet hall, my place set with a simple fork and knife. Finally! Just the way it's supposed to be! A classic setup, not that whole overkill thing with the bazillions of forks and spoons. If I had to figure out which was the salad fork from the fish fork this early in the morning, I might just pass out from a fried brain.

I plop down in my seat and look around. The banquet hall's just like it was last night. Huge, elegant, and empty. Very, very empty. I don't know what I'm expecting to see. Bruce? Maybe. I sigh when I realize that his plate is not set out for a reason. He's not coming.

"Bruce?" I ask anyway when Alfred brings out the holy grail of pancakes, the stack dripping with syrup and butter. Maybe I do like him after all. I don't know anymore.

“Master Bruce sleeps in late.” Alfred sets the masterpiece in front of me, taking his place by the side of my chair. “He works late into the night.”

“Doing what?” I say through my mouthful of pancakes before I feel Alfred’s glare boring into me. If looks could kill, just put ‘He spoke with his mouth open’ on my grave.

“Many things.” That’s not an answer, but that’s all I get. So I try to picture what Bruce does. I can see him polishing his hundred-some sports cars, sitting in his office on a video chat with his board, talking about some boring something or other at his company. Is that why they call them ‘board’ meetings? Because they’re so boring?

But the more I think about it, the more I think of how stupid it is. Bruce can’t do those things all night long, can he? And the house is so quiet at night. What does he do, patrol around the fence with Ace? Or does he just not want to spend time with me? I thought that last night we actually made a connection. Alfred even did that whole speech thing.

But... who *is* Bruce Wayne? And why do I even care?

BANG! My fork flies out of my hand and skids across the table as a stack of huge books plops onto the table. I gawk at the booklet sitting in front of me. Is it just me, or is this some sort of ‘placement’ test? What,

now that Alfred's worked my muscles to death, he's gonna scramble my brain? What kind of butler is he? Or is this what they're all like?

"I'm in seventh grade." I shouldn't have to point this out, but I do anyway, poking the stack of huge, college-sized textbooks. I could knock someone out with one of these things. Maybe instead of the fancy titles, they should put 'Warning: Lethal Weapons' in giant red letters on the front.

"I am aware, Master Dick." Alfred sweeps my breakfast away, replacing it with a sharpened pencil, a brand-new eraser, and an extra notebook. Well, that's just horrible. Who replaces food with books? Scandalous. "But just because you are in a certain grade does not mean your education is at that level. You could be ready to move on or not."

"I don't want to go to school." I want to pull the 'my parents just died' card, but then again, they'd want me to go to school. They'd want me to keep busy, to keep going. They'd want me to keep smiling, to do the best I can. They'd agree with Alfred. So I leave it at that, knowing that Alfred will shoot it down anyway. Besides, that's really a low blow. I'm not that petty.

"You will do school as long as you live under this roof, Master Dick." Alfred's lips thin, and he nods. Really, does he have any other

expression? “Finish the test, and we will see where you are. We will add the necessary subjects from there.”

I hate tests. Especially when I’m not prepared for them. I was homeschooled since we were always on the move in the circus, and whenever my mom would pull a pop quiz on me and the only other student in my class, Raya, we’d try to get out of it. But there’s no getting out of this. Alfred might as well have tied me down to my chair.

So I snatch the pencil and flip open the booklet, my hand grabbing my hair as I puzzle through one question after the other. Math, Science, Grammar, English, History, it’s all here, mostly just the basics, but sometimes more.

By the time I’m done, my brain’s mush. I need more pancakes, which aren’t as good as my mom’s but are still a reminder of home. But I can’t think about that. I can only think about the good times and how much Mom would smile if she knew I was working on school. How much Dad would grin at how much I worked out in the gym. And how much Uncle Rick and I would joke about Alfred together. But even that, thinking about ‘how much I would’ve’ hurts.

It's an ache that won't go away. A hole that's just chilling in my heart. It's not supposed to be there. But there's nothing I can do about that.

Alfred takes the test from me and does the unthinkable. He hands me another book. I take one look at the cover and push it away. Oh no. No, no, no! "I'm not reading this."

"Yes, you are. It's literature, Master Dick."

I scowl at the book. No way this thing counts as 'literature.' "Romeo and Juliet is a sobby, girly romance." I pick up the book like it's covered with slime. Raya obsessed over this story last year in Lit. And from what I heard about it, it's stupid, and I won't like it.

"It is a piece of history, Master Dick. Read it while I grade your test." That's that, and Alfred walks away, leaving me stuck at the table. Now, you may be thinking, *'but Dick! This manor is huge! You could run away and goof off, and he wouldn't know!'* To which I say, uh, have you been paying attention? The guy finds me anywhere and everywhere I go!

So I read, and I actually, reluctantly, enjoy myself. I don't like the love story; that's lame, mostly, but the sword fights are cool, and it's fun reading through the book that's a mouthful of words. Like Shakespeare just thought a word sounded cool and had the characters say it just

because. Half of the time, I don't really know what they're saying, but I know what's happening, at least.

I'm putting the book down right as Alfred comes back with my test. I'm itching to know what grade I got, but he doesn't tell me. You know that feeling when you're waiting for someone to tell you how you did? Yeah, that's what twists my stomach now. I want to bounce up and down in my seat or run away. I want him to say something. Instead, he pulls so many books up to my chair that I'm almost drowning in ink and pages.

"Every morning, except Sundays, you will study the following subjects." Alfred puts a schedule down in front of me, but keeps the test out of my reach. My stomach churns like a pot of Mrs. Vestri's gumbo. How'd I do? Am I dumb? Smart? Won't he tell me? "I expect nothing but the best from you, Master Dick."

And there it is again.

Alfred leaves. Leaves me alone with the schedule and the maze of books. I look down at the condemning slip in front of me, scowling at the numbers. At six-thirty, I'm supposed to get up and get dressed. At six-forty, I'm supposed to go to the gym and train with Alfred, 'see another schedule—' Oh no. No way! I pick up the paper and look at the

next schedule stapled neatly underneath. Apparently, Butler Alfred's going to have me work on strength, cardio, flexibility, endurance, and skill. I raise an eyebrow at the strange names popping up all over the page, and it's not until I read Karate that I realize those are different martial art forms.

So maybe that'll be cool. Maybe.

I drop the first paperback and continue to read. After I train, I eat breakfast. After that, I study until snack time at three thirty. From then on's my free time.

My eyes scan the listed subjects, and my mouth hits the table. Well, not really, but you get the idea. There are not only basic subjects, such as Math, History, and stuff, but there's also Biology, Technology, Physics, Mythology, Geography, Criminal Science, Forensics, Computer Science, Chemistry, Medical Sciences, Linguistics, and Engineering Sciences.

My brain melts just thinking about it. I'm not some child genius. I'm not some prodigy of science or athletics. Why's he making me do all of this? Because the Wayne men have to be 'the best at everything?' But why? I don't want to be the best at everything! I don't enjoy normal school! I'm not even a Wayne!

I don't think about it too much. I don't want to be angry with Alfred; I like him and Bruce. Yes, I've finally made up my mind. But this is only my second day— not even, really. Can't I just use this day to, oh, I don't know, adjust? But then again, this is adjusting, isn't it? Adjusting to expectations. Adjusting to my new life, my new routine.

I'm more than just a boy who lives in the house and eats the food. I'm expected to be a Wayne or at least be trained and intelligent like one. But... where does that line stop? Am I supposed to be like Bruce? I don't want to be. I don't want to stay in this house, all alone except for Alfred.

But I still open up my 'History of Gotham' textbook and start to read.

CHAPTER TEN

I AM DECLARED A CHARITY CASE

The next few days are pretty much the same. I wake up, get ready, then launch into my daily routine. Alfred nearly kills me in the gym every day. I don't understand why he expects me to sneak up on him and land a punch without him noticing. I don't know how he dodges the punches, old and dressed in a three-piece suit like he is.

I don't understand why I have to work my butt off on the still rings, flipping around and holding myself up by my arms alone. I don't understand why I have to run, and run, and run. What? Is he getting me ready to be in the Olympics? To compete in every single stupid event? Because it sure feels like it. I have to practice throwing darts at targets, shooting wooden ducks out of the air with plank guns, and tossing boomerangs around the yard with Ace. I don't get the point of that last one.

But I'd be lying if I said I don't enjoy myself. Every time I collapse into my chair to eat breakfast after a good morning's workout brings a sense of satisfaction. My whole body burns, but it's a good burn.

The martial arts are fun too. I wanted to hide, though, when Alfred said *Jui-Jitsu* and I said, ‘Bless you.’ I’m just glad the man doesn’t have a sense of humor because if he did, I’d really die from embarrassment. Instead, I only got the ‘look.’

By the end of the week, I’m sneaking up on Alfred, sliding behind him, so he doesn’t see me, catching his blows before they land. Okay, well, most of the time. And let me tell you, you would think that an old, stuffy British butler can’t land a punch? Yeah, get punched by Alfred and come back. I guarantee you’ll be singing a different song.

On top of all that, I practice breathing, controlling my heart rate, and all that weird but cool stuff that Masters do. I laugh when Alfred tosses me a long wooden stick he calls a *bō* staff. That morning, it’s all we practice. Punches, kicks, sticks, the more I do it, the more I love it.

What I really want to know, though, is how Alfred knows all this stuff. I did ask him about it on my first day of kickboxing, after he sent me down to the ground, hugging my stomach, and do you know what he said? He just said: “*What, you do not think I have always been a butler, do you, Master Dick?*”

It takes me a while, but finally, on my fifth day, I force myself to climb the ladder to the trapeze swings. I don’t want to look down. I don’t

want to take that bar and swing over the ground. All I can hear is their screams. But I do it anyway. I fly, flipping and twirling, and I live for it. Because I find, when I'm up there, I'm alive, and they're with me. It's not like my nightmares. When I spar with Alfred, when I work out on the gymnastic equipment, or dive into the pool, they're with me. I see their smiles. I hear their laughter. And I can capture the moments in my head.

I thought I'd hate studying all the extra subjects that Alfred's making me do. But I love them. Literature's my favorite, but Forensics and Criminal Science are fantastic too. When I study those, I can just imagine the Gotham PD working the case of my parents' murder, using all of these skills to track Zucco down.

And I think about Zucco a lot. When I punch the bags or the pads on Alfred's hands, I imagine they're Zucco, so my punches land. When my kicks slam into the boards, snapping the wood in half, I imagine that it's Zucco's stomach. I hate the feeling, the burning anger that sends spots into my eyes, but then I remind myself that he did it. He took them from me.

Bruce isn't around much. He usually wakes up around three-thirty when I'm done with school, and we talk about my classes sometimes. Alfred wasn't kidding when he said that the expectations were high.

Bruce's definitely not the shallow, stupid person that the media makes him out to be. He's a genius, even sometimes helping me with my homework. But not as much as I'd like.

More often than not, he's gone in his office, and I don't see him until dinner— or even the next day. But, like Alfred said, the more I'm around him, the more I know him, the real him. Or at least the him that I want to be real.

The Bruce Wayne who helps me figure out that one problem that's making my brain hurt. The Bruce Wayne who likes to take me into the garage and wash cars with me, polishing them until they shine. The Bruce Wayne who takes me out to play basketball, dunking baskets like the best of them.

The Bruce Wayne that actually cares.

“Come on, Master Dick. It is a simple lock. Now, how do you get out of it?” I'm chained to a chair. No, no, don't call child services. I'm fine. Really. But I'm sitting in the living room in one of the straight-backed chairs, my limbs chained to the arms and legs.

All part of my newest class, Escapology. I didn't even know that was a thing until now, but there it is. Other subjects that Alfred's added include hacking and sleight of hand, and what I call 'the ninja thing,'

which is basically disappearing when someone isn't looking, trying to get away before they notice. That's fun, but so hard. More often than not, I trip over my own feet and end up falling flat on my face by the time Alfred turns around. Thank goodness the man doesn't laugh. Otherwise, I don't think I'd ever live it down.

"I don't have the pin, though!" I squirm in my chains, trying to reach the small locks sitting on top of my wrists. I grunt, wiggling my hands and squeezing my fingers through the chains. I know I've got to get my hands free first. I'm not about to undo locks with my toes. But I lost the bobby pin Alfred had me stick in my mouth. It sits on the floor right in front of my feet, taunting me.

"Then get it, Master Dick." That's all Alfred says. In fact, he leaves, disappearing into the kitchen. I'm doomed.

"I need to pee." I groan, trying to scoot my chair towards the bobby pin only inches from my feet. I stick my tongue out with the effort, wiggling my bare toes towards the pin. But, if I get it, how will I reach my hands?

I grasp the pin between my big toe and second toe, grunting in triumph. Now... what to do? I try so many things, bending over as far as I can, trying to scoot the chains up with my foot, tipping the chair over,

which only gives me a heart-stopping jump as I thump back down onto the carpet, thankfully right side up.

What's Alfred expecting me to do? I'm not Plastic Man over here.

Finally, I make up my mind. I'll pick that lock with my toes. Just you watch me! I bend my foot over to the lock, closing my eyes, feeling around for the opening. It takes a few tries, well, a lot, actually, but I finally get the bobby pin into the lock. I wiggle my toes around until *CLICK!* The lock pops off, and I shake the chain from my leg.

Next is the easy part. Well, easy for me. I lift my leg and lean forward, bending until I get the bobby pin firmly grasped between my teeth. Now I just need to hang onto it and—

The pin drops into my hand. It's not long before I'm out of the chair, rubbing my wrists, dancing with glee. "Yeah!" I point at the chair as if it were its fault I was stuck there. "Take that, you frugal piece of furniture!"

"Not bad." I spin around, my foot whipping into a powerful sidekick, only for Bruce to snatch it in his hands without so much as batting an eye. Really, what's with this guy? I never see him in the gym. Is that what he does all night? Train?

I hop around on one leg for a little while, my cheeks burning. But I still manage a sheepish smile, muttering a “thanks” as he drops my foot. I’m proud to say that I don’t teeter around or stumble. If my balance was good before, it’s way better now. At least I have that going for me.

“Why were you chained to a chair?” Bruce bends down and picks up the chains, inspecting them.

I rub my neck. What a way to greet a person. What? Does he walk up to someone and say, ‘*So, do you always drown on Saturday afternoons?*’

“Alfred’s teaching me escapology. Ya know, if someone ever kidnaps me?”

“Hm.” Bruce’s eyes narrow, and I want to take a step back. Why does he do that whenever I mention Alfred training me? Isn’t he the one who told Alfred to do it? Isn’t he the reason why I’m doing it in the first place? So I can live up to the Wayne Family name? “Well, you did a good job. But, in real life, if you took that long to get away, it would already be too late.”

I try not to ask. I really do. But I can’t help myself.

“Have you ever been kidnapped?”

“A lot of times, actually.” Bruce hands me the chains as if this is the most normal thing to say in the world. I blink at him. What’s wrong with this place? Who wants to live in a city where they’re kidnapped every other day? Serious help, that’s what they need. Serious help.

“Oh. Wow.” I lean forward, tugging at the chain. How do you respond to a bomb like that? “Is it because you’re rich, or because of your glowing reputation?”

Bruce laughs. It’s short, like most of his laughs at home, but it is genuine, unlike his longer laughs on TV.

“You should know by now that my ‘reputation,’ as you call it, isn’t—”

“Who you are?” I assess him. I’ve been learning a lot, and the more I learn, the more I see. What did Alfred say? *‘Master Bruce is a man of many secrets, many mysteries. He is very protective of those secrets.’* “You put on a show.” I realize, shocking myself with my own deduction. Hey, maybe I do learn things after all!

Bruce’s surprised but pleased.

“Yes. A show. All of it’s an act.” Bruce’s sigh is deep, tired. But didn’t he just get up? “A play for the media to eat up. They have to have something.”

“But...” I puzzle over this. Why? Why would he be so different at home than he is with other people? Why can’t everyone see the real Bruce Wayne? Wouldn’t that be better? “Why?”

Bruce doesn’t answer. Instead, he holds out a pamphlet. “I know Alfred has got you back on track for schooling. We took the liberty of turning in your Placement Test to Gotham Academy, and they’ve accepted you.

I take the pamphlet, trying to ignore the fact that Bruce ignored me again. If everything outside the house is a show, why do I get the feeling he’s still hiding something here at home? No, not just something, a lot of things. Then again, should I even care? Shouldn’t I just be grateful I get time with him as it is?

But... school? I look at the pamphlet, taking in the nice font, the crisp pictures, and the typical talking up about the school and its faculty. I’m told in the booklet that I’m going to get the best education I could possibly hope for. That my future will be set in success.

I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to say.

I want to get out of this Manor. I want to see other people. I want to be around kids my age, talk with kids my age, and laugh with kids my

age. But... how will they treat me? I'm the ward of Bruce Wayne. Will they even know? Will they even care?

Bruce reads my expression flawlessly. In a rare moment, he sits on the couch in front of the normal-sized TV, patting the cushion next to him. I thump down beside him, clutching the pamphlet. He does what I expect. Blow me away with how much he knows how I feel. How much he understands.

"I know this might be... scary, Dick." His voice's that deep, kind voice I've heard in the garage, that I've heard waking me from my night terrors. Why can't I have him here all the time? "Going to a school for the first time— but more than that, going after what's happened."

I snort, kicking my legs against the seat.

"Yeah... that about sums it up." I glance at him, my heels pounding into the couch. "But... I want to be with other kids, Bruce. It's not that I don't want to go... it's just...."

"It's something new. Something unsure." Bruce puts a hand on my shoulder, a weight keeping me rooted in reality. Keeping me away from the questions wanting to spiral me out of control. "There's going to be a lot of that, Dick. Think about how it was coming here, starting a new life, a new routine. This isn't ever going to stop."

It should, though. The circus was my routine for my first twelve years of living. Nothing really changed, except I went from watching to helping to participating.

Bruce keeps going. “School, parties, work, life, growing up... Dick, trust me, it will never stop. But we need to keep moving on with it. Don’t think you have to be completely confident in every new situation. That’s not how it works. Being nervous is natural.”

“Were you nervous?” I scoot closer to him, my feet finally finding a place, propped up on the coffee table. “When you first had to do all of this, were you nervous?”

“Of course I was.” More than ever, I realize that an actual human is being sitting next to me, settling back against the cushions, his arm moving to drape around my shoulders. I want him around. I want him around every day, every moment. I need him. Doesn’t he know that? “I went to an academy too— at least until high school. Then, I went away to boarding school. Then around the world for college.”

I lean against his strong arm, his voice calming my jittering nerves, untwisting my knotting stomach. “When I returned, I had to take over my father’s company. I studied so much, learned so much, and grew

so much, but I was still unsure. I had a huge burden to bear. I still do.”

Bruce sighs. “And now I hear that burden’s yours, too.”

I look at him. Look up at those thoughtful eyes, those eyes that seem to read every part of my expression, hear all of my thoughts, spoken and unspoken. I can talk to him. I can share it with him. I’m safe.

“Alfred says I have to live up to the Wayne legacy... but—” I can’t look at him anymore. I find something interesting to stare at on my feet, my eyes running along my toes. “But I’m not even a Wayne. I’m just your ward.”

I jump, realizing what I’ve just said, and whip back to Bruce, waving my hands frantically. Okay, maybe I can’t share that much! “It’s not that I don’t love it here or love the stuff I study. I do! I do! It’s just....”

“I know.” That’s all he has to say. We sit there in silence until Alfred calls us to dinner. Bruce eats with us, then tells Alfred to get my things ready for the morning. For school.

In the morning, I get up an hour earlier. Alfred and I train like usual, but after, instead of going to breakfast, I go straight to my room, shower, and get dressed in my school uniform. I didn’t even know that school uniforms were a thing anymore, but here I am, slicking back my

hair, wearing a white button-up, a red and gold striped tie, a navy jacket complete with a red shield patch logo on the pocket, and navy pants.

I get a new school bag too, just the right size to carry my lunch and books, the black leather shining brand new in the sunlight as Alfred leads me to the limo parked in the drive. I want Bruce to come out to say goodbye and good luck on my first day, but he's still asleep in his room.

So I'm left to snack on BBQ chips in the back of the limo, crunching my way through the drive, peering out the windows, searching for my new school. I might just throw up in my mouth when Alfred pulls up to a large campus. The buildings are aged but graceful, the iron fence looking like our own fence back at the manor, with ivy crawling along the poles. The familiar aesthetic should calm me down, but really, it seems more like a prison or the creepy fences around graveyards.

The courtyard is packed with kids, all dressed like me. Well, the girls wear skirts instead of pants, some wearing navy and gold knitted vests instead of jackets, and argyle socks pulled up to their knees, but the effect's the same. They chat, laugh, and whisper in groups, waiting for the bell to ring. Just how I imagined school would be like.

My hands twist the strap of my bag. I want to do this... but I also want to hide in the seats, safely away from all these kids. I can feel

Alfred's firm gaze watching me as he steps out of the limo and opens the door for me. I don't want to move; some kids are already staring. I don't want to go out there, where the sharks are circling. Part of me remembers the Home, King Kong, and the caretakers. I have to swallow hard to keep the barf from embarrassing me more.

I strangle my strap and climb out of the limo, looking up at Alfred. "Thanks, Alfred." I manage, smiling. *Keep smiling. Keep going. Everything will be fine. This is something new, something exciting!* Wow, I haven't had to tell myself this in a while.

"You are most welcome, Master Dick." Alfred clasps his hands in front of him, nodding as he looks me over. "Have a good first day at school. I will pick you up right here. Wait for me, please."

"Yeah, of course." I adjust my strap and take a step back, away from Alfred and towards the sea of tweens and teens. Towards my utter annihilation and doom. "See you later, Alfred."

"Goodbye, Master Dick." Too soon, Alfred's driving away, taking my only way of escape with him. Yeah, yeah, call me a baby. Call me dramatic. But if you aren't nervous going into a new, strange place full of people you don't know, well, I don't actually know what to say to you. Good for you, I guess?

Taking a deep breath, I walk into the school grounds. Some people stare, but most of them ignore me. Honestly, it's a mixed bag. I've said it before, and I will say it again. Movies lie. Most school movies have the new kid being 'weird' or universally loved by almost everyone, except the 'mean crowd.' But in reality, people are people. Not one gaze is alike.

I'm just about to walk up to someone and ask what I should be doing or who I should be talking to when someone taps me on my shoulder. I turn around, expecting to see an unfamiliar face, perhaps a friend I can make. Instead, I'm met with sparkling green eyes, wild man's cheese hair, and a face full of freckles.

It's all I can do not to squeal like she does. I don't want to be a sissy in front of all the teen boys watching, especially on my first day, so I manage to make my shout of "Babs!" as deep and manly as possible. My voice still cracks, though. Oh well.

"DICK!" Someone, or a group of someones, snickers at my nickname, but I don't care. Babs hugs me, leaving my face so red and hot that I might as well have eaten a ghost pepper. She smells like pizza, sweat, and lavender, which is a strange combination, but when did that ever faze me? If smell were a problem, I would've died in the Home.

“You go here?” I ask when she pulls away, her eyes glittering like emeralds. Man, I forgot how much I missed her! How much I wanted to see her again. What’s that Mom always said? Absence makes the heart grow fonder? What? It’s true!

“Yeah, I go here!” Her voice’s a breath of fresh air after the morugish quiet of the Manor. It reminds me of cozy blankets, hot chocolate, and tissues. I wonder why. “I’m a student liaison, in charge of helping new kids adjust to the schedule and stuff— but oh, Dick! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

My grin splits my face. I haven’t told Bruce or Alfred about my time at the Home yet, but for some reason, I can’t wait to tell Babs all about it over lunch. Maybe it’s because I know she’ll actually say what I need to hear. Bruce may be able to relate to being an orphan, but he was never put in a home. He had Alfred. And Alfred isn’t the kind of person to hug you after a sob story.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I survived prison.” I joke about it, but Babs knows what I mean.

We don’t talk about it yet, though, when she leads me inside, shows me my locker, my list of classes, the schedule for the day, and what to do when the bells ring.

We sit together in the courtyard for lunch, where I finally get to tell her about what happened after that morning when we said goodbye. About the Home, the mystery slop, the daring escape into the rain, the mugger who almost shot me, and who I met in a back alley.

“No, stinkn’ way!” Bab’s eyes are as round as saucers, her voice a reverent hush. “You met *him*? He saved you?”

“Yeah.” I stuff my sandwich into my mouth, talking with my mouth full since Alfred isn’t around to stop me. What? I just need to get it out of my system, okay? I can’t be perfect all the time! “I kicked him too, sent him stumbling backward.”

“No!” Babs looks as if she’s about to explode. I don’t know what I would tell the Commissioner. Probably something like, *‘Hey, so, uh, Commish, I accidentally blew up your daughter with my story about Batman.’*

“Well... yes and no,” I confess, waving my sandwich with my motions. “He took one step back. But I did move him.”

“That’s got to be the coolest thing ANYONE has ever done!” Babs shoves her Lunchable pizza into her mouth—flapping her hand against her face as if it’s too hot on the benches. Maybe she is a little like Raya. But like, cooler. “I mean, *the* Batman!”

“On about him again, Babs?” You know what I said before? About movies being wrong about schools and stuff? Well, I eat my words because towards us walks someone who I’m sure is the ‘mean boy.’ He has a few friends with him, most of which look nice but snobbish. You know the type. The classic ‘rich kids’ who let it go to their heads. “Still obsessed with the Bat?”

“Hey!” Babs sits up straighter, scowling at them. “You love him too! He’s a hero, and he’s saved your dad more than once, Matt.”

Matt shrugs. “Yeah, but I don’t fangirl over him all the time.” He turns to me, and for a moment, I don’t think he’s that bad. Maybe I’ve jumped the gun, and he’s actually nice. Then again— “Don’t let Babs babble your ear off. She can’t shut up about him. If you want to get away, just send up an S.M.F.B. You know, Save me from Babs?” Okay, so maybe I don’t like him that much.

I smile at him, relaxing back on my hands, letting my eyes twinkle. Matt and the others smile with me.

“I don’t mind. I like hearing about Batman. I didn’t grow up here, so listening to all the cool stuff he’s done from someone who’s actually seen him do it is pretty awesome.” I don’t need to, but I add. “Who knows? Babs might end up writing the book on Batman.”

We all laugh at that, even Babs, who looks at me gratefully, mouthing a ‘thank you’ that the boys don’t see. Matt might not be King Kong, but someone doesn’t need to be big and tough to be mean. They don’t even have to shout or raise their voices. Sticks and stones.

When we all finish laughing, I think Babs and I are in the clear. Now that Matt knows where I stand, he and his buddies will leave us alone. They should, really, but they don’t. Instead, Matt’s looking at me with that hard, cold, snake-like look that makes my blood boil. My fingers tremble. *He’s not Zucco... he’s not Zucco...*

“You’re new... right?”

I snort, shaking my head. “No, I’ve been going here since first grade.” Some of the boys snicker again, and I smile. If you can’t get them to leave, make them laugh, I guess. “Yes, I’m new. Dick Grayson.” I hold out my hand for a shake, but no one takes it. Okay, awkward.

“Right...” Matt’s eyes narrow, looking me over like he would look over a piece of collector’s art. It’s only now that I realize my mistake. If the boys at the Home knew who I was, what do these kids whose families are in the higher circles of society know? Bruce hasn’t let me turn on the TV other than to watch some movies with him, so I don’t

know what the news is saying, but— “Wait, Dick Grayson, as in *Flying Graysons*’ Dick Grayson?”

“Yup. That’s me!” I know what’s coming. I don’t want to be here. I want to run, hide, turn back time so I can keep my big mouth shut, but I can’t. I stay stuck on the bench, fighting hard to keep the smile on my face.

“Wow... Charity Case himself.” My eyebrows furrow at the name. ‘Charity Case’... Oh no, does he mean—

“Matt!” Babs’ freckles are practically popping off her face, her hands on her hips, her eyes so stormy, I almost scoot away. Wow, she and Raya could be twins. I don’t know how to feel about this. “Don’t you *dare* call him that! Bruce Wayne—”

“Took him in to look good in front of the crowds.” Matt’s on a roll now, his façade dropping, the smile revealing a sneer. *Snake. Coward!* “My dad says he did it, so people like Gotham Hospital and the Orphanages don’t turn away his brand. You know, because he’s such a—”

“Charity Case, huh?” It’s all I can do to keep from punching Matt square in the face and breaking his nose. I can just see it now, him crying for his mommy, his nose all wonky. But I don’t dare. I shove my hands into my pockets, keeping my trembling fists hidden. “Well, I don’t think I

care about that, Matt.” I stand up. Matt and his buddies take a few steps back. I’m the poster boy of calm, cool, and collected. I don’t give them the satisfaction of anything. Instead, I savor my small victory. “All I care about is that I’m not on the streets. Have you ever been on the streets, Matt?”

Matt doesn’t say anything. He’s trying to hold onto his sneer, his sense of power. I can’t let him know his words hurt. No one can ever know how much it stings, how much my eyes are smart. I point behind us, back at the street beyond the fence, away from the nicer part of town and towards the run-down, crime-riddled streets.

“You know, those things out there filled with people that would eat you up and spit you out? Do you know what that’s like, Matt?” Matt doesn’t say anything. He can’t. I don’t give him the chance. “Well, if you don’t know what it’s like, maybe walk Gotham alone at night. See where that gets you. See how grateful you’ll be to go back to your nice, safe home.” I let my eyes spark dangerously, imagining myself as Raya’s lion, fangs and all. The image works. Matt and his posse take another couple of steps back. “You won’t care how you got there. You’ll just be grateful for what you’ve got. Like me.”

There's silence for a moment, the tension so real that I could reach out and touch it. Babs is the one who breaks the staring contest, stepping up next to me, hands still on her hips. Wow, she really is the boss, isn't she?

"You heard him, Matt. Get to it." I know she can talk because she's the Commissioner's daughter. She's seen things I'm sure I wouldn't ever want to see. She knows more than any of us what's really out on those streets.

And Matt and his buddies know it too. They leave, but the nickname still lingers in the air.

Charity Case.

The rest of the day, I hear the whispers. They say I'm smart, and funny, and I make them laugh. Apparently, I'm this easy-going guy that's fun to talk to and swap jokes with. That's the general verdict of my new peers. But I know there's something else. Whispers behind my back. Some of them, from rich and powerful families like Matt, look at me like I'm nothing. Like, I don't belong in their world. Which, to be honest, I don't. But some, like the more normal kids at the Academy, look at me with envy.

After all, they have families and everything they should need, right? But how did I, an orphan boy, land a life with a billionaire without even trying?

By the time Alfred picks me up, I'm so lost in thought, excited and frustrated at once, that I don't notice the black car watching us leave or the men standing at the corner, his dual-colored eyes glittering.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I GET SHOT

“—concludes our lesson on the fall of the Cobblepot family.” I sit at my school desk, my cheek resting against my hand, but my eyes are wide, fixed on Mr. Lawrence. No way am I going to fall asleep during class. No matter how monotone his voice is. “Read chapters four and five, and complete the essay on the degradation of Familial Wealth over generations. Papers due by Monday.”

The bell rings, and I stand up slowly with the other students, closing my notebook and sliding it back into my bag along with my textbook. I have to say, while I do love being around other people, sitting in a classroom listening to a lecture is a lot slower than reading through the material myself. Not to mention boring, especially when your teacher has the time perception of a sloth.

“So?” Babs leans over to me as we slip out of the classroom, heading towards Mrs. Shubert’s Pre-Algebra class, my favorite subject. Well, no, not really, but Mrs. Schubert’s nice. She has this way of asking you to answer questions that doesn’t make you nervous. Which is a lot, when it comes to math, at least. “What do you think about GA so far?”

I look around at the bustling halls, the clattering lockers, the mess of bodies. I look at the aluminum tiles, the rough brick walls plastered with neat signs and posters, and huge cabinets full of trophies from anything from state spelling bees to the decathlon. It reminds me of the circus, only not everyone's nice to each other. And in place of Raya is a junior, Bette, who might fuss even more than Raya, if that's possible. In place of C.C. Haly is Principal A.P, who's pretty upbeat for a guy who has to deal with a bunch of kids all the time. If it was me, I'd probably be bald from pulling all my hair out. Or retire. Either one.

"I like it." My voice lowers to a whisper, imitating Mr. Lawrence's droning tone. "Though I could do without sitting at an uncomfortable desk for hours."

Babs and I laugh as we round the corner, just making it to math before the bell rings. I'm glad Babs is here. I'm glad we can actually talk about something normal, like school, and not about how our parents died or brag about the horrible things we've seen. The more I'm around her, the more normal my life feels. Well, as normal as it can be when I'm going to an elite school full of high expectations and going home to a full-blown Manor House.

I yawn my way through equations, trying not to look embarrassed when Ms. Shubert calls me out on a problem after I let a big one rip. So much for my dignity. Though the class does find it funny, which spurs me on. Just add ‘Class Clown’ to my growing list of nicknames. It isn’t the worst I’ve been called.

To be honest, though, school’s pretty boring. Like my life at the Manor, it’s held to a smooth schedule of study and lunch, lectures and research. At least until Babs and I are stopped in the hall by Coach Drewitt, head of the boys’ gymnastics team. I’ve only seen him once when Babs gave me the tour on my first day, bossing everyone in the locker room around, waving a clipboard like it was a yardstick or something.

“Grayson, Gordon.” I stop when the man calls my name, Babs tugging on my arm until she realizes why we’re stopping. The coach is huge, not fat, oh no, just tall and hairy like a sasquatch. A very vocal sasquatch.

“Yeah, Coach?” We have to get to Spanish, but I’m not about to walk away from a teacher. Trust me, trying to run from a teacher is almost as bad as trying to sneak away from Alfred. I swear, adults use portals. How else do they find you so fast?

“Gordon, practice as usual.” Babs nods next to me. So, she does gymnastics, huh? Why didn’t she tell me that? I mean, she’s so skinny and lanky that I wouldn’t have thought it would be her thing. Then again, I also wouldn’t put it past her. “And you, Grayson—” I lock eyes with the coach, pointing a finger at my chest. *Me?* It’s stupid since I’m the only Grayson here, but hey, who thinks about that when a teacher calls them out? He nods, his eyes pleading. “Join us. I hear you’re good.”

I raise an eyebrow. Oh yeah? What’s this all about? “I’ve never been on a gymnastics team.” That’s true. I haven’t. I hadn’t even gone near gymnastics equipment until Alfred started training me. Well, okay, we did use some equipment for training at the circus, but that was specialized. It doesn’t count.

“There’s a first time for everything. Just tryouts.” If a sasquatch could have puppy eyes, maybe Coach Drewitt could’ve pulled it off. Maybe. “Since you enrolled late, we can make an exception.”

Why not? At least I can slide more practice time in. Besides, what’s wrong with showing off a little? “What time, Coach?” I pull my schedule out of my bag. Trust Alfred to always pack everything I need. Or everything I don’t really need. Honestly, what middle school boy walks around with a daily schedule? Not any I’ve met. “After school?”

“Yes, practice is right after school. Girls and boys. Only an hour and a half.” Coach tries to peer at my sheet, but I hold it up to my face, letting some ‘hms’ squeeze through my lips. The man’s sweating so much already, but I have to bite back a grin at how he’s pounding his clipboard against his leg. Babs snickers. If I’m going to do it, I’m going to make him sweat over it first. It’s only fair.

“Yeah, I can do that,” I say, at last, biting back a laugh at the sigh of relief from Coach. I do homework when I get back to the Manor, but I really don’t do anything until dinner. Besides, what’s one more thing? It’s not like I’m already doing extra classes or anything like that. I put away my sheet, grinning up at Coach. “I just need to call my butler. Let him know what time.”

You know how weird that is? Still? I never thought I would ever say the phrase ‘call my butler.’

“Of course, of course! Give him a call.” Coach Drewitt tries to hide his excitement, but it doesn’t work. Why’s he so desperate? Does my reputation precede me that much? Is he a fan? I don’t know how to feel about that. Coach gives us both finger guns before rushing back down the hall. I wouldn’t be surprised if he started to skip like a five-year-old. “See you both at practice!”

I watch him go, my phone hanging loosely in my hand. “What was that all about?”

Babs’ laugh might as well have been a sign pointing right at her. A sign saying ‘I really do babble.’ “It’s my fault. I told him you’re Richard Grayson from the Flying Graysons yesterday at practice.” She elbows me in the ribs, winking. “I’m surprised he didn’t ask for an autograph.”

Uh-huh. I’m used to it by now, but the thought of one of my teachers being a ‘Flying Grayson’ Fanboy is just... wow. I laugh with Babs as we run towards Spanish, gasping to Alfred over the phone that I’ll be later than usual. Yeah, I tell him. I don’t ask. What? He’s my butler. I can boss him around. Sometimes.

I’m so excited about practice that the rest of the day passes in a blur. Who cares about Grammar when you have extracurriculars to look forward to? By the time I get into the gym with Babs, dressed in a tight, flexible tank top and leggings, my heart’s pattering so fast I could cartwheel around the room. Maybe I will.

Funnily enough, the gym looks like the one back at the Manor, only it’s filled with girls’ and boys’ gymnastic equipment. It smells like sweat and hard work, the fluorescents glaring down at us. I line up with

the boys, the smallest one by far, and try not to look too excited. And by that, I mean I try not to launch into a routine right then and there.

Coach Drewitt and the girls' coach, Coach Morgan, stride up to us, working down the lines of students. While Coach Drewitt could be the yeti's younger brother, Coach Morgan could be a fairy's bigger sister. She's so tiny and delicate, barely taller than I am, that at first, I think I could snap her in half. Until, at least, I notice how thick and strong her legs are, how buff her arms are. Now, who would break who in half, I ask you?

Each gymnast is given something to work on. A routine to improve, streamline, and perfect. You know, the typical stuff. But when Coach Drewitt walks up to me, he just says. "Grayson, let's see what you can do."

So I do it. I show off. What? I've always wanted to show normal kids what a circus boy can do. I fly across the vault, landing in an almost perfect bounce, my adrenaline pumping. I flip and muscle through the still rings, my arms singing, my face slick with sweat. By the time I'm on the pommel horse, most of the boys and some of the girls are watching me. "So—" I say, weaving my legs in and around the hand grips, keeping

them together, my toes straight, “Do you think it’s called the ‘pommel horse’ because they did this on horses first?”

People laugh, whisper, and cheer when I dismount. I don’t want to be too pleased with myself because arrogance never helped anyone, but I can’t help but be proud of my improvement. Alfred will be pleased.

Actually, no. He’ll probably tell me that it wasn’t horrible, but it could be much, much better.

Coach Drewitt scribbles something down on his clipboard, his eyes gleaming. I really hope he doesn’t ask for an autograph, at least not in front of everyone else. “Grayson, you said you’ve never been on a team before?”

“Nope. Never.” I pull my grips off, chalk cascading in clouds onto the squishy ground. “But I do have a whole set of gym equipment back at the Manor, and Alfred makes me practice so—”

“How flexible are you?” The question comes out of left field. Really, who walks up to someone and asks how flexible they are? But Coach asks it anyway. And who am I to not show off— er— give them a demonstration?

I drop down to my stomach, propping myself up on my elbows. Then, I pull my legs up and over until my toes touch my forehead, then

pull them past my nose and onto the mat in front of me. I spread them out in a perfect split, grunting as I rise off my elbows and into a handstand, pulling my legs together and sticking them straight up.

And, just because I want to, I take a hand off the ground, supporting all my weight on one hand, pushing up and down, before flipping onto my feet. Most of the gym stares at me now. My cheeks heat up so much that I want to fall over and hide or try to disappear as Alfred taught me. No such luck.

“Well, then, welcome to the team, Grayson.” Coach Drewitt hands me a sign-up form and a permission slip. The papers tremble in my hands. Really? “Practice is after school, Monday through Friday. Extra classes are offered all day Saturday.”

“Thanks.” I hold the papers close, scanning over the forms. This has to be a dream. No, really! If I can’t be in the circus anymore, this is the next best thing. “I’ll have to give these to Bruce.”

“Do that.” Coach Drewitt leans forward, a hand on my shoulder, his voice dipping down so the others can’t hear. “You have a real shot at the Olympics, Grayson. Make sure to tell Wayne that, too.”

The Olympics, huh? I don't know if that's what Alfred has in mind, and I'm not even sure what Bruce wants me to do, but I'll ask anyway. Because why shouldn't I be able to do something I want to do?

I spend the rest of practice coming up with routines with Coach Drewitt. He teaches me strings of moves that Alfred hasn't, which I love. We talk about my strengths, what I need to work on, and so on and so forth until it's time to go.

And yeah, Coach really is a fanboy. Just to be nice, I grab his Sharpie and sign his clipboard. I'm a student in his class, so it makes no sense, but I do it anyway. Graysons never turn down their fans... at least when most of the class is already heading out of the gym.

I'm the last one in the locker room, and soon, I'm the only one. I step out of the shower, my towel hanging around my neck, my everyday shorts on. It's good to be out of uniform. You would think that after wearing leotards almost all my life, leggings and a tank wouldn't be that uncomfortable. But hey, I never said I liked wearing those things, did I?

At the mirrors, I slick back my hair, running a comb through it like Alfred taught me. I know it's stupid, but my hair hasn't been such a mess lately. Honestly, where has this new shampoo been all my life?

The locker room is quiet, only interrupted by the drips from the leaking showers and the creaking of the air conditioning moving some of the locker doors. A light flickers overhead as I slide my comb back into my bag, thankful that Alfred made me bring a change of clothes and cosmetics for general PE.

Grabbing my stuff, I shut my locker, throwing a T-shirt over my shoulder. I get ready to turn, but that's when I hear it. Only a week before, I wouldn't have heard it. I would've thought it was the rustle of the air conditioning or the thump of the vents. But I'm not the boy who runs headlong into big tops anymore. My ears pick up even the smallest of sounds, like breathing, which, once you can hear that, you can never be scared again.

Someone's standing behind me. There's a small whoosh as something's pulled from a pocket, and I whirl around, my leg spinning out in a kick, connecting with a man's ribs. *CRACK!* The man grunts, but it's quickly replaced by a laugh. A laugh that chills my blood, sending ice sliding through my veins, and my heart slowing to a death march.

It's only when I look up, my duffel held in front of me, ready to batter whoever it is where it hurts, that I know why. The man's tall, sharp,

and gaunt. He wears a three-piece suit lined with knives, his tie glistening like blood. And his eyes glint blue and brown.

“Well, now, Sonny.” He leers at me, a knife in one hand, a plain white cloth in the other. “You’ve improved since we last met. I felt that one.”

My bag crashes to the ground, my arms limp, wet noodles. My legs shake, my knees wobbling so much I think I might fall back into my locker. My stomach twists into knots, sending puke rushing up my throat. *No, no, no, no! It can't be him! How is he here? Why is he here?*

I go so white, so cold, that I might as well be dead already. “Y-you...” It’s a shaking whisper, not what I wanted to do when I saw this monster again. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I’m afraid. But it’s too late for that. I hate the way I tremble, the way the sweat begins to slip cold and trickle down my forehead.

Tony Zucco smiles, the knife inching closer to my neck, the cloth sweeping towards me. “Yes. It’s me. Don’t worry, little Grayson. It’ll all be over soon.”

He’s going to kill me! You’d think after all my training, all the things Alfred’s taught me, I wouldn’t freeze. You’d think I’d jump up and start kicking butt, that I’d pound the living crap out of this jerk. You’d

think that I wouldn't stand there like a statue, cold and pale. But I do. All I can hear are their screams, his laugh. All I can see is red. Pulsing, horrible, blood red. My head pounds against my temples, my throat aching to scream. I stood up to a thug on a midnight street. Why can't I face this guy?

Because he killed them. He killed them!

My eyes pop open when he presses the thick cloth against my mouth and nose. I can't place the smell until my eyes start drooping. *What?* My brain is slowing, scooting along like a slug across a sidewalk, waiting to be squished. *What is this... what is... He's drugging me! He killed them!* Just in time, my leg snaps forward and up, smacking his hand away, the cloth fluttering to the ground.

I can't move. I slump against the locker, sucking in clean air. I hate how my stomach churns. I hate how my eyes sting, my blinks fighting away the flood that wants to burst out. I hate the way mist dances around in my head, lifting me into a dreamy place I shouldn't be in. I don't get time to clear the fog from my head. I don't even get the time to take two measly little breaths. Zucco's hands slam me into the locker, my head banging against the metal, the sound ringing in my ears,

pain exploding at the base of my skull. I grit my teeth, my head singing, but I shove my legs forward, my heels catching his injured side.

“Stupid little brat!” Zucco hisses, stumbling back, two knives in hand.

“Me? A brat?” I struggle to my feet but scoot towards the door. I need to get out into the hall, where Babs is waiting for me. Alfred is waiting in the limo. I need to get away from him. Murderer, murderer, *MURDERER!* “Really, Zucco? That’s like, the go-to villain line!”

“Still the comedian, are we?” Zucco’s sneer sends shivers racing up and down my spine as I back up, keeping my eyes on the knives in his hands. I have to stay focused. I have to remember what Alfred taught me. *Murderer!* “I thought seeing your mommy and daddy die would break that out of you.”

Red boils in my vision. My breath is so quick, I might as well be drowning, gasping for air. *He can’t be here! This can’t be real! Help, someone, please! Help me!* Zucco sees, and he smiles. He knows. Knows the power he has. “Daw, there he is. That scared little boy.”

“Man, you really are fresh out of material, aren’t you?” I launch forward, landing two quick punches on his vulnerable side, ducking under the knives. I need to get them away from him. The only problem is

he's got a jacket full. My head pounds like a drum, my heart stops in my chest, but I force myself to keep breathing. To keep thinking. He can't win. This can't be happening. *Murderer!* "What, do they have copyright-free fight banter for Z-class villains?"

I knock one knife away, my hand twisting and popping his hand open, just like Alfred taught me. Zucco isn't phased. He pulls another blade out of his jacket. How can I do this? This can't be real! "For a kid who's about to die, you sure do talk a lot."

"What can I say?" I throw the other knife away, only for it to get replaced. *Wait, the jacket! I need to get the jacket!* "If I'm gonna die, might as well get out of my system, right?"

I leap up into the air, flying over his head. My fingers snatch the sleeves of his jacket. As I fall back to the tiled floor, I pull, yanking not only the sleeves but his arms, toward me. To his credit, Zucco only hisses through clenched teeth. *Man, this guy's tough! I'll give him that!*

I toss the jacket back into the locker room and make a break toward the door. Alfred will be disappointed in me. After all that time training me, scolding me, and hitting me in the gut, I forgot the one rule that he pounded into my head: Never turn your back on your opponent.

A hand grabs my ankle, and I fall to the ground, my chin cracking onto the aluminum, my teeth biting my lip. Fingers dig into my skin, pinching my Achilles tendon, which, if you didn't know, is a pressure point. And a very painful one at that. "Ouch." I manage to spit, kicking my ankle free.

"Dick?" That's Babs. My heart stops in my chest. She's just outside the locker room. If Zucco knows I care about her— if Zucco pulls out one of his knives... Maybe getting to her isn't a good idea. Maybe I should have kept the knives to defend myself with. Maybe—

Hands flip me over, digging into my arms. Zucco's sliding his jacket back on as one of his lackeys pins me down, his knee pressing on my chest. I gasp, the weight on my chest crushing, final. I'm not strong enough to push him off me. What can I do? Training is great and all, but when push comes to shove? I'm not supposed to take grown men one-on-one. I'm still a kid. It doesn't matter how much I bench press or practice fighting Alfred. I'm not supposed to get caught. I might actually die here.

"This is awkward." I gasp as the lackey's knee presses down, his hands like clamps on my arms.

“Aren’t you going to call out to your little friend, boy?” Zucco pulls out not a knife but a long syringe from his jacket. What is that? I don’t want to die from something burning through my veins. Is that actually a thing? Or is that just in the movies? “Tell her goodbye?”

“I haven’t thought of my last words yet.” I spit, grunting under the weight of the giant, muscled-bound man on top of me. Gosh, what does this guy eat? Muscle milk and grilled chicken? I glare at the man but smirk. It’s dangerous, I know, but honestly, at this point? Why not punish them for coming after me? “How about this? You need to lay off the sugar, buddy.”

Click.

I stare at the gun in my face, the muzzle right between my eyes. Then again, maybe I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Strangely enough, a gun isn’t as terrifying as Zucco. So I laugh. Dumb, I know. But what else do I have? “What? Really? Now, this *is* cliché!”

“Dick?” Babs is knocking on the side of the entrance to the boys’ locker, her voice ringing past the turn that keeps her from danger. *Please, please, please stay there, Babs.* I want to scream. *Please, please, please don’t get shot!* “Dick, I heard a crash. Are you alright?”

Only a crash? What about the sinister voices or the grunting or the laughing? Well, I might have to ask Commissioner Gordon to get his daughter some hearing aids.

“Aren’t you going to answer her?” Zucco sneers. But is it just me, or does he look nervous at the sight of his man pointing a gun in my face? But why? Doesn’t he want me dead?

“Still haven’t thought about what to say.” I snap, looking at the firearm cross-eyed. Do you know how much I want to just pass out now? What? You try staring down a gun shoved in your face and tell me it’s not terrifying. “What should it be? Oh, sorry, friend, but I have a gun pointed at my face so—”

BANG!

I think I’m dead. I should be dead. The gun was in my face. I had nowhere to go. I couldn’t move, dodge out of the way. Instead, a pain like I’ve never felt before explodes in my shoulder. I probably scream, but I don’t know. I probably thrash, but I can’t tell. Red pounds in my vision as I’m thrown into the air, thumping over something solid. I moan as I swing and wince as whatever holds me breaks out into a run.

I think I hear Babs shouting something, and another *bang* rips through the echoing halls of the school. Blazing hot tears blur the world.

No... they didn't shoot Babs... they couldn't shoot Babs. I'd never be able to live with myself if they shot Babs.

A shout hits me like a train. I know I recognize the voice, but I can't place it. I'm thrown off my perch, hitting the floor with such a crack that I wheeze, curling up into a ball. I'm cold. I'm dead. I'm dreaming. I failed. Again. He killed Babs. Like he killed my parents. *No, no, no, no!*
Murderer!

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm on my feet. I can't see, I can't hear, but I can feel. I roar as I crash into someone large and solid. I scream as I pound into them, hitting all the spots I know will hurt with quick jabs. Pain? What's pain? I don't feel pain.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins, pushing me harder, faster. I beat the person until they're on the ground. Then I'm on the floor. I can't breathe anymore. I can't move. *Just leave me here... let me sleep...*

Soft, cool hands grab me, their touch sending shivers racing across my bare skin. Yes... bare... I forgot to put a shirt on before I was attacked... I slump forward, gasping, wheezing. My shoulder burns and blazes, but it feels as if the pain isn't my own. It can't be. This isn't real.

“That’s it, Master Dick.” The voice is calm, soothing my pounding head and slowing my frantic breaths. “That’s it. You are all right. You are safe.”

It’s Alfred.

I want to cry so bad that I have to bury my face in his shoulder to keep him from seeing. I don’t want him to know how much I failed. How much of a disappointment I am. My shoulder’s on fire, warmth trickling down my arm. Other voices come wild, loud voices that swirl like a tornado around me. Sirens blare from outside. Outside... I’m still in school? Everything’s blurred, like through a rain-drenched window.

Alfred helps me to my feet, and another shoulder slides under my good arm, propping me up on my shaking legs. I blink through cold sweat to see bright orange hair and flashing green eyes. *It’s her! She’s here! She’s alive!*

“Ba-babs?” My voice is weird, slurring like I’m sleepy, but I’m not. I can’t be. It’s not bedtime, is it?

“Take it easy, Dick.” Her voice is right in my ear, tickling me with her breath. She’s here! She’s alive! She’s not hurt! But how? What happened? “You’re shot. The police are here. You’re going to be okay.”

Shot? So... I *was* shot... I'm carried by Babs and Alfred out of the school, across the courtyard, and into the street, where the entire section of road is blocked off by police and an ambulance. The sun's so bright, I have to close my eyes when they sit me on the back of the ambulance, the medics rushing towards me. Good thing, too, because I think I might fall over, losing myself in the painlessness of sleep. Yeah, that sounds nice.

"Dick, can you tell me what happened?" The voice is kind but stern. I squint through the glaring light and mob of uniformed medics who swarm around my shoulder and see a familiar face.

"D-detective Yin?" My voice seems small even to my own ears. I swallow hard and try again. "It... it was Zucco and a thug. They... they tried to drug me, they—"

"We have the thug. Tall, middle-aged, with a bird tattoo on the left side of his neck." Yin comes closer, a recorder out. I want to complain. To say that I was just shot, can't she give me five minutes? Can't everyone just let me sleep for five minutes? But I don't say anything. "He had the gun. But you said Tony Zucco was here too?"

"Yeah." I bite back a groan as something is dribbled over my wound, causing it to sting like a million bees. Oh... why can't I just pass

out? Knock me out, please! “He had a rag... with c-chloroform. And a syringe with something clear in it. H-he said he wanted to kill me... but...”

I bite my lip hard. The medics are prodding the wound on both sides. Both sides? Good. The bullet isn't in there. Hey, I did learn something from Alfred, alright?

“Tell me everything that happened, Dick.” Detective Yin's sitting beside me, the recorder hovering inches from my mouth. “Leave nothing out.”

I surprise myself. I tell her everything that happened, putting in the times, places, and other people who'd been around. I basically lay out my entire day, well, school day. It might as well be an episode from a high school show. When I get to the part where Zucco jumped me in the locker room, I surprise myself even more.

My voice doesn't shake. My eyes don't sting with tears. The pain's gone again, replaced by laser focus. They didn't catch Zucco. They should've, but they didn't. And I'll do everything I can to make sure they catch him this time. *Murderer...*

My fists clench, my fingers digging into my palms. I need to see justice done. Zucco needs to pay for everything. He needs to get what he deserves.

When I finish, I'm so tired I almost nod off right then and there. Alfred's next to me now, talking to a woman with a badge I've never seen before, like they're old friends. Babs is off to the side talking to another detective, Yin's partner, Detective Bennett, I believe. She's not crying either. She is hugging the blanket they put around her tightly, though.

My head's just about to fall to my chest when a shadow sweeps over me. A hush falls over the street, and even the hums of the machine go silent. I look up, up at the thing that blots out the sun.

It's *him*.

"Batman." Yin stands up, her hand suddenly resting on my good shoulder. Why? Is she protecting me? No, no, that's not it. She's showing that I'm safe. "Did you catch him?"

I hold my breath. I don't know what to expect. Good news? Bad news? I know what I want, though. Justice. I want justice. I want Zucco to pay.

"**No.**" That one word sends my heart plummeting to my feet. I suddenly feel tiny under the shadow of the Bat. The Batman blocks out

the view of Babs and Alfred. The Batman looks down at me with such a severe frown that I suddenly think he blames me for what happened. I'm a tiny mouse under the eye of a hawk.

Yin clicks the walkie strapped to her shoulder. "I want a perimeter set, per Batman's normal sweep. All officers on alert."

"He had a plan." Batman's still looking down at me. I want to crawl away, hide, but I can't. I can't move. **"A quick getaway."**

"I would think so." Yin's hand squeezes my shoulder before letting go, leaving me shivering in a shadow, the gloved hands of medics wrapping gauze around my cleaned and stitched wound. "He came for the kid. What have you found?"

I lift my head again. Wait, has Batman, *the* Batman, been looking for Zucco? I don't know whether I want to be angry or not. Batman is supposed to be the best. If he is working this, why hasn't he caught him yet? Why hasn't Zucco paid yet?

"He's a high-up in one of the gangs." Batman's stern gaze moves from me to Yin. I suck in a breath but listen hard. **"I have found several sites that he frequents. Just like Haly's Circus. Protection money."**

Yin curses under her breath. “You would think we don’t do our jobs.” She tosses the recorder to Batman. Am I really watching a GCPD detective work a case with Batman? Tell me this is a dream, and I don’t know what I’d do. “Copy it and give it back. It’s the kid’s report.”

Batman looks at me, then he’s gone.

The rest of the day’s a blur. Alfred takes me home, but not before chewing out Principal A. P. for the lax security at the school. At home, I’m put straight to bed. The woman that Alfred spoke to, Dr. Leslie Thompkins, comes with us, taking care of me for the night.

I don’t think I’ve ever been that babied in my life. They feed me soup, help me shower, change the bandages, and give me pain meds. I have no time to wonder where Bruce might be or how I can ever turn my back to hallways after this. I’m taken right into a dream where Zucco stands over me with a gun, Bruce, Alfred, Babs, Yin, and even Batman are all shot dead at my feet.

He laughs, and I scream. At least, until I wake up, my shoulder burning, stabbing, my body slick with sweat. And Bruce isn’t there.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I SCHMOOZE THE PAPARAZZI

The next week passes mostly the same. At first, I stayed home, free from lessons and training, but only for one day. One measly day. Then, it's back to the races.

I get up stupidly early, yawning my way to the bathroom, then I train with Alfred. I'm pleased with myself, though, because every day, I get a little better, faster, and stronger, and the better I get, the more I enjoy myself. My shoulder sometimes bugs me, but it's more of a phantom pain, a reminder.

Then it's off to school like a normal kid. Well, when I say 'normal,' I mean normal for me, which means more work and teasing. Some kids treat me like some sort of legend, going through a crazy thing like being shot point-blank by a gangster. Other kids avoid me like the plague. I don't care, though. At least, that's what I tell myself. I joke and laugh with the best of them. I get to know the other students, enjoying our conversations, no matter how ridiculous and shallow. Anything to escape the musty silence of the Manor House.

Babs and I really get to know each other. Of course, I stick to Babs. She's the first kid I met in Gotham outside of the circus, the girl who stuck by me even when I was bleeding all over the place. And yeah, she's nice and funny and— no! I don't have a crush! Don't you even dare!

I love gymnastics too. Or, at least, I would if Coach Drewitt would let me back to practice. Either he feels bad about what happened or actually thinks I need more of a break because every time I step into the gym, insisting that I can do it, he sends me home. I keep up my routines at home, though. At least I have something to work on while I shred up the equipment.

Most kids like me at school and mean well, so I ignore them when they bring up Bruce, my parents, and the people out to get me. When they say they're sorry about my parents, I smile and say thank you. When they ask how scary it was to almost get killed by a mobster, I crack jokes and brag about how I fought them off. If I laugh, it doesn't hurt as much. Doesn't sting.

When they talk about how much of a jerk Bruce Wayne is, I bite my tongue and laugh along with them. It's hard, knowing that these people don't know what Bruce's actually like. Then again, I still don't

know what he's like. It's hard to get to know someone when they're never around.

Every night after school, I come home and do my homework, then I'm allowed to goof off. I kinda feel bad, catapulting through the halls and making a mess of the carpets, ruining all of Alfred's hard work, so I move my antics outside.

Ace and I finally became friends. He's still scary, with those huge teeth and paws as big as my hands, but we have a blast exploring the grounds and chasing each other across the lawns and through the hedges. Besides, how can a dog be scary when they're running with their tongue sticking out and their ears billowing like tiny flags?

If anyone looks at me now, as Ace and I barrel across the green, running towards the small cluster of trees that hide a small koi pond, they'd think I'm happy. They'd be touched that the small orphan boy's finally settling down, moving on.

But if they think that, they've never lost something. What they see is what I desperately want to be. The Dick Grayson I was before those lines loosened. Before they fell. The Dick Grayson I show is the person everyone falls in love with, who does all the cool things, jokes and laughs, and mocks death right in its face.

But... Whenever I hear my last name in roll call, I hear C.C. Haly's voice. Every night I hear their cries. Every night, I wake up sweating, my throat hoarse from screaming. Sometimes Bruce comforts me, but more often than not, it's Alfred who sits beside me, wrapping my injured hands, his clipped tones soothing my frayed nerves.

More and more, I dream about Zucco. His hands draw across his neck. His voice whispers that I'm next. His thugs shoot me with guns, laughing all the time.

I'm probably just paranoid, but now I see people following me everywhere, waiting in dark alleys to jump out at me. They creep into the locker rooms and broom closets at school. They lurk in the darker hallways of the Manor. Am I so crazy that I think people're waiting to attack me from my closet? Yeah, yeah, I am.

Even now, as I run alongside Ace, my feet pounding through the grass, my arms pumping, my laugh ringing through the grounds, I feel watched. You know that feeling when your hair stands on end like a hedgehog's spines? The tickling on your neck?

Yeah, it's like that. Every day, every night.

I slide to a stop at the cluster of trees, leaning against the smooth bark, my head resting back as I catch my breath. Ace moves into the trees

to bug the Koi for a drink. Something rustles in the bushes just behind me. I jump up and away from the tree, landing in a defensive stance, my eyes searching for the threat.

I feel so stupid as a squirrel scampers out of the bushes and into one of the trees, chattering at me. I know, I know. I'm seeing things. I'm hearing things. Threats that aren't even there. I'm suspecting squirrels as kidnappers. But hey, if you get shot and almost drugged and pinned to the ground by a big tattooed goon, you can laugh at me.

I jump again when I hear Alfred call from the porch. "Master Dick! Time to come in! Chop, chop!"

I look down at my phone. It's only five. Why's Alfred calling me early? I run up to him anyway, leaving Ace behind to terrorize the squirrel, my chest heaving and my arms stinging. "What is it, Alfred?" I gasp, following him inside the Manor. "Did I forget a point on my essay again?"

Okay, that is kind of an annoying story. You would think it would be so easy to hit all the points necessary for the essay— you know what? It's not important.

"No, Master Dick." Alfred's too fast. Honestly, you'd think someone who walks with short, smart steps wouldn't blaze forward, but I

have to jog to keep up with him. Who is he, the Flash's grandfather? The Blazing Butler? "Master Bruce is asking for you."

Bruce... asking for me? Usually, I do the asking. In fact, I ask him every night to come to dinner. More than ever, though, he isn't showing up. His place sits empty next to mine. It might as well be collecting cobwebs. Does he never eat? Alfred says he has more work to do, but then I think, what about me? What about the poor little orphan living under his roof who got shot?

No, I'm not being selfish. Is it selfish to want to eat dinner with the person who took you in, who claims to care about you? Is it selfish to hope that maybe, just maybe, they'll think you're more important than their stupid business meetings for once?

So it's nice, but weird, having him ask for me. It's not the time to work in the garage, it's too late to help me with my school work, and he isn't really the kind of person who asks to chat just for the sake of it. And believe me, I should know.

I have to swallow a small noise when Alfred leads me to him, standing, framed in the firelight, gazing into the dancing flames. He's in something I haven't seen him in yet, other than in pictures. A three-piece

suit like Alfred's, identical, even down to the black bowtie. His hair is done, smooth, and slicked back. Honestly, he looks like a private eye.

I smile when he turns to me, even when his steely eyes bore into mine. He isn't smiling. He isn't frowning. He's just... looking. "It's time, Dick."

I don't even ask. I already know what he means. And I've never wanted to throw a tantrum so much in my life. "Oh no, no, no, come on, Bruce!" I shove my hands into my pockets, Bruce finally smiling at my scowl. Why is it that adults always smile when you scowl or frown? Why can't they sympathize? Weren't they kids, too? "I don't want to go!"

"You're all over the news, Dick." Bruce's voice isn't stern anymore. It's amused. Well, at least one of us is having a good time. Figures. "Getting shot doesn't help you stay out of sight and out of mind."

Oh yeah, the revelation of the century. You know, I was actually hoping that the news people would stay away, but he's right. Maybe I feel like I'm being followed all the time because cameras and stupid reporters who want the exclusive scoop keep stalking me. You wouldn't believe the people that our school security has had to run off campus.

“But why tonight?” I want to whine so bad I have to clench my hands into fists. I won’t be a baby. I won’t stoop that low. I’ll try to reason with him. “We were going to watch *Inception*, remember?”

“I know. But we have to go, Dick.” Bruce steps towards me, a hand coming to my shoulder. “The media knows about you. It’s time they actually met you. Besides,” Bruce winks at me, “I’m sure you will look adorable in your suit.”

Because that is exactly what every twelve-year-old boy wants to hear. That they’ll look adorable. Oh boy, just put ‘He was embarrassed’ on my grave.

“Oh, ha, ha.” I only make him snort when I stick out my tongue. I don’t want to go to some stuffy, rich people’s gala where they dress in uncomfortable clothes, talk about stupid things, and eat yucky food. I don’t want to have to practice the etiquette Alfred’s forcing me to learn, which happens to be my least favorite subject by far. All I wanted was a nice, fun evening with just Bruce and me. What? Was he already planning on ditching me to go to the party? Then why’d we even bother making plans in the first place? “I’m sure all the grandmas will love it. But, Bruce, how should I even act? I mean you—”

And I mean it. If Bruce acts differently in public, does that mean I have to act differently, too? What are the rules? I'm loud and chatty and goofy, ya know, the little boy that everyone loves? So what, I'm supposed to be quiet and depressed and tug at their heartstrings with my sob story? Bruce shakes his head, his hand holding me down, keeping my worries from spiraling out of control. "Just be your normal, charming self. They'll love you."

"Gosh, I'm sure that's just what I want to hear, Bruce!" I mean, he's not wrong. But, all jokes aside— I meet Bruce's eyes, letting him know I'm serious. "Bruce, have they caught him yet?"

Just a simple question. It could mean anything to any other person. But not to me. Not to Bruce. Ever since the whole gun-ho showdown, every time I see Bruce, which isn't much, I ask him. Have they caught him? Has Batman and the GCPD caught Zucco yet?

"No." Bruce's hand drops from my shoulder, the look in his eyes says so many things at once, and I can't even tell what he thinks about it. "But don't worry. You will be with Alfred and me the entire time. I've called in a few favors from the police, too, so there will be extra security."

“It usually doesn’t help in the movies.” I point out. *Yeah, so helpful. Really. Way to make yourself feel better, Grayson.* I am right, though, aren’t I? Something always happens at parties. A stickup or something. You know, the part that makes all the silliness worth it?

Bruce laughs. That short but genuine laugh that I don’t hear enough. “It sure doesn’t. Good thing this isn’t the movies. Alfred,”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Please get Dick ready.”

“Of course, Master Bruce.” Alfred’s hand is on my shoulder now, tugging me towards my certain doom. “Come along, Master Dick.”

When I was younger, I always thought that C.C. Haly looked incredible with his red and black coat tails and white suit embroidered with gold. I always thought that the spies who kicked butt in their three-piece suits were awesome, like Alfred. But now, as I stand in front of the full-length mirror, Alfred lecturing me on how to tie my bow tie just so, I don’t look awesome. I look stupid.

And here I was thinking that my school uniform looked ridiculous.

I run a hand along my perfectly gelled back hair, my scrubbed face, my primed and pressed suit. I gawk at myself in the mirror, turning

this way and that, my nose wrinkling. Who in their right mind sprays cologne on a kid? “It... itches.” I finally say, tugging on the suit jacket, trying to roll my shoulders, only to be rewarded by a sharp ache in my bad shoulder and my arms getting stuck. Oh ho, ho. I’m so loving this.

Alfred helps me get my arms back in place, smoothing out the last of the wrinkles. He looks happy at least, the tiniest twitches in the corners of his mouth showing that he approves. Well, at least one of us can enjoy my misery. “Of course it itches, Master Dick. It is new.”

I don’t want to think about wearing this thing enough for it to be comfortable. I’d rather wear my bright green leotard and feather mask than this. “Do I have to wear this, Alfred?” I tug at the collar that keeps my neck straight and stiff, lifting my legs up and down. What kind of person thought about making or, even worse, putting someone in one of these things? Why not just put me in a straitjacket?

“Yes, Master Dick. You must. Now, come along. We mustn't be late for your first gala.” Alfred guides me out of my bedroom and into the front room, where Bruce is waiting, dressed to perfection, looking down at his phone until we walk up. I want to punch that small, amused smile right off his face until he says. “You look just about as comfortable as I was when I wore my first suit.”

He still manages to surprise me. Now, if only he were like this all the time and was, oh, I don't know, actually around. What? No, I'm not angry! Well, not much, anyway.

Instead of grumbling, I snicker, imagining a young Bruce, like the one in the Wayne Family portrait, being forced into a suit. At least I don't suffer alone. "Yeah, I'm sure you just loved these things. Probably slept in them too, huh?"

"Trust me," Bruce says as we walk towards the doors together, "I would love to burn them all and go casual, but we do have a reputation to uphold."

Something tells me that that might actually be something the media would expect him to do. Show up to an important event in a T-shirt and jeans. I laugh at the thought, but stop short when Alfred opens the door.

It's a crisp evening, with the sun dancing golden on the clouds and the breeze tickling the leaves. Everything would seem nice and right. Except, there's a woman on the doorstep. I feel like I've seen her before. Maybe it's the auburn hair and green eyes that remind me of Babs, but she doesn't have any freckles or the same look in her eyes. Babs is a take-charge kind of girl, at least in tense situations. This woman has that

inquisitive, sniff-out-your-story kind of look. She's pretty, though, in her white, silky dress, her hair done up in some sort of bun-thing, her earrings glistening in the sunset. Hey! She looks nice, that's all I'm saying.

At first, I think it's one of the women who came with Bruce to the circus, but no. Bruce must've noticed my face because he holds out a hand to her, then turns to me. "Dick, meet Vicki Vale. Vicki, this is my ward, Dick Grayson."

Vicki Vale... I've heard that name before. Then, it hits me. Vicki Vale, the photojournalist. The person whose name is stamped underneath almost every article of Bruce Wayne that had Raya so excited. Wait, we're going to the gala with her? One of the media, who Bruce said to ignore? How much sense does that make?

"Dick?" Bruce nudges me. "Vicki said hello."

My cheeks might as well've been fire hydrants. Or, even better, a house fire. I shove out my hand, my grin sheepish through my blush.

"Sorry. Hi, Ms. Vale."

"Not a problem, Dick. And please," Vicki takes my hand and gives it a firm shake. Her fingers are delicate and soft. Her smile is

gentle, too. So, is she nice or a gossip? I want to ask Bruce so badly, but I can't. Not with her around, "Call me Vicki."

"You're coming with us, Vicki?" If I can't ask Bruce, might as well ask her. Well, not to her face. What would I even ask? Something like *'say, are you a nice person or out to make us look bad on the cover of your magazine?'* If there's one thing I'm learning from Bruce, Alfred, and school, there's more than one way to get someone to drop the information you want. Usually, people do it to me, like Bruce and Detective Yin. But if they can do it, I can do it too.

Or at least, that's what I hope.

"Yes." Vicki's hand slips through Bruce's offered arm, and I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing. Oh boy, this is just the worst and best thing to ever happen to me. I get to be a third wheel! "I'm going to make sure you boys don't get into too much trouble at the party!"

Suddenly, the Bruce I started to know is gone, replaced by the Bruce I always thought he was. All charm, all wit, all big grins but cold, disinterested eyes. "What? Trouble? Now, Miss Vale, I have a young boy to look after. I can't get into trouble anymore."

I give a hard cough. Well, if he meant what he said, I can still act like myself. But maybe I can act more like myself. If Bruce is going to be

like this, I need to be his foil. Someone has to be the funny one around here. What? You think a sappy, suave billionaire is funny? Yeah, okay, just you watch! “What he means is I have to keep him out of trouble.” Alfred’s raised eyebrows get us moving towards the limo, but I keep going. “I’m the responsible one.”

Am I? Yeah, pretty much. I mean, at least I actually eat my dinners and go to bed at a decent hour.

“I wouldn’t be surprised about that.” Vicki nudges Bruce playfully as we sit down. Bruce tries to sit next to Vicki, but I make a huge show of sitting between them, grinning at her as Bruce scowls, then shrugs, draping an arm behind us. “You do seem like the responsible one.”

“I am!” I say, beaming. I cross my arms behind my head and let out a sigh. “I might as well have adopted him.”

“Hey! See here, you little—”

We go on and on the entire car ride. Bruce can act, but I can play it up better. Maybe because this is how I am if I’m cut loose. When I actually say what I want to say. I can tell you the exact moment Vicki Vale melted, her small giggle at my huge grin and twinkling eyes so

funny that I almost burst out laughing right then and there. But I can't blow our cover.

So instead, I ask questions. About Vicki, about what she does, how she and Bruce met, embarrassing him with stories about our misadventures in the garage, which really were as funny as I tell them. I don't care how much he denies getting grease all over his new paint job. It happened, and the hose really did spray out of control.

I tell Vicki about how awesome it is in the manor, how great Alfred is, and how much fun Bruce and I have... When he's around. And yeah, I complain about that. If I can't do it right to his face, I can do it like this.

Bruce'll make himself seem shallow, arrogant, and selfish, but I'll show them a different version. The version that the poor little orphan boy sees. They'll still scold him and say he's such a selfish jerk, keeping me alone with Alfred. But they'll also see how much it means to me when he does spend time with me. And really, it's the truth.

I make up my mind as we pull up in front of one of the taller, newer skyscrapers with spotlights dancing across the smooth, white surface that I'm not going to be Bruce Wayne. Or, at least, not the Bruce Wayne the public sees. I'm going to be Dick Grayson. The silly, poor

little orphan boy who doesn't understand anything about this world. And maybe that's the truth, too.

So that's what I roll with when I step out of the limo behind Bruce and Vicki and onto the red carpet. Lights flash in my face, and people slam me with questions. While Bruce powers through, only posing to take a few photos with Vicki, I stop and answer questions. Yes, I'm Bruce Wayne's ward. Yes, I am the son of John and Mary Grayson. Yes, I am keeping up on my trapeze work. And no, I'm not returning to the circus anytime soon.

Only halfway to the door, and I'm already the talk of the night. The Cinderella story of the century, apparently, from rags to riches. A poor little boy who got swept up by a mysterious billionaire. They eat it up so much, in fact, that I have to run to catch up with Bruce and Vicki, who wait for me in front of the elevator. Who wants to be a reporter or a photographer for a living? Really, how can someone be that annoying or think it's cool to shove a mike into someone's face?

"Way to impress the press, Dick," Bruce says as the doors slide closed and we lift upwards, heading towards the gala on the top floor, "I couldn't have taught you better myself."

“Please,” I grin up at him, letting my eyes dance with mischief, “I was dealing with the press long before I met you, *old man*.”

It’s true. I was the talk of the circus-going world since I was born. When you’re a Flying Grayson, greatness is expected. I never felt the pressure for that, though. It’s in my DNA. But this is an entirely different zoo.

“He’s got a point, Bruce.” Vicki’s smile is sweet, her red lipstick so bright in the fluorescent light of the elevator that I can’t look at her. “This one’s already trained.”

Am I trained? Eh, maybe. I just hope that the crowd doesn’t expect me to do some crazy acrobatics. Not in this suit.

I’m not ready for what waits to pounce on me from behind the elevator doors. The gala’s held in a huge, round room, the walls, if you could call them that, are all windows looking out into the city. Because that’s just a spectacular view. A colossal chandelier as big as my four-poster hangs from the ceiling. I try not to think about swinging from it too much.

The room’s decorated in a way that Raya would call ‘elegant,’ which is basically another word for boring. Navy and silver drapes, pure white table cloths with simple flower centerpieces, and the only actual

cool thing in the room, a massive ice sculpture of a swan. Did I just make an ice pun? Okay, well, fire me, but it *is* cool.

A band plays slow, sleepy music from the stage as I walk next to Bruce, Vicki holding on to him on the other side. I might take a nap, but who could take a nap in this ruckus? Bruce introduces me to so many people that I think I'll spontaneously combust with names.

Miss Starr, Mr. and Mrs. Belmont, John Wycliffe, Ms. Carson, Mr. and Mrs. Powers, Oliver Queen, and so on into eternity. A lot of these people seem to know Bruce well, and either respect him because of his company, talking about the latest from Wayne Enterprises, or think he's a ridiculous showboat. Those people make me feel like some sort of bragging right. After all, this is the Gotham City Orphanage Gala, with a big pot in front of the stage taking donations.

Some people even ask if Bruce adopted me from there. So I chatter on about the GCHB. If I'm going to be a 'charity case' and a 'poor little orphan boy,' I might as well draw attention to the kids who actually need their sympathy, their charity.

I don't know about the kids in Gotham City Orphanage. All I know is that they were too full to take me. The Home was too full to take

me. So I talk about that. I talk about sleeping on the floor, eating slop, messing around with the older kids, and playing with the younger ones.

By the end of the night, you'd think that I was some sort of hero.

"No, that's what she said!" I'm explaining my conversation with Ms. Corvi on my first day at the Home to Mrs. Powers, trying to ignore how many bricks seem to be sitting on my eyes. Honestly, why do adults stay up this late? And how can they talk this much all the time? It's exhausting. Smiling, waving, and shaking hands. I'd rather be doing this at the circus, you know, when I could show off and relax. "She told me she would 'find a place for me.'"

"On the floor?" Mrs. Powers shakes her head, her white hair pinned neatly into a fancy updo, her throat laced with pearls. "My dear boy, that is positively dreadful."

I shrug, keeping my voice as chipper as possible, swallowing back a yawn. "Well, it wasn't so bad. Ms. Corvi was really nice, and the younger boys were so funny." Maybe, if I can pique their interest, some of these people will go to the Home and adopt a kid of their own. Maybe I can spark a trend.

Instead, Mrs. Powers reaches out a hand, her golden owl brooch winking at me. "Well, it was a pleasure speaking with you, young

Grayson. I will make sure to drop some extra in the pot for your little friends at the Home.”

I shake her hand, smiling through the awkwardness of shaking the hand of someone with so many rings on her fingers. “I’m sure they would appreciate that a lot, Mrs. Powers.”

“Dick.” Bruce and Vicki walk up to me, arm in arm. Vicki’s smiling, but Bruce has that look on his face. The look tells other people, ‘I’m so done with all of this.’ “Time to go.”

I’m so relieved to leave the party, and even Vicki, behind that I don’t notice the eyes watching me slip into the limo.

But I feel them, I hear his voice, and I see him... in my nightmares. And when I wake up, Bruce isn’t here.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I HACK GCPD

“Get the kid!” *Bam!* My knuckles pound into the hard surface.

“The boss really wants to see you.” *Smack!* My leg shoots forward, slamming into the thick fabric. “You can’t get away from us, brat!” *Wack!* Sweat pours down my face, but I don’t care.

Boom! I launch into a flying kick, smacking into the punching bag twice, sending it rocking back and forth as I land in a defensive pose, going right into my next string of attacks. *Smack!* The bag isn’t a bag; it’s Zucco. *Wack!* It’s Zucco’s goons coming for me. *Bam!* I can’t believe I let them almost get me two more times!

I don’t feel pain as my knuckles send the bag swinging, as my legs pound into it again and again. What? Come on, don’t tell me you’ve never tried to beat the living daylight out of an inanimate object before.

I don’t hear the footsteps behind me until they are right there—waiting, reaching—

“Ugh!” My fist strikes a gut, hard and quick. The man doubles over, letting out a small grunt. Only when I blink through the sweat do I

realize who I've just attacked. And oh boy, I'm going to be grounded for life!

I leap back, fighting the urge to hide behind the bag, still swinging like a pendulum. Okay, maybe I won't get grounded for life, but I'm definitely gonna get the 'look.' "Alfred!" My butler stands in front of me, dressed and groomed to perfection as always. Well, except for the wrinkles where my knuckles hit. I rush forward, reaching out to help him up, do something. Did I break something? Is he going to pass out? What should I do?! "I'm so sorry!"

Alfred wheezes, but only for a second. The next, he's standing up, straightening his suit jacket, and sniffing. Honestly, what's he made of? Is he the Alfred of Steel? No way can he be a normal human. "No need to apologize, Master Dick. Well done." Most adults would scold me or tell me off. I keep forgetting that Alfred isn't most adults. Still, it doesn't feel right to be praised for winding my butler. Oh well.

Alfred clasps his hands in front of him, looking more like he's picking me up from school than recovering from a pint-sized punch. Now, if only I could be that calm when I'm hit in the stomach. "I came to fetch you."

I know it's pointless, and I'll just be disappointed, but I still perk up. "Bruce?"

The look on his face is enough to deflate me. Maybe it's the attempted kidnappings over the past couple of days, but Alfred's been showing more emotion than his normal thinned lip expression. Mostly in his eyes, but still, I'll take what I get. "No, Master Dick. I am sorry."

That's what he says now. No, "Master Bruce is working" or "Master Bruce is still asleep." No. Just, 'I'm sorry,' which I take as Alfred agreeing with me or at least realizing how much it really hurts. Out of everyone in my life right now, even Babs, he knows.

I come home with Alfred after being rescued from my doom by Batman, found drugged and dragged through an alley, and Bruce isn't here. I come home after a day when even the smallest absence from Alfred causes Zucco's thugs to jump me on the sidewalk, trying to muscle me into a car, having to be saved again by Batman, and Bruce isn't here.

I don't want to think about it. I don't want to hope for it. But I do. And it hurts. "Then, what're we doing?" I unwrap my knuckles, trying to blow the damp hair out of my face. "It's a Saturday." I want to add that

I've already finished my homework and extra studies, and I should have the rest of the day free. Are we going somewhere?

"Lessons, Master Dick." Alfred holds a hand out towards the gym's exit. "Chop, chop."

Lessons... again? Now? "But," I don't want to argue. I don't want to complain. But my nose wrinkles as I dump my hand wraps into the duffel bag, grabbing a towel and draping it over my neck, "I got all my homework done. I thought—"

"Plans change, Master Dick." Alfred doesn't say anything else as he starts walking towards the door, leaving me to sprint just to catch up with him. Okay, that's a lie. Alfred's plans don't change. And it isn't because the man isn't flexible, oh no, the reason his plans don't change is that he somehow plans for everything. So why? Why do I have to do more work? It's not that I don't enjoy it; it's just that my free time's precious and rare. I was working out anyway. So what's this all about?

I don't ask, though. I've found it's best not to pester Alfred because a) he won't even bother to answer or b) he'll just give you 'the look.' And I don't need 'the look' right now. Not when my head's throbbing and the adrenaline's still pumping fast.

We enter the banquet hall. It stands empty, echoing, and huge. I don't know what I was expecting. A surprise? A party? Bruce? Something more than the papers and laptop sitting in front of my spot? I don't want to look disappointed, but there it is. I am. I can't help myself.

I plop down in my chair, rubbing my hair with the towel before looking down at what sits before me. It's not any curriculum I'm familiar with. It's not even schoolwork. It's a large map of Gotham City, sections color-coded, the key down at the bottom. Certain places are circled, some crossed off. The laptop in front of me flashes a police case file on the screen.

My eyes widen at the name. Tony Zucco. I whip my head over to Alfred, who stands expressionless next to me. No, he didn't, not for me, no way! "What—what's this, Alfred?" My voice cracks. No, this can't be possible. Is he actually—?

"This is your way of getting closure, Master Dick." Alfred taps the map. "The locations circled in red are the known establishments that Tony Zucco frequents to collect extortionist money. The ones X-ed are those who have been freed by Batman and the police." My mind swirls. No, is he actually? Can I, actually? This has to be a dream! "The article is Tony Zucco's case file." Alfred motions to the laptop, and I follow his

hand. I want to be embarrassed as I flinch at the picture of Zucco, but I'm too caught up in what I'm reading. Everything the police know is here. Everything Batman knows is here. Well, okay, maybe not everything. But it's a lot!

"Did you hack the GCPD files?" My voice is so awed, so impressed, that Alfred's mouth twitches. But really, I know he taught me how to hack, but this? Is this legal?

"This file and map are at your disposal, Master Dick." Alfred takes a step back, the twitching gone, replaced by his regular somber expression. "I hope that when you pursue this, you will understand the true difficulties of the police and the Batman. Happy hunting."

With that, I'm left alone with the laptop and the map. Two small things, but they mean the world to me. Bruce hasn't let me even watch the news related to Batman and the GCPD's search for Zucco, let alone research it. Did he give Alfred permission to do this? Or is Alfred going behind his back?

I don't know which I'd prefer.

For the next hour and a half, I study the map and the file. I've been trained to do this from the classes Alfred's made me take, but this is actually work, not schoolwork. This isn't some crafted test. This is the

real deal. So real, in fact, my hands tremble as they trace the lines over the map, absorbing every tiny bit of info on it.

The City of Gotham is divided into sections, each with its super villain overlord. Or at least, that's how I like to think about it. Really, it's just the territory and stomping grounds of a particular villain. The ones that matter, anyway. Joker, Two-Face, Riddler, Black Mask, and the Penguin. My encounter with the thug that night, when I escaped the Home, makes more sense now. I'd been in Riddler's territory.

Now, you'd think that all of this would be easy peasy, very straightforward. I could find Zucco in a day, and Batman could find him in an hour. Everything's laid out for us, right? But once I take a closer look at the map, I know why they haven't caught him yet. All of his gigs are spread around the city. They aren't just in one part of Gotham. For example, he hit Haly's Circus, which is on Amusement Mile, part of the Joker's territory, but he also hit a Bakery in Two-Face's territory and a car garage in Black Mask's place.

Then you'd think that maybe Tony Zucco isn't working for any of the big shots. Maybe he's a solo criminal, an average head honcho. But I know he can't be working for himself for two reasons. One, he said he was collecting money for his boss when he threatened us at Haly's. Two,

a small thug like him would be eaten alive by the big A-class villains.

I'm surprised he operates in their territories at all.

Leaving the map behind, I scan through his file. In all the reports, no one ever says who he works for or if he even gave a hint. Only 'the boss,' which is as generic as you get.

But here's the thing. He's strictly his boss's extortionist, collecting 'protection money' and only has ten murders to his name, including my parents. Now, you'd think that's bad, but we're in Gotham City. That's like kindergarten level compared to these other guys. So, if he's not into murder and not into revenge, if I'm reading the file right, I only write one question in my notebook.

Why does he want me?

Who, of all the super mob bosses of Gotham, would want the Flying Graysons dead? It couldn't have been his idea. That's not his MO. He only kills to prove a point, which is probably what he would've done to me if everyone hadn't jumped in to scare him off. In all cases where he's been scared off, he's never come back for revenge. He's left that establishment alone. So why kill my parents? Why try to kill me? And, if he wanted to kill me, why would his goons have tried to drug and kidnap me?

Unless... he doesn't want me dead.

I pull the laptop closer and do what Alfred taught me to do. I hack into the GCPD database. Hey! He did it first! Besides, he told me to get closure! This is closure! So, my fingers fly over the keyboard, my eyes scanning each super villain profile available. Who would benefit? Who would even care? At first, I think it might be the Riddler. Didn't that thug say that he wanted civilians to play with? But that wouldn't make sense. Why would he go to all this trouble just to get a little boy? And that whole incident happened after the circus.

I wouldn't put it past the Joker. I mean, the circus? Clowns? It's kinda his whole shtick. So I dig into the over hundred pages, not even kidding, *over the* hundred-page case file. I don't want to read all of what's in there. All the terrible things that these people have done. All the things that I know my mom would disapprove of me knowing.

The problem with the Joker is that his whole thing is chaos. His attacks never have a pattern, never have a reason behind them. Besides, if he were the one who's behind Zucco, I would think that Zucco would have more of a presence and actually represent the Clown Prince of Crime. Joker likes to put his own little flair on everything.

So, I cross out Riddler, Two-Face, and Joker. They have too much personal flair and not enough motivation unless they just want to troll the police and the Bat, which I wouldn't put past them. I mean, having them come after just me would be kind of flattering, in a messed-up kind of way.

Even still, I focus on Black Mask and the Penguin. Both seem like the kind of people who'd have an extortionist, and both seem to be on relatively good terms with the others. But killing trapeze artists and kidnapping twelve-year-old boys? I mean, now that I'm the ward of Bruce Wayne, it would make sense, but Zucco threatened me before that.

I scribble all my notes down in the folder Alfred left me, listing every single possibility from least to most likely. Two Face? No connection. Not at all his MO. It has nothing to do with choices, which is his whole thing.

Joker doing it just for the 'fun' of it? Maybe. How is this possible? Because the others fear him enough to let his people operate in their territory. Plus, it has everything to do with the circus.

Riddler? I was in his territory. Zucco probably knew where I was and didn't come to get me. But was that because Batman was in the area? What about that thug? Possible connection.

Penguin. He mostly dabbles in legitimate business, not wanting to sully the last scraps of his respectability with Gotham's elite. He's a Cobblepot and needs the wealth, but that has nothing to do with a small boy from the circus.

The most likely, in my eyes at least, is Black Mask. His crime empire's the most organized, though not as big as Penguins. His hands are in all the dirty pots that Mom wouldn't want me to know about. Drugs, extortion, blackmail, weapons, smuggling, and trafficking.

I learned a little about human trafficking in my classes, but Alfred made a point of telling me to skip parts. I did. What? I don't disobey all the time! What I do know is that people kidnap other people and put them up for auction, like human slaves.

I'm glad that Batman and the GCPD have cleared out all of the known trafficking circles in Gotham because I can't stand the thought of people treating other people like that. But now I wonder. What if someone wants me? What if they know that Black Mask can do this, so they hired him to kidnap me? And since Batman and the GCPD are watching all of his old people, he's sending his extortionist to do the dirty work?

The only question is... why?

I smooth out my paper, satisfied with my work. Alfred's right. I really did need this. Batman and the GCPD are probably further along in the case than I am. They know more, have more resources, and are actually doing things. But in my mind, I've already caught Zucco. I've already found out who he works for. And they've already gotten what they deserve.

Tucking the folder under my arm, I walk out of the banquet hall. I might as well hand this over to Alfred and take the rest of the evening off in my room. The only problem with that is that I can't find Alfred.

What? I'm not my Butler's keeper. I look for him everywhere. If you've ever tried to find an adult, I'm sure you know the procedure. You start your sweep in the places they frequent, which, in this case, are the kitchen, laundry room, and portrait hall. Then, you go out from there. I tell you, it's like a glorified version of hide-and-seek!

I'm wandering through the office hall when I finally hear voices. And let me tell you, in a house as quiet as this, voices are always a welcome sound. I open my mouth to call out to Alfred, getting ready to shout that I've finished my work, when I notice who's talking and where they're arguing.

Alfred and Bruce are arguing behind the closed, locked door of Bruce's office. I shouldn't listen. I should walk away, go to my room, and wait for Alfred to come to me. I shouldn't spy— but my feet move me towards the door, silent on the hardwood. When I reach the door, I slow my breathing and heartbeat. I know Alfred and Bruce will be able to hear me otherwise. Then, I press my ear against the door. Stupid, I know, but hey, when two adults are arguing, you either want to a) run and hide or b) listen in. Especially if your name's dropped. Multiple times.

“—saying is that Master Dick has been asking for you. Repeatedly, Master Bruce.” Alfred's voice is the sternest I've ever heard. You'd think that Bruce really was his son or something. “You cannot keep ignoring the boy.”

“He has you, Alfred.” I don't know what's worse, the words or the sound of Bruce's voice as he types on a computer. The disinterested tone. My heart squeezes in my chest. I don't know if I want to hear this, but I keep listening. “You took excellent care of me.”

“But Master Dick is not you, Master Bruce!” Alfred's voice is something I've never heard before, passionate. “I did not take him in. You did. You are the one who told me that you wanted to give him a life. To do for him what I did for you.”

“I know.” Bruce still types, his voice... I don’t even know what to think about it. Cold? Distant? Annoyed? “But I don’t have time for him right now. You know that.”

He might as well have just killed me. My heart stops in my chest. My throat clogs, my eyes burning. He... he actually said it. That he doesn’t have time. That he doesn’t care. “Master Bruce, he’s a boy! You need to make time.”

“I have work, Alfred.” I want to punch Bruce in his perfect jaw. Alfred lied. What the media says about Bruce Wayne is exactly who he is. He’s selfish, arrogant, and doesn’t care about anyone. My blood goes from freezing to boiling in a matter of seconds. I can feel my cheeks flushing, my head pounding.

“Master Bruce, you need to be there for the boy!” Alfred snaps so hard that I think something actually broke. My ears, probably. “He’s already been almost kidnapped two more times! You know how traumatic that is! I cannot...” Alfred sighs, “I love the boy, Master Bruce. But I am not who he wants. He wants *you*.”

“I am there for him.” Bruce’s voice is cold, determined. “I take care of him. He’s safe, isn’t he?”

Liar! He's never been there for me after I've been shot, drugged, or dragged away. Not once! How could he say that? Why am I even here, listening to this? It would be better if I hadn't...

"You may be there for him, Master Bruce, but he doesn't know that." Alfred's voice is pleading. "If you want him to avoid making the same mistakes as you, you cannot keep him shut out of your life."

I want to cheer Alfred on and raise my eyebrows all at once. Bruce hasn't been here for me. I mean, yeah, he takes me to parties, pays for everything, and gives me Alfred, but I know about those things. What does Bruce do that I don't know about? I know he's not here for me, not when it counts. What, does he sit and watch me sleep, then has Alfred come in when I wake up screaming from nightmares? Does he call up Principal A.P and ask if I had a good day at school?

"Keeping him away is how I keep him safe." Bruce isn't typing anymore. From the creak of a chair, I know he's standing up. His voice is so hard, so severe that I want to whimper, but I don't. Instead, my heart pounds, my breath hitches, and my eyes burn, tears leaking down my cheeks. I don't want to cry. I don't want to let this hurt. But it does, it does! Is it too much to ask that the person who took me in is around a

little bit? Is it too much to ask him to acknowledge how I feel about all of this?

You tell me. Do you think I'm selfish?

“And Alfred, I need you to take him out of school.” Everything stops. The house seems to hush completely; all sound, all movement stops. No birds tweet outside, and no air conditioning churns. My mouth opens, my skin freezing, sending chills running up and down my back. *No... no, he can't! He can't keep me here! He can't keep me locked up in this... this morgue!*

“Master Bruce! I really must protest!” Alfred's voice is as shocked as I feel. “School is his favorite pastime! Where all his friends are! You can't—”

“I can and I will.” Bruce's hands creak against the desk. I close my eyes. *No, no, no, no!* “Every time he's been attacked, it was during or after school. He's not safe out there, Alfred, not until we catch Zucco.”

“We?” What has he been doing? Nothing, nothing!

“The boy will never be safe!” Alfred's protests only add fuel to the fire. He's trying to fight for me, but he's being shot down. How could Bruce do this? *How, how, how?* “He is the ward of Billionaire Bruce Wayne! There will always be people—”

“I am putting my foot down on this one, Alfred.” Bruce’s words are final, sealing my doom, digging my grave. Alone... alone with a man who’s never around, who doesn’t care about me. Alone in a cold, quiet Manor with only a butler and a dog to keep me company. Alone, alone, alone. Call me overdramatic, but when you grow up in a tightly knit circus family, always around other people, solitude might as well be the grave.

Then, the worst thing happens. “He can come to charity events and galas with me, but I don’t want him going anywhere else.

Charity Case. The nickname pounds into my skull like a hammer, ringing over and over. Only go out with him. Only to galas, where I get paraded around and shown off. Where I make Bruce seem like a decent person. *No... no... it can’t be true. He can’t—*

I can’t stop myself. I don’t even know what I’m doing. But my blood’s boiling like a pot of noodles, my head pounding like a drum, and my heart might explode out of my chest. I throw the door open with a bang. Both Alfred and Bruce look up at me, startled.

Alfred’s face goes white, and his eyes drop, the smoky blues weeping. Bruce looks at me in surprise, but that does not last long. Two seconds pass, and his gaze is as stony and steely as a wall.

“H-how dare you.” I thought I’d scream, but my voice’s frighteningly, even as if someone else is speaking. It must be someone else because I’m shaking so much I might just topple over. “How dare you!” I point at him, my finger trembling. “I never asked for any of this! I never asked anything from you! I was fine with you never being around, but some little love and attention would be nice, don’t you think?”

My vision blurs, my eyes swimming. I can’t do this. I’m not doing this. But I am. This is happening. “But then I think, why would I even want to be around you?” My voice laughs, but it’s throbbing in my ears. “You’re a *jerk*! A jerk who doesn’t care about other people. A jerk who puts your stupid work in front of other people!” My laugh doesn’t have any humor in it. I don’t think I have any humor left in my body. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there’re other people in the world. You know, people who would actually want to be around you? Who need you?”

“Dick—”

I ignore him. He doesn’t get to talk. It’s my turn. “I’m SICK of you!” I can’t see anything anymore. All I see are blobs of color swirling. I stumble back as I see the muddy blob that’s Bruce step forward. “I

didn't ask for this! I could be back with the circus if it wasn't for you!

With people who actually want me!"

"Dick—"

"But no!" I keep backing away, my fingers trembling, my lips quivering so much the words jitter out. "I'm stuck here with *you*! And why?" He's closer now. I can feel him. He's reaching out for me, but I can't see his face. "Because you just wanted to show me off at parties to make *you* look good!"

"Dick, no—"

"Is that all I am to you?" I ignore the shock and softness in his voice. Instead, I hear the cold, icy words he used earlier. The way he'd talked about me. As if I were nothing. As if I were an inconvenience. "A *Charity Case*?"

"Dick—"

His hands grab me. They hold my wrists. They feel like Zucco's, like everyone who's tried to take me. Like all the people who passed me on from place to place, never once asking what I wanted. Not even Alfred.

"*Get away from me!*" Now I scream. And I hit. I slam my legs into his chest, smacking the solid mass of muscle, but twist my arms out

of his grasp at the same time. I slam onto my side on the freezing wooden planks, swiping the snot away with my arm. My hand rests on something hard, something solid. The folder.

“Dick—”

“No!” I jump up and swing, the folder bashing him across the face. “Get away! I *hate* you!”

Bruce stumbles back, his hand clutching his nose. The folder falls out of my hands, papers scattering all over the floor. I can see now. I can see the hurt on Bruce’s face, the blood leaking from his fingers, the way he regains his footing— and looks right at me.

I was blazing, then I was cold. Now, I’m numb. My arms go limp. *What’ve I done? What did I just do? What did I just say?*

I stumble back, shaking my head. Alfred motions for me to come closer, but I can’t stay. I can’t stay here! Not with Bruce looking at me like that. So I do the only thing I can think of. I turn and run. I run as fast as my feet can carry me. I run down the halls, my feet slipping and sliding on the polished wood. I can’t get out of here, so I hide in the one place they’ll never look: a random sitting room in front of a roaring fireplace. I collapse and curl into the huge armchair. I curl over myself, my shoulders shaking, my breath hiccupping, and I cry.

What've I done?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BLAME IT ON THE BATS IN MY BELFRY

Alfred finds me. Of course, he finds me. Why did I even think I could hide from him? Still, I curl up on the chair, trying not to think about the mess I've made all over the nice, plush cushion. Alfred stands beside me, unmoving, like a statue. Through the tears still swimming in my eyes, I can see him holding a fluffy blanket and a steaming cup of hot cocoa. My shoulders shake harder. I don't deserve that. I can't believe I said that to Bruce... but... but...

“A-Alfred?” My voice's small, but I don't care. I look up at him, wanting nothing more than for him to drop that ‘Alfred look’ and actually show some real emotion. If he can be shocked and disappointed in Bruce, can't he be comforting to me?

“Yes, Master Dick?” It's more than a title, I realize. It's more than an obligation because he's our butler, and we're his masters. It's a term of affection.

“D-did Bruce—” My voice cracks at his name, and I sniff hard, my nose clogged. “Did Bruce... really mean all those things?” I want to hide, but at the same time, I want a hug. I want to be around someone,

someone who cares. “Does he really not care about me? Am I gonna be stuck in this place forever?”

“Oh... Master Dick,” It’s not much, but it’s there. That tone of affection. That look I caught him giving me when I was running through the halls, messing up his house with my antics. It’s a soft, kind look that makes me want to start sobbing again. I sit up slowly, wiping my nose as he comes to me, draping me in the cozy blanket, setting the hot cocoa in my hands, “I do not know.” That’s not what I want to hear. I want to know what Bruce meant about being around and what Alfred meant by me not knowing about it. I want Alfred to tell me that Bruce cares, that I’m not trapped here, and that everything will be okay.

But that isn’t the way things are, huh? I tug the blanket around me, taking a shaking sip of my hot cocoa. Somehow, Alfred makes it just right. It doesn’t burn my mouth, but it isn’t lukewarm either. It’s piled with whipped cream and fills my shaking insides with something warm and fuzzy.

We sit there in silence for what seems like forever. I slowly drink my hot cocoa, snuggled in the blanket, and Alfred watches over me, my one constant in this cold, unsure Manor. At least his personality remains the same. At least he doesn’t change the way he acts around other people.

At least he has a small range of expressions, and I can always expect what I'm going to get.

Finally, when the mug doesn't rattle in my hands, when my lips aren't quivering, and when I take deep, still sniffly breaths, Alfred speaks up. "I have something for you, Master Dick." His voice is back to its clipped, no-nonsense usual, which you'd think would be cold. But at this point? It's good to have something familiar. As I said, something expected. "Come on, let's go. Chop, chop."

What can I do but follow? Sit and sob the rest of the day? My eyes already ache, and my head's already pounding. I don't want to cry anymore. Besides, as long as it's not around Bruce, I think I'll be fine.

But... I told him I hated him. The guilt hits me like Alfred's punches to my gut. It twists my insides, and my hot cocoa might just come up and ruin Alfred's perfectly polished floors. I told Bruce, who, despite what I think of him, took me in from the Home and gave me all of this, that I hated him.

As I follow Alfred, I don't want to look at the Manor. I don't want to pay attention to how quiet it is, how eerie the shadows are. All I want is to stay wrapped in this blanket and to take back what I said. Some of it, anyway. At least that last part.

“Here we are, Master Dick.”

We step into one of the sitting rooms. There are a lot of these, most of which I think Bruce probably hasn't even used before. But this one's different. The firelight shines bright, and the lights dance warm and welcoming. And along the walls are lined with pictures and posters. The contents of my family's trailer are meticulously placed around the room, hung up on the walls, decorating the armchairs, and filling the space with so much life it doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the Manor.

Mom's makeup kit is on a cabinet shelf next to the old music box. Uncle Rick's sports posters are framed over a signed baseball he got from a stop in New York. Dad's first trapeze awards are meticulously displayed, polished to perfection.

They smile at me from the posters. We all laugh in one family picture of us in London, one of the clowns photobombing us. Then, when my eyes are already misty, my mouth opens in a perfect O, and I look up at the space above the mantel. A huge oil painting looks down at me. It's like the picture of the Waynes, but it's so much more. It's all of us, Mom, Dad, Uncle Rick, and me, all looking just like we did right before... right before...

I realize, to my surprise, that it's from a picture someone took of us on the day of the... accident. Mom and Dad are in each other's arms, heads pressed together, hands clasped over Dad's heart, smiling up at whoever's looking. Uncle Rick's got me in his arms, tousling my hair as I try to push him away, my face so full of joy I'm envious of myself.

I pull my blanket tighter around me, unable to keep the smile from my face. What, did you think I'd cry again? Sob my eyes out? No. This is how I want to remember us. Happy, smiling, laughing. A family. This is what I want to see when I dream, them alive with me.

I realize, suddenly, that the room isn't quiet. Somethings playing on a small speaker set up on one of the tables. The small bop whispers into my ear, reminding me of the good times. *Rockin' Robin* is playing in this room, filling the walls with memory.

"How?" I don't think I can manage anything else. How could I? How did I even manage to speak at all after this? This isn't their graves or a fanboy's memorabilia wall. This is my family, saved in my heart as it should be.

"Master Bruce had your things retrieved from storage." Alfred's next to me, his hands clasped behind his back as he looks at me, his lips twitching. "I have spent the last week or so preparing it for you."

“I don’t know what to say.” Okay, I do. But honestly, after this, how’s ‘thank you’ enough? Bruce did this? This was his idea? “Thank you... Alfred.”

“Not at all, Master Dick.” Alfred guides me towards the armchair, which isn’t much different from the one I just left. I sit down, no, I curl up in it, looking up at my parents. My Uncle. My beautiful, smiling family. “Master Bruce has his faults, Master Dick.” Here it comes. I know I really need to apologize to Bruce now, but still, what he said— “You were right. He does push people away. Which is why I believe it is good that you are here.”

I try not to snort. I really do, but it comes out anyway. “Why? Why Alfred? If he’s just going to—”

“Because Master Dick.” Alfred rests a hand on my shoulder even as he gets ready to walk away. “Now he has something... *someone*... to take responsibility for.”

Just like that, Alfred’s gone. I’m left alone with a memory. And, at first, it really is a good memory. I want to keep it that way. I really do. I fight to keep the horrible images at bay, to lock them up, save them for the night terrors.

But the more I look around at us, at the joy on our faces, at the kindness of Mom's beautiful eyes, and the passion in Dad's, at the humor in Uncle Rick's, the more I think. Why'd they have to die? They shouldn't have died. It's not fair.

Zucco took them from me.

Surprisingly, I still fall asleep. I mean, how could I not? I'm exhausted, my mind breaking from my talk with Bruce, my chest aching with what Alfred and Bruce have done for me, and my blood chilling at the thought of what Zucco really took away from me.

When I dream, I don't dream about what my fantasies say happened, I dream about what actually happened, every single agonizing detail, from seeing Zucco leaving the big top to the clown with the tortoise to them crashing to the ground, to Commissioner Gordon taking me to GCPD...

Alfred doesn't wake me up for dinner. In fact, when I wake up, the clock blinks eleven p.m. I slept the rest of the day and into the night. My stomach growls, but I don't leave the sitting room. Instead, I see the folder with all of my research sitting next to me on the chair.

The research about Zucco. I grip it in my hands, closing my eyes. Bruce is wrong about a lot of things, but one thing he's dead wrong about

is that I'm safe here. I'm never going to be safe anywhere until *he* is gone. Until Zucco's gotten what he deserves.

And Bruce's wrong if he thinks I won't do anything about it. I don't know when I make up my mind, but I find myself standing up and walking out of my family's room, the folder clenched between my fingers.

The halls are deathly quiet. I don't think Alfred is stalking around at this time of night, and as long as I stay clear of Bruce's office and bedroom, I should be fine. I sneak back to my room, my footfalls muffled, my breath barely making any noise. Not perfect, but better than the clambering clown I was before Alfred started to train me.

When I get to my room, I slip into my closet, grabbing black, sturdy cargo pants, a thick black turtle neck, and one of those bulletproof jackets that hang with my sweaters.

Don't ask.

I jam a black ski cap over my head and creep into the bathroom. No way I'm tying a mask around my head. I don't think I could pull off a sock with holes in it. So instead, I find the bag of simple makeup set aside for me if I ever go to an interview or something, which thankfully hasn't happened yet.

I pull out the mascara, shove my finger into the bottle, and smear it all around my eyes. I've always wanted to do this.

When I look in the mirror, a miniature cat burglar looks back at me. I don't know how to feel about that. I don't think about it too much, though, as I hit my next stop, the gym. I would try to crack Alfred's gun cabinet, but I'm pretty sure he'll kill me if I take a gun. That's apparently a rule in this house. No firearms, unless it's Alfred. So instead, I grab my bō staff and slide its strap across my back. Just call me a modern-day ninja, I guess.

Now comes the tricky part. Actually sneaking out of the Manor. Now, I know, I know, you may be thinking, *'But Dick! They're trying to keep you safe!'* Well, at this point, I don't care. I'm going to find Zucco or have him find me, and he's gonna pay.

So I hack into the Manor's security system, or at least the parts that Alfred showed me. Which, thankfully, includes the gate to the grounds and the locks on the garage. What? You thought I'd walk to Gotham on foot?

In the garage, I grab a motorcycle, not bothering to choose which one, and guide it towards the smallest door. I'm not about to grab a car.

Are you kidding me? I don't know how to drive yet. But motorcycles, I can do. I'm from the circus, after all.

I sneak out of the garage and am met with the nippy, wet, and windy Gotham night air. The moon isn't even peeking out of the thick, low clouds, leaving the Manor grounds bathed in the warm porch and cool blue fountain lights.

I roll the motorcycle towards the gate, each rustling from the leaves making me jump, each clang from the fence sending shivers racing up and down my back. Ace runs up to meet me. He doesn't bark since he knows who I am, but he's not happy either. I can tell from how he clings to my side all the way up to the gate that he's nervous seeing me out this late.

I wouldn't put it past Bruce to train him to stop people from leaving *and* sneaking in. But Ace sits as I slide through the gate, clearing my prison and emerging into the free world. The gate clangs behind me, and I'm not sure if it's locking me out or reminding me about the warm bed I'm leaving behind.

Most people are scared of the woods. Afraid of the reaching tree limbs, the creaking of the old trunks, the rustle of the brush as creatures creep through it, their eyes glowing. And I don't blame them. Bats soar

through the trees, snatching insects out of the air right in front of my face. Things scurry around in the underbrush, and I swear I hear something howl nearby, but I don't let myself think about it. Instead, when I clear the third bend in the road, I start my motorcycle and speed off, leaving the Wayne property behind.

The ride to Gotham is longer than it seems when I go to school with Alfred. Maybe because I'm alone, watching for oncoming cars, listening to the waves beat against the cliffs. You'd think I'd be used to silence now since Wayne Manor has to be the library of houses, but this is a different kind of silence. It's an alert silence, a waiting silence.

I'm a kid riding a motorcycle alone when it's nearing midnight. I'm not supposed to be out here. If a cop sees me, I'm so dead. I'm tempted to turn back. The thought tugs at me, pulling me back towards the Manor, but I ignore it. It's now or never. I can't keep living like this.

Gotham isn't better than the night I snuck out of the Home. In fact, without the rain, it's even more chilling. Without the drone of the rain, I can actually hear things like cries and jeers coming from alleyways and the hushed whispers from rooftops and side streets. I stop constantly, checking the color-coded map of Gotham, peering at the different territories from under the flickering lights of the street lamps.

Right now, I'm in Old Gotham, Riddler's territory. Where the GCHB is. I tuck the map back into my pocket and slide my motorcycle behind a dumpster. I don't know where else to put it. I don't trust public parking, and I can't just stow it in a garage.

But I can't sneak up on anyone roaring around on a motorcycle, can I? So I leave my bike, keeping to the shadows, sneaking along the streets. All I need is one of Riddler's thugs. I know he's not Zucco's boss, but I was here, in his territory. What stopped Zucco from getting to me? It's as good a place to start as any.

"N-no! P-please!" That's a woman's voice, her trembling words snatching my attention. She's nearby. And when there's a pleading woman, there's usually—

"Just a little excursion, miss. I'm sure the Riddler'll make it worth your while." I recognize that voice. Why do I recognize that voice? I race towards the people, scampering up the drain pipes, so I look down at them from above the alley.

I was right. It's a young woman, backed up against a wall, a pocket knife held out trembling in one hand, a can of pepper spray in the other. Well, good for her. At least, it would be if she wasn't so paper

white. To be honest, I think she's more likely to faint than actually use the spray.

The man, who's too close for comfort, holds a gun level with her chest. He's dressed in a green rain jacket studded with question marks, his purple T-shirt ratty, his stupid bowler hat— wait a minute!

“S-stay away! Y-you can't do this!” Points to the woman who's not screaming in the face of a gun, or maybe, not points. Wouldn't someone be able to hear her better if she were screaming?

I crouch over them, my legs tensing. I can't let her get hurt.

“What, do you think the *Bat* will save you?” The Riddler thug sneers, the gun cocking in his hand. “He can't be everywhere at once, Sweetheart.”

That's it! I flip down, not making a sound until I crash into the man, slamming a foot into his face. The gun goes off, the bang echoing off the walls. The woman screams and runs, the knife forgotten on the ground. I roll into the trash and filth of the concrete but pop back up just in time to see the Riddler thug stumbling to his feet, his nose broken.

I laugh at the crooked hook, my laugh echoing eerily off the walls of the alleyway. “He doesn't have to be everywhere, Riddler Jr.,” I say,

falling into a defensive pose. “He’s not the only one who fights jerks like you.”

“Charming.” The Riddler thug grimaces but pulls a pistol out of his jacket pocket, taking a step toward me. He looks me over. Okay, maybe the all-black clothes and eye makeup is a little stupid. But there’s nothing I can do about that now. “Who are you? The Blundering Batboy?”

“Haven’t thought about the name yet,” I say, shrugging. He pays attention to that, so he doesn't see my next move. I dash forward, rolling under the gunshots, and kick up, launching myself from the ground with my hands. He slams into the wall, and I’m on my feet, my arm pressed against my chest, trying my best at an intimidating growl. “But what I have been thinking about a lot is one of your little goon squad pals. Tony Zucco.” My eyes narrow, and I press harder. “Where is he?”

I want to die with embarrassment when the man laughs in my face. Okay, so I’m not intimidating. At least, not in the way the Bat is. Who would take a twelve-year-old seriously? “What? You think I would tell you if I knew?” The man spits in my face, his breath smelling like moldy cheese and all things nasty.

“I thought crime paid.” I let my intimidating failure slide and let an exaggerated grimace paint my face. “Can’t it pay for a dentist? Maybe a toothbrush?”

“You— what?” The thug blinks at me.

“A toothbrush. You know?” I wrinkle my nose. “Because your breath stinks? You could use some mouthwash, too, buddy. Try some fresh mint.”

“Why, you little!” I’m shoved back, but I don’t let my surprise show on my face. I can’t, or he’ll eat me alive. “I outta—!”

“Now, now. I know you big thug types.” I shake my head, casually walking around him, but as I learned very painfully before, I never turn my back on him. “Too cool for school. Work for the boss, you know. Like to show off.”

“S-show off?” The thug sneers. “You have no idea, kid. Just who do you think you are?”

“A newbie. You know, a poor clueless kid.” I leap on top of the dumpster, crouching there, my grin nearly splitting my face. If I keep smiling, I don’t think about how badly this can go. And actually, I might enjoy myself. “But I have to say, the Riddler’s got nothing on Tony Zucco, and he’s just an extortionist.” I laugh, and again, it echoes off the

walls, sounding more like an imp than me. Or maybe, that's right on the nose. The man flinches but smirks at me.

“Ha! I know what you're trying to do! And it won't work.” The Riddler thug points his gun right at me, but I stay calm. I don't move. “We're too smart for you, boy. You have no idea what Gotham's like! What the Riddler's like!”

“A guy who likes puzzles and tongue twisters?” I snicker, ignoring the gun, or so it seems. Really, I'm looking at the man, at the gun, and around the alley all at once. Who knows when some of his buddies could show up? What would Alfred think when the police retrieve my cold, dead body from a dirty alleyway? “Please, Batman isn't even paying attention to him anymore. Let alone, you guys. Zucco, now, that guy—”

“You don't know anything!” The Riddler thug's shaking now, his eyes popping with indignance. This is the same guy who threatened me that one night, the guy that Batman took down, and it would make sense that, like me, that was something of a bragging right for him.

A criminal is classified by how much of a threat he is, but in their world, it would make sense if they classified themselves based on how much the Bat pays attention to them.

“Don’t I?” I don’t sneer. I smile so lightly, so easily, that the man’s probably shot me a million times over in his head already. “You care about what the Bat thinks about your boss, don’t you? You’re jealous!”

“Why, you little!” *BANG!*

I dodge the bullet, literally jumping up into the shadows and disappearing. I have him angry at me. Now, what do I do? How can I get him to talk? “Yeah, yeah, you’re jealous!” I laugh from the shadows, and it’s everywhere and nowhere. The thug doesn’t have a shot.

So I try the stupidest thing I could do. I jump down in front of him. I was about to open my mouth and ask another question or goad him into spilling the beans, and I should’ve seen it coming.

If it wasn’t for the batarang, I would be a holier person than I am now. *Snap!* The gun’s knocked out of the man’s hand. *Wham!* He’s out cold on the ground. *Phoom!* He’s wrapped tightly with a rope. All of it happens in less than five seconds. And I’m left standing in a deep, colossal shadow.

I don’t know what to say. Instead, the Bat speaks first. “**You aren’t supposed to be here.**” It’s not what I was expecting, though nothing that comes from the Bat’s mouth around me is what I’m

expecting. Why does he always act so weird around me? Does my reputation precede me that much?

“B-batman!” I know, I know, but what else am I supposed to say? I didn’t see him coming. I didn’t hear him coming, even with my trained ears. My hands tremble, and my legs are mushy. What I’ve done finally hits me. I could’ve died. But I didn’t. I didn’t! I almost totally kicked butt!

Batman does something else I’m not expecting. He grabs me, pulls me into his thick, armored chest, and launches us up to the rooftops, zipping into the sky with his grappling hook. I blink hard when I’m set on the edge of a building, looking out over the shorter buildings of Old Gotham to the towers that stick up like sore thumbs.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” Batman repeats, his cape draping over him like a bat’s wings. Really, how can he look so cool? **“You are the ward of Bruce Wayne. Zucco’s still at large. You will get yourself killed. Or worse.”**

Worse? Worse? How is something worse than dying? Besides, how does he even know who I am? “I can take care of myself.” I insist, trying to look taller and older than I really am. But if he knows who I am, it’s no use. He’s already seen me drugged, crying, bleeding from a

gunshot wound. “Didn’t you see me with that guy? I didn’t even have to use my bō staff!”

“What I saw was a sloppy, dangerous attempt to get information.” Batman’s growl is so chilling, so intimidating, but I don’t step back. I bristle, but then again, it’s cool getting scolded by the legend himself. **“You’re too nice, kid. They won’t take you seriously.”**

“It’s an advantage.” I try to argue. Just to note, don’t ever try to argue with Batman. At least, not when you’re a foot shorter than him, and his biceps are as big as your head.

“It’s fool’s play.” Batman doesn’t move. He might as well be an actual bat, only he’s standing up, not hanging upside down. **“He may be a street-level thug, but he’s still dangerous. He works for the Riddler.”**

I almost ask, *‘what does that have to do with it?’* but the Riddler’s the Riddler, one of the smartest, most devious people alive. His thugs are a lot dumber than he is, but they must’ve learned something from him. I might’ve been playing with the thug, but he could’ve played with me just as much.

“I will escort you home.” Five words. Just five simple words. But I despise every one of them. Or, at least, part of me does.

“No.” I pull out my folder, my precious research. “I have to take this to the Commissioner. Or... you need to take it and help me. Help me take him down.”

Batman does take it. In fact, one moment it’s in my hand, the next it isn’t. He’s flipping through my notes, his mouth dipped into a thin line. Now, where have I seen that expression before? **“You did this?”** He asks, his voice not giving anything away.

I nod. “You and the GCPD haven’t brought him in yet. Zucco. If you know who I am, then you know how much this means to me.” I clench my fists, trying to keep the burning away from my eyes, the desperation from my voice. “He needs to pay. You’re Batman. You need to—”

“What I need from you, Mister Grayson,” His voice cuts through any hope I have, any lingering dream, **“Is for you to go home. I am already hunting down Zucco. The GCPD’s best are on the case. All you need to do is—”**

“Wait?” I shake my head, taking a step back. “No. No, I can’t do that anymore. I can’t!” I don’t know what I’m doing. Actually, I do. Something incredibly stupid. I fall into a defensive stance, facing the Dark Knight. “I can handle myself!”

“**Fine.**” The fight doesn’t last long. If Alfred is a miracle for his age, this guy? This guy is the living legend, the myth. Superman? Ha! Batman is the ‘super man’ because I’m sure he’s just an ordinary person under that mask.

He blocks each of my attacks and deflects every one of my blows. I fly around him, trying to keep moving as he stands still, letting me get all my energy out, slow down, and tire. But I can’t stop. I can’t let him win. He has to understand. Someone has to understand! Zucco needs to pay!

I take my bō staff off my back, spinning it around with expert hands. Even then, when I launch forward with a small yell, the staff whipping towards him, it does nothing. All my staff does is crack onto the concrete where he was only a second before.

I throw all my energy into one last attack. A double flying kick to the face. One of the hits lands, and Batman takes a step, one measly little step, back. I want to crow in victory. Then, I’m in his grasp, his fingers clamping down on my wrists. So much for that. I sag. I know I’m beaten. He’ll send me home now. Bruce will lock me in my room. Alfred will never teach me anything again. They might as well just lock me up in Juvie.

“Impressive.” I lift my head, trying to keep my mouth shut, but it probably just banged against the rooftop. Batman’s assessing me, reading my every expression. He isn’t scolding me? Isn’t telling me off? He’s... impressed? **“For a boy of your age and stature, you did well. Still, I can’t—”**

“Please.” I nod at my folder, which lies dejected on the ground with the grime and filth. “I know you probably already know all of that, but I can’t live with him in my head anymore. You were there when I got shot. You know—”

“I was there that day at the circus.” Batman’s voice is different, softer if that’s possible. **“I’ve been tracking down Zucco since the night your parents died.”**

What? But that doesn’t make sense. How could Batman have been there? How could he have known? Come to think of it, why’s he in the Riddler’s territory if he’s tracking down Zucco? How did he find me when I ran from the GCHB? And now he just so happens to find me tonight like this? Why would he even care?

Unless... *unless...*

I stare at Batman. No, not at Batman. At the man under the mask, hiding behind the cape. The man who holds my hands gently but firmly.

The man whose voice I recognize. The man who told me to go home, to leave it alone.

“I am there for him. I take care of him. He’s safe, isn’t he?”

“You may be there for him, Master Bruce, but he doesn’t know that.”

Bruce has been with me, watching me all this time. I’ve never been without him, I realize, because Bruce Wayne... Bruce Wayne...

“Bruce?” I ask the Batman. “It’s you... Isn’t it?”

I think I’m right. I’m almost a hundred percent sure I’m right. But still, I’m not ready for his answer. It’s one word, so simple, so innocent, but it rocks my world. One word changes my life forever.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I TAKE AN OATH

Bruce Wayne is Batman. I've been living with Batman. He's taken me in, kept me safe, and worked on finding Zucco. Everything makes sense— Batman showing up that rainy night, saving me from the mugger, telling me to wait.

Bruce never being around, staying up late, and sleeping in late. Alfred training me, holding me to high expectations. Everything suddenly clicks. How didn't I see it before? How did I not hear Bruce when Batman spoke? How did I not see Batman in the steely gray of Bruce Wayne's eyes? It's so obvious now why Bruce is so different in public. No one can know he's Batman, so he's someone that people wouldn't think would be Batman.

I want to smack myself. It was all there, staring me right in the face, no, slapping me across the face, waving flags, shooting off fireworks. Bruce might as well have had a sign over his head flashing *'I'm Batman.'* How didn't I see it?

“All this time....” I hug myself, suddenly feeling so small, so insignificant before this man, this myth... this legend. He seems like a

giant, so larger than life that I'm a tiny little mouse, shivering under his shadow. "It's been you all this time."

"Come on, Dick," Batman speaks, but all I hear, even through the growl, is Bruce. Bruce, who has been here all this time. Bruce, the man I smacked in the face with a folder that I told I hated him. **"We can talk in the car."**

The car? *The car? No stinkn' way!* "You mean *the* Batmobile?" I want to jump up and down, but I also want to hide, run away, and get out of his shadow. I told Bruce— Batman— that I hated him. I hit him, I smacked him! And I still haven't apologized. How does a Batman ground his ward? I don't want to go to Juvie.

"Yes. The Batmobile." Batman holds out an arm to me, his gauntlets riddled with weapons and curved fin spikes, yet they seem like the most comforting things in the world. He's not angry. He's not chewing me out. He's holding out a hand, taking me somewhere safe. Just like he did when he took me from the Home. But... what about what he said? Does he still not have time for me? Do I have to stay locked in the Manor? How will things change between us?

“My bike.” I almost forgot about the motorcycle I took from the garage, but now it hits me. I left it behind a dumpster. I left *Batman's* motorcycle behind a dumpster. Oh, I am so, so grounded!

“I already have it.” That’s all I get. Well, I really do have a stalker, don’t I? I don’t know how to feel about this. What would you think if you found out Batman was stalking you?

So I take Batman’s hand, Bruce’s hand, and let him pull me in tight, my arms holding onto his strong neck as he jumps off the building, gliding to the ground. He doesn’t put me down as we walk towards a sleek, muscle car parked along the curb. Maybe he’s afraid I’ll run away again, but you tell me. Would you run away after someone told you you could have a ride in the Batmobile?

The thing is a work of art. Sleek, black, and shiny. But it could also be a tank from the sturdy tires and build. Sleek, yes, but durable. Fast, but able to punch through walls. He has this car, and he still buys other cars? What does he do, take all the best parts and use them to upgrade the Batmobile? Speaking of which, did Bruce build it, or did someone else?

Who else knows?

Batman clicks something on his utility belt, and the doors pop open. I don't know who else he takes for rides in this thing, but it's equipped with a passenger's seat, the leather calling me. I couldn't resist, even if I wasn't given permission. The thing's just too beautiful. I jump inside, sliding into the seat and strap myself in, the belt more like the restraining harness on a roller coaster than anything else.

A few seconds later, we're speeding through Gotham, the lights whizzing past. Does he have a license for this thing? Can Batman get pulled over? How fast can this thing go? And, most importantly, can I drive?

"Why didn't you tell me?" I don't know how else to start the talk. What was I supposed to say? What was I supposed to ask? What do you say to Batman when he reveals he's been the billionaire who's helped you with your homework?

Batman, no, Bruce pulls off his cowl, his coal-black hair mussed. Now his bedhead makes more sense. You'd think it'd be weird to see Batman with his cowl off, but honestly, it's even more strange to see Bruce in the Batsuit. Batman without his cowl is still Batman, but for some reason, he's even more intimidating. Maybe it's his perfect features, but I think it's the eyes. White film over eye holes in a mask is scary, but

steely gray eyes glaring at you over bulked-up armor, broad muscled shoulders, and biceps the size of my head? Yeah... you tell me which is scarier.

“It’s supposed to be a secret.” Bruce’s lips are drawn thin, his brows furrowed. Is he angry with me? Probably. But then— “Though I suppose you were going to find out eventually.”

“Well, who else knows?” What? I’m curious! If you found out that your guardian was Batman, wouldn’t you be curious about who else knows?

“Alfred, Dr. Thompkins, and Lucius Fox.” Batman— Bruce— doesn’t change his expression, leaving me to puzzle. Not about Alfred; that’s a total given. I mean, the guy raised Bruce. But why Dr. Thompkins? Wasn’t she the woman who cared for me after I was shot? Oh... That might be why. But who’s Lucius Fox? And why not Vicki? Oh, no, scratch that. She’s a photojournalist. Then again, she must be a really bad one if she’s been around Bruce all this time and still hasn’t figured it out.

We zip towards a wall. I want to yell and tell Bruce to watch out, but instead, the wall slides aside for us, leaving us to zoom into a long, dark tunnel, the fake wall closing behind us. So, this is how he gets

around Gotham so fast. No traffic, no lights, no bother. Just a system of tunnels. Genius.

I want to ask about Mr. Fox, who he is, and why he knows, but I move on to the more relevant subject. “It would’ve been easier...” I want to apologize, but even still, can’t I give him a hard time? Can’t I be a little angry at him? “If you’d told me.”

“I didn’t want you to be a part of this world, Dick.” Bruce sighs. He’s tired. So tired, with the bags under his eyes. Only now do I realize how pale he is, how focused he is all the time. I should’ve known. I should’ve pieced it all together. He does so much. But... does that make me selfish, wanting him around? “I wanted to keep you safe.”

That touches me in a place I’ve been trying to ignore. That parent-sized hole in my heart fills in a little, Bruce’s words bringing a warm, fuzzy feeling like he just wrapped me in a blanket. Maybe I am selfish. He’s been protecting me all this time, looking out for me, watching my back. And what’ve I done? Complained, smacked him in the face, and told him I hated him. Though... in my defense, he didn’t tell me. How valid is his excuse? You tell me.

Even still, now I know. I know why he does this. I know why Bruce is Batman. Once you actually know Bruce, and about the other

side of him, it's not rocket science. His parents were shot dead in an alley. He couldn't do anything; he was just a kid. He's like me.

He wants everyone else he cares about to be safe. He just has a rotten way of showing it, I guess.

“But... I wasn't safe anyway.” I point out. *Oh yeah, so helpful, Dick. Way to point out the fact that you snuck out of the house. might as well just go to your room and lock yourself in.* Then again, it's true. I'm not safe. I'm not going to be staying safe. There's no stopping me. “I'm going to keep looking, whether you—”

“Stop right there.” Bruce eyes me, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. Oh boy, *Batman* smiling? I think my brain just exploded. Then again, Bruce does smile, so... who is the real him, I wonder? “I didn't let you sneak out of the Manor just because.”

So, he knew. He'd watched me sneak out. He'd trailed me the entire way here. What a stalker. Still, he could've stopped me any time. But he didn't. Because he knew that Alfred had been training me. He wanted to see what I was made of. Well, I'm glad I haven't been making a total fool of myself.

So, he 'wanted' to keep me safe. He 'wanted' to keep me out of it. But what does he 'want' now? An idea forms. It's stupid, I know. Some

little kid's fantasy. At first, I'm afraid he'll laugh at me, but then I think, I'm already in so much trouble, why not?

"You were watching me this whole time." I finally say, trying to read his expression. I'm not as good at it as he is. Not yet, at least. Right now, as far as I can tell, he looks thoughtful, aware, and waiting for the penny to drop. "You *knew* that I'd go after Zucco." I don't get a spoken answer. I just get a nod. So I keep going. "So you followed me, tested me, because..."

The answer is too good to be true. It can't be real. This can't be real. Now, you might be thinking, what's the big deal? He was following you like a creep; shouldn't you be mad? But here's the awesome truth.

"If Bruce is never around..." Bruce's smiling now, his eyes softening just enough for me to keep going. I can say hello to freedom because "Batman can be around, right? Batman can teach me— because if Bruce Wayne can't have a kid—"

"Batman can have a partner." Bruce looks right at me, still stern but smiling. "I wanted you to have a normal childhood. But you're going out on those streets, facing Zucco whether you're ready for it or not. I need to make you ready. And I need to give you what I never had. Closure."

I try to keep my heart from launching out of my chest. I try to keep my voice from squeaking. This day really did just do a complete one-eighty. I want to scream, bounce up and down in my seat, and press every cool-looking button and lever on the dash.

But Bruce still looks at me with that thoughtful but steely gaze, so I sit quietly, my hands trembling. “But this world— it's dangerous.” Bruce doesn't slow down, even as we speed through the tunnel, the blue lights blurring overhead. “I don't need to tell you that the people here in Gotham don't care if you're a kid. They will kill you.”

Yeah, well, no, duh. “I know.” I drum my fingers on my thighs, blinking at the flashing lights, ignoring the look Bruce is giving me. I can't meet his gaze. It's too intense.

“You don't know.” Bruce's voice is so hard, so demanding, that I turn to him anyway, meeting what I am now dubbing his ‘bat-glare.’ “You haven't even seen what those people are capable of. You want Zucco, but I need to be sure you want to keep going after that.”

He means people like the Joker, Two-Face, Poison Ivy, and Bane. People that Batman faces every other night. After Zucco gets what he deserves, would I want to go out every night, facing crazies like them?

Would I want to fight crime with Batman, staying at his side? Is that even a question? I can see myself now, caped and masked, leaping into action.

But more than that, I think of the woman in that alleyway I saved. And my parents, falling to their deaths. That wouldn't have happened if I had done something. If I had told them about seeing Zucco sneaking out of that tent. It's not guilt that drives me towards what Batman offers. It's not excitement or adrenaline, though those pump through my blood like crazy.

No, it's not about the thrill. It's about keeping them safe. Doing what Mom and Dad and Uncle Rick would've wanted. Living and helping others live, too. Fighting the bad guys, so kids like me don't have to look over their shoulders when they walk down the street. Fighting bad guys, so they don't have to go through what I went through. It's super cheesy, I know. And if I say it out loud, I'll never live it down. But I've made up my mind.

I'm going to be Batman's partner. Just you watch me.

"I'm sure." I settle back in my seat, finally smiling up at him. Then I remember something. So I say: "And I'm sorry, Bruce. For what I said. I don't hate you. I never did. I was just—"

“I know.” That’s all I get. I should be used to it by now because this guy’s the Batman. More than that, he’s Bruce Wayne. Alfred told me the more I got to know him, the more I’d understand. But here’s the thing: when you find out a guy has not one, not two, but three different personalities, you know, the Bruce Wayne the public sees, the Bruce Wayne I got to know, and Batman, well, the more I learn about him, the more he confuses me. Who is he, really? But I guess that’s the whole point.

“Alright, then.” Bruce slams on the brakes, and we slide to a stop. I can’t see where we are, not yet. Bruce holds my attention, leaning over, his hand resting on my arm. It’s gloved, cold, but it’s real. It’s here. And that’s enough for me. At least for now. “But there are conditions.”

Of course, there are. It makes sense. “Okay... shoot. What do I have to do?”

“You have to train a hundred times harder than before.” Bruce is so severe, so somber, that I can’t protest or laugh in his face. No way, more than I already am? Is that even possible? I’m only twelve! “Alfred’s trained you well, but not well enough. You need to be perfect, Dick. You can’t make mistakes.”

Well, no pressure, then, huh? And I thought Alfred was bad!

“Okay, Bruce. When—”

Bruce holds up a hand. I shut my mouth. There’s *more*? “You will train with Alfred in the morning. You will go to school—” I want to cheer, but I bite my tongue hard with the look that Bruce is giving me. Oh ho, I didn’t know him at all. Then again, I did see this side of him... sometimes, “And come home and keep studying. After that, you train with me.” A simple phrase. But it means so much more. Batman is the best. And if he wants me to be perfect— “You will train until you can beat me in a fight. Until then, when I am on missions, you will run look out and backup from here.”

I might as well be stone. I go cold, my mouth hanging open. Oh, I’m never getting out onto the streets! Or at least not until I’m in my forties! Beat him? In a fight? Is he crazy? I’ll never be able to beat him. “Bruce, I can’t do that.” I try to keep the whine out of my voice. If I’m going to be his partner, I can’t be a little kid. I have to be better. But I can’t help myself either. “I can’t beat you! You’re the best!”

It’s true. Ask anyone. Well, okay, maybe not a Superman fan, but anyone else will say that Batman is the best. Maybe that’s it. He wants me to be perfect because he’s perfect.

Batman doesn't make mistakes.

“You can, and you will.” Bruce doesn't deny that he's the best, note, but his determined look wears off on me. “If you want to survive this cesspool, if I'm going to let a twelve-year-old kid out into the Gotham streets, you need to prove that you're ready.”

“But Bruce!”

I shut up when Bruce gives me that 'look' again. Did you know that there're different levels of the 'bat-glare'? Well, there are, and this one cooks me to medium rare. “There's no room for mistakes. No room for distractions or uncertainty. Out there?” Bruce points behind us, back to Gotham. Back to where I've almost died already, multiple times. “Out there is a place without mercy. Without hope. A place of insanity and filth. You—” Bruce points right at me. My heart stops in my chest. I shut my mouth, “Need to be physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared to go out there, do you understand me?”

“Yes, B.” I don't know why I use a nickname, but what should I call him? Batman? Bruce? At least both start with 'B's, right?

He doesn't acknowledge the nickname. Instead, he pops the doors to the Batmobile open. “Good. Come on.”

He leaps out, flipping onto the ground into a flawless landing, automatically walking off towards something with quick, purposeful strides. And I thought Alfred moved fast. I stay behind him, leaping out of the Batmobile, but I don't run forward. I gawk. I gawk at the massive cave Bruce drove us into. There's a flat circle where the Batmobile parks, but beyond that is a museum. I mean a seriously huge museum of anything from villain costumes to a giant ten-foot-something penny to a model T. rex. It's the best evidence archive I've seen... and will probably ever see.

On the other side are the training grounds. Targets are lined up along the walls, and drones are ready to activate and be shot at. But not by guns, oh no. Beside it sits an entire rack of batarangs. A large fighting arena fills up a lot of the training space, and robots from human-sized to giant-sized stand ready. I resist the urge to dash all around and touch everything. I mean, there aren't any signs saying I can't, and the stuff's so cool, but I can already feel the bat-glare boring into my brain, so I keep my hands to myself.

Below us, a tiny cove filled with dark water laps a dock teeming with watercraft, a massive closed-off tunnel probably leading out to the cliffs, ready and waiting.

I watch Bruce zip up to the next level of the cave, using a firehouse pole but going up instead of down. My mouth drops open as I turn around and around. The cave looks like an actual cave, carved out of the rock with stalactites hanging from the ceiling, the upper level, no, the whole thing, supported by massive metal beams.

Things fly screaming overhead, and I know it should be obvious, but I still jump when they zip past the blue-tinted lights. Bats. Hundreds and hundreds of bats. Okay, so who thought that was a good idea? I mean, it's cool, but still. Bats?

“Gosh, B.” I stumble forward, trying to take it in all at once.

“What do you call this place? The Bat Lair? Bruce’s Man Cave? Hideout *à la* Bat?”

“Dick,” Bruce peers over the upper level, looking so cool in his suit framed by the blue lights, that I want to take a picture to show Babs. Instead, I try to keep my heart from exploding out of my chest and bouncing on my toes, “Welcome to the Batcave.”

The Batcave. My new favorite place in the whole world. I want to start climbing up the beams, flipping from the hanging rocks. Instead, I grab onto the pole. When my fingers touch, the metal buzzes like someone’s stuck bees under my hand. I quickly grab on with both hands

as I'm pulled up and launched onto the second level. Whoever thought of that is a genius.

I land in a solid stance, which is good because Bruce is watching. The upper level isn't as packed as the lower level. Up here, there's a wall of glass cases, each holding a different version of the Batsuit. A plane that looks like it could be out of a sci-fi film waits in front of a blocked-off tunnel, sleek and black like the Batmobile.

In the center of it all is a computer. And when I say computer, I don't mean a measly little desktop with a single screen and keyboard. I mean an entire wall of giant, TV-size monitors, several smaller ones closer to the desk, and several massive keyboards. Each computer has its own purpose. Right now, Bruce is sitting down in front of a set that's filled with maps of Gotham and Zucco's file.

Next to the Bat computer is the analyzing station. Microscopes, scanners, test tubes, you name it, it's there. Okay, not really, but also literally. There's even an examination table, medical supplies, and everything a patient would need. That makes sense. How often has B almost died?

To the side of the analyzing station, a capsule stands against the wall. At first, I think it's another cool way to get down to the second level

until it lets out a small ding like an elevator, and the doors slide open to reveal Alfred carrying a tray of tea and weird biscuit things. Okay, so maybe if it looks like an elevator and sounds like an elevator, it's an elevator.

Alfred's eyebrows raise as he looks me over, taking in my 'street ninja' attire. I wonder what he thinks about me sneaking out and taking a motorcycle. I wonder if he even knew. "Master Dick. At last." Not exactly what I expected, but it does form a grin. Alfred's been rooting for me the entire time. You'd almost think he planned this.

"Alfred." Bruce slides back from the computer, his face hardening. "I suppose you knew this would happen?"

"I could not have orchestrated it better myself, Sir." Okay, maybe he didn't plan *everything*. Alfred strides forward and offers Bruce tea, which he takes. Huh, I didn't know he liked tea. "It was only right that he sees who Bruce Wayne really is."

Is it just me, or does Bruce smile into his steaming cup, rolling his eyes at our butler? "Well, it worked. He's here." Bruce pulls a sheet of paper off the desk and hands it to Alfred. "His new schedule and training regimen. I want you to add ballet."

“*What?*” I can’t help myself. What? Nothing can be perfect! No matter how fantastic something seems, there’s always something. Like dancing in a tutu. “I’m not wearing a skirt!”

Bruce laughs. Actually laughs. He sets the tea down on the desk and stands, looming over Alfred and me. Wow, I never really knew how much of a presence Bruce has. In and out of his Batsuit. He puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezing it. “You’re an acrobat, Chum. You’re used to wearing a leotard.”

“A pink, fluffy tutu—” I start, pursing my lips, “Is not the same, B. Though, if you do it, I’ll do it.”

“There will be no skirts for you, Master Dick,” Alfred says, folding the new schedule neatly and setting it on the silver tray. “Male ballet does not require it. Nor do I require leotards. Leggings will do.”

Thank goodness. Even still, ballet? Wouldn’t focusing more on fighting be better? I mean, if Bruce wants me to beat him...

“Oh, and Alfred?” Bruce catches Alfred just before he enters back into the... um, what to call it? Would it be the bat elevator? The cave elevator? The Bat-la-vator? Where does it lead anyway? It doesn’t matter right now, though, because Bruce leans close to Alfred, his voice lowering to a whisper. If Alfred hadn’t started training me, I would’ve

never heard it. Bruce says what I've wanted to say to Alfred for a long time. Well, I do say it. And I'll keep saying it. "Thank you for taking care of him."

Alfred steps back into the elevator, smiling. Oh yeah, actually smiling. I think someone broke him because I never thought his face could twist that way. This night is so full of surprises. I'm half waiting to wake up and realize this was a dream. A good dream for once, but that would still suck. "Of course, Master Bruce. It was, and is, my pleasure."

Then, he's gone, leaving us standing, watching the elevator take the one person we would fall apart without. I wouldn't have given Bruce a chance if it weren't for Alfred, well, at least not much of a chance. And Alfred's the only reason Bruce came around.

If you think about it, Alfred really did force us together in the end. He should get a raise. How does that work? "So..." I bite back a yawn as I turn back to Bruce. It's way, *way* past my bedtime. If tomorrow weren't Sunday, I'd be in so much trouble. Try snoring right through Mr. Lawrence's lecture, "What now?"

"Now, you take an oath." Bruce motions for me to follow him. As I skip to keep up with his long, deliberate strides, I can't help but wonder. What kind of oath? He already asked me if I would continue fighting

even after Zucco's gone. What's he going to make me promise? That I won't stay up until one o'clock until I'm thirty years old? That I'll always brush my teeth or pick up my stuff in the Batcave?

Okay, so definitely not those, but I can't help but wonder. Raya and I always made pinky promises when we were younger, but mostly, I avoid promises. I want to keep them, but I can't stand disappointing people when I mess up.

Bruce leads me into a dark, side room off the Batcave. It's full of news articles, framed or nailed into the wall, fluttering in the breeze swept up by Bruce's heavy cape. The room's lit by blue floor lights, casting the glow on the glass, sending it glinting and sparkling.

I squint at the nearest article. "Batman Saves Commissioner Gordon's Daughter from Mad Man," the next one reads, "Two Face of Terror, One Face of Justice." My mouth opens. Maybe it hits the floor, maybe not. I can't tell. I'm too busy gawking at all the new articles about Batman. About Batman saving people. Being a hero.

The media has no idea. No idea. Neither did I. Bruce Wayne, billionaire, arrogant, selfish, always with two ladies on his arm. Bruce Wayne, the jerk, Bruce Wayne, the showboat. That's what they see. What they don't see, and what I didn't see, is why that act is so important. Why

he plays it up for them. Because Bruce Wayne is the most selfless, heroic person I've ever met in my life. Why? Because he's Batman. Batman is the wall, the guard between the innocent and the criminal. Batman is the reason everyone in this city can sleep safely at night.

"This is what I do." Batman stares at one of the articles, blocking it from view. His voice echoes in the chamber, his broad shoulders and cape outlined in the lights. "This is what you are going to do, Dick."

He turns to me, larger than life, against all his accomplishments. "Are you ready?"

Am I ready? Can I do this? Can I live up to... to that? No, no, I can't. But I will. I will, and I promise myself. I promise myself that I'm going to avenge my parents. I promise to end the evil in this city that took their lives. I'll avenge my parents by giving Zucco what he deserves... and by spending the rest of my life in this war. Because it is a war. A battle between the heroes and the criminals. A fight between those who protect and those who do harm.

Laugh at me, why don't you? Think I'm crazy, or dramatic, or rash. I don't care. This is my promise to them. This is what I've always wanted.

Only, I'm not alone. Not anymore.

I promise myself, even before Bruce pulls out the Book, you know the one, and holds it out to me, lifting his right hand. I promise myself, even before I put my hand on the Book, raising my right hand. The lights flicker like candles, and it may be a trick of my eyes, but somehow the cold blue light turns warmer, filling the room with certainty.

Bruce starts the oath, and I stare into his eyes. Those cold, steely eyes look at me with determination, and something that I know is what I haven't seen since Dad and I practiced our routine together the night before the accident.

Pride.

“—And swear that we two will fight together against crime and corruption and never swerve from the path of righteousness.” Bruce finishes. Only now do I realize that this is not just my oath. This is our oath as a team. He's not just holding me to this. I am holding him to it, too.

So I say. “I swear it!” Because I know that, for once, this is a promise I'll never break. I won't, because this is my promise to myself...

And to them.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I BECOME A PROFESSIONAL DETAILER

The Penguin stands at his window overlooking his city. Yes, *his* city. Below him, the Narrows sprawl, more alive at night than in the day. Here, the criminals are free. Here, the police do nothing.

The night brings the safety of shadows, where most do not fear the alleyways or dark corridors. Here, the Batman rarely comes. It is his greatest vice and the criminal's greatest triumph. Even so, the Penguin does not rest.

He stands, dressed to impress, his suit pressed, top hat jaunty on his sleek salt and pepper hair. From the back, he seems like a fine gentleman, someone who would be respectable in the eyes of Gotham. The first sign of something wrong, however, comes at the sight of his gloved hands. The misshapen mitts tell of something horrible, something cruel. If you were to see his face, you would know. The scars marring what would have once been a handsome face. His nose hooks over a pressed mouth, his eyes small, dark as coals, one shining behind a monocle.

Features that gave him his name, which he embraced. The Penguin. He lords over his empire, enjoying his roost above the rest, but even the big birds have predators.

As he stands, framed against the smoke and filth of the Narrows night, behind him flickers a screen. For it is not the politicians who rule Gotham. It is not the police that executes justice. It is not even the Batman. For they do not know the truth.

Tony Zucco might fear the Penguin, but the Penguin fears a shadow. A bedtime story.

“We have been patient, Oswald.” The voice is cold, smooth, like ice in the veins. “We have waited long for this. Where are our results?”

The Penguin does not answer. For if Zucco is being backed into a corner, caught between both sides of the law, the Penguin is strung by his webbed feet. No one denies the shadows of Gotham what they want. “My extortionist is working on it, Sir. But the boy is being protected by Wayne.” The Penguin does not turn around; instead, he clasps his hands behind his back. “And was I not instructed to not draw attention to you or your interest in the boy?”

“We were promised the Grayson boy.” The voice hushes. “You are running out of time, Oswald. Do it, and do it right or suffer.”

Click.

The call ends, leaving the Penguin to think. He will let Zucco run his course. If he succeeds, then his buyers get their prize. If he fails? There is always the contingency.

I didn't sleep that night. I mean, how could I? Would you if you knew that there was an entire superhero hideout under your basement? Would you if you found out that the person you were living with was actually a superhero who dresses like a Bat and leaves the house every night to kick super-villain-butt?

Would you if that same hero accepted you as his protégé, promising to show you more of the cave and secret passageways in the Manor in the morning after training?

So I lay awake in bed all night, my heart beating faster than rabbits, my mind whirling, my eyes tracing the shapes in the plaster. My life as I knew it ended when that line slipped when Zucco removed those bolts, and it's been changing ever since. First for the worst then... I don't even know what to call my first few weeks at the Manor. It wasn't all good, but it wasn't all bad either.

But now I know things will be better. Because I'll be with Bruce. And I'll be kicking butt with him soon, at least, after I kick his butt. Which, honestly, I can't see myself doing. Okay, that's a lie. I can see myself flying in like a professional hero, impressing Bruce and winning my place at his side. But who I am now is not who I am in that fantasy.

I can't beat Bruce. But I will. Alfred and Bruce will make sure of that, which is kind of weird. What kind of grown-ups are like, *'say, we're going to take you in and train you so you can beat us in fights soon?'* I mean, besides Sith lords, which Bruce and Alfred are not.

As soon as the light peeks in through my windows, I'm up and out of bed, rushing through my morning routine, which is basically throwing on a tank and leggings, taming my bed head, and brushing my teeth. I don't know if Alfred's already up, but I run to the gym anyway, my heart pumping.

I'm not too happy about the added ballet lessons, but I'm excited, more than ever, to train. At least now I know what I'm training for. I shouldn't be surprised when I burst into the gym and find Alfred waiting for me, his hands behind his back, his suit as pressed and trimmed as usual.

“Good morning, Master Dick.” I don’t know what I was expecting, maybe a mention of what happened last night? How exciting this all is? How he’s been right the entire time? But then, I shouldn’t have expected any of that. He’s Alfred. “Ready to get started, are we?”

“As long as there’re no tutus, I’m ready to roll.” I crack my knuckles, looking around at the different gym equipment. “What’s first? Weight training? Flexibility? Trapeze?”

I really hope he doesn't say ballet. That would really bring me back down to earth. Maybe even below it, depending on what he makes me do. But my spirits lift when Alfred gestures behind him to the fighting arena. “We will go straight to the point, Master Dick. Your upcoming spar with Master Bruce.”

He means me getting ready to kick Bruce’s butt, as crazy as it seems. I jog, following him to the arena, sliding under the wiggly barrier, and grabbing my hand wraps from the duffel sitting in one corner. Do I take my eyes off Alfred? No. I learned never to take my eyes off him the hard way. “So, more martial arts, then?”

As crazy as it sounds, I am now a successful, if not rushed, black belt in most of the martial arts that Alfred taught me. Which is pretty

much all of them, or at least most of them. Including arts like Jiu-Jitsu, Taekwondo, and Judo.

More than that, Alfred's been teaching me fencing, wrestling, kickboxing, and parkour, on top of all my trapeze and gymnastic training.

"No, Master Dick. Not martial arts." Alfred doesn't move, which is surprising. Usually, he's attacking and talking to me at this point, giving me pointers and actual practice at the same time. "We are here to craft your own style."

My own style? What's that supposed to mean? "What?" I stand, finishing with the straps of my hand wraps, warming up my shoulders with helicopter rotations. "Isn't each of the martial arts a style?"

"Each warrior has his or her own style, Master Dick, depending on what they study and what best suits them." Alfred still doesn't move, so I drop to the ground in the splits, stretching out my legs and core. Alfred keeps going. "Currently, your strengths lie heavily in Jiu-Jitsu, Taekwondo, Judo, Muay Thai, Savate, Karate, Kung Fu, boxing, Capoeira, Krav Maga, Aikido, and Ninjutsu. But more than that, your acrobatic skills are something I have never seen before."

"Oh yeah?" I push myself into a backbend, looking at Alfred from between my legs. "So, a combination of everything?"

“Quite so, Master Dick.” Alfred clasps his hands in front of him, looking right at me, though upside down. “A harmonious mix, as it were. Focusing on your strengths in each art and taking away your weaknesses with something from yet another art. All bound together by one thing.”

I lift my legs and push into a handstand. Am I showing off? No. Alfred’s seen me do way cooler things than this. “My acrobatics.” It’s obvious. I was able to knock Zucco back by flipping over him and slamming into his back. And now that Alfred’s brought this up, I can just see myself repeating the motion, but honed with skill and focused power.

“Indeed, Master Dick.” Alfred pulls something out of his pocket, holding it out to me. “Let us begin.”

I flip onto my feet and stare at the thing in his hand. It’s a blindfold. I raise my eyebrow, though it doesn’t have the same effect as when Alfred does it. “You want me to do—”

“I want you to fight without seeing, Master Dick.” Alfred’s lips twitch. “I want you to act on instinct. When you find the rhythm, we will work from there.”

I put my hand over the blindfold, slowly closing my fingers around it. Alfred’s lips twitch more. I think this is his equivalent of

laughing at me. He's enjoying this way too much. "So... I find my own style, play to my strengths, and beat Bruce?"

"Indeed." Alfred's hands drop as I pull the blindfold toward me, lifting it halfway to my eyes. I don't know if I really want to get embarrassed and humiliated by my Butler, of all people. Then again, he's not one to hold it over my head. Though Bruce might. Good thing he's in bed. "You are small, fast, and agile. Master Bruce is solid, deliberate, and powerful. He is very fast, of course, but he is much bigger than you, Master Dick. Size will be your advantage."

I put the blindfold on. I've been trained to see with my nose, my ears, and my sense of touch. Even still, not being able to see isn't the greatest thing in the world. Especially when you know you're about to be attacked by your own butler.

We've spared countless times, but then he was training me in a specific art. Now, I'm on my own. So when the punch comes, I do the only thing that comes naturally to me.

I fly.

The rest of the training is a blur. Alfred's assessment of my best martial art skills was correct, as usual, so we practice honing those, stringing moves from different arts together, and pairing them with

quadruple flips, back springs, and mid-air splits. Flying kicks and attacks are my forte, and while Bruce favors fists and kicks, I really do find it more comfortable to fight with my bō staff.

By the time I walk out of the gym, I'm slick with sweat but satisfied. Even after Alfred made me do all five positions of ballet. I want to complain, but I don't help my case any, especially after performing a flawless *ciseaux* and *penché* on the first try. Hurray. I have a gift. Yay me.

After that, I sit down for breakfast and more studies. And let me tell you, if I thought all my school work was piled up before, it has nothing on this. Apparently, the requirements are doubled up, and not just in the things you would think, you know, that would aid detective work. Oh no. I have to know everything.

So, yeah, by the time lunch rolls around, my brain is mush, but I've learned about two more countries, some fascinating things about penguins, and four more phrases in Latin. Well, five, but when I tried to submit that one to Alfred, he told me no. *Ubi est latrina*, anyone?

"Welcome to the security room, Master Dick." Alfred stands by the door as I walk into a room full of monitors, showing every room in the house— except for the bathrooms, to my relief. My eyes scan all the monitors until I find Bruce's bedroom. He's not there. Go figure. "Here,"

Alfred ignores my search. Instead, he walks forward and sits in the seat, motioning to the board full of neatly labeled buttons. And, is it just me, or is one labeled, electric fence, ten thousand volts? What? Is the fence active?

And what about that other button that says ‘security doors’ or ‘gun towers’? What’s Bruce planning for, an invasion?

I sneak up to Alfred, peering over his shoulder. Okay, even if someone came here and didn’t know Bruce Wayne was Batman, this is still a little excessive. I mean, cool, but extreme. “Familiarize yourself with the functions, Master, Dick.” Alfred stands up, allowing me to sink into the chair, my chin almost slamming into the desk. Okay, embarrassing. I find the lever and pump the seat up until my elbows reach the desk, ignoring Alfred’s raised eyebrow. “Ahem, yes. I will fetch you for dinner.”

So I spend the rest of the afternoon in the security office of my Manor House. What? Would you think that it’s boring? Okay, so the manuals are boring... and just sitting and watching an empty room like Alfred’s office is a snooze. But spying on Alfred in the kitchen? Practicing the anti-missile system— okay, well, not actually practicing it, but doing a sim of it is pretty awesome.

What boy wouldn't want to see how many raccoons he could get by turning on the electric fence? Okay, okay, so I did fry a few, but they're trash pandas! Basically burglars!

By dinner, I'm ready for the next thing. You know the one. The tiny little phrase on my schedule that says 'time with Bruce.' And while most casual readers would think we would play a game, watch a movie, or work in the garage, I get to go on a 'real' tour of the Manor and work in Bruce's mancave—the Batcave.

Some things never change, though. Bruce doesn't come to dinner, but then again, I don't even bother trying to get him here to eat my crab—stuffed mushrooms and salad. For once, I'm not angry at him for not being around. How could I be mad? He's going to show me around the Manor, the hidden passageways, the Batcave, and what the different equipment does, and maybe, just maybe, we'll start training. Or I could help him work the case!

Basically, by the time Bruce walks into the banquet hall, I'm bouncing in my seat, biting at the bit, pawing the ground like a horse ready for the races. Then he says the best thing I've ever heard. "Are you ready, Chum?"

I want to scream a resounding ‘yes!’ and lunge forward. Instead, I leap out of my seat and manage a few cartwheels, flipping up to a stop at Bruce’s side, my grin splitting my face as I look up at him. His steely eyes twinkle, and an amused smile teases his lips. “Born ready, B!” I plant my fists on my hips. “First night of orientation! Let’s go!”

It's cliché, but there are entrances to the Batcave everywhere around the grounds and in the Manor. The one Alfred used last night and the one I exited through is behind the grandfather clock in Bruce’s office. I know, right? But that's nothing compared to the sliding bookshelf in the library and the arcade game in the living room.

So yeah, basically any strange or suspicious piece of furniture in this house is a secret entrance. Oh! And the garden shed. Yup, the garden shed has an entry.

The Batcave itself is a lot bigger than I first thought. Like the newspaper room, there are a lot of one-off chambers or tunnels leading to the secret entrances. And when Bruce shows me the map of our systems, I finally find out how he can always be wherever he needs to be and always have what he needs.

We have hideouts all over the city. There's even a second Batcave, or 'storehouse' as Bruce calls it, underneath Wayne Tower. Figures.

The first few hours with Bruce are really just finding out what I now have access to: a bunch of maps, passwords, and rooms. Still, wouldn't you be excited if you were told the voice commands to the Batcave and the Batmobile?

“—Files. You have access to not only the GCPD data but also everything in my own database.” Bruce scrolls through the list of files on the computer. And when I say list, I mean *list*. Like, thousands, millions of names. All alphabetized. “Just search under a keyword or phrase. Such as—” Bruce clicks the search bar and types 'League of Assassins' and a shorter, but still lengthy list pops up. I scan the names. Oof, who would want the last name al Ghul? That would stink.

“Cool!” I lean forward, drumming on the desk. “So... What now?” I know I need to know all of this, but honestly, I'm ready for some action or any sort of training, really. “Tossing batarangs? Training? Oh, oh!” I resist the urge to jump up and down. This is a long shot, but maybe: “Can I drive the Batmobile?”

The way Bruce looks at me, you'd think I have a third eye or rabbit ears. My cheeks burn. Okay, so maybe that was a long shot. A really, really long shot. He doesn't even answer me. Instead, he hands me a bucket of soapy water, a brush, tire wax, and a handful of clean rags. I stare down at the items, then look up at Bruce.

“Umm, what're these for?” I pick up the clean rag, holding it between my fingers. I'm pretty sure I already know what it's for, but I don't want to believe it. Is Bruce really going to—

“Clean the tires.” Okay, so maybe he is. Bruce turns and sits back down at the desk. “I will quiz you on how much you know while we both work.”

“Is this supposed to be one of those tests about discipline and patience?” I gather all the supplies in my arms and raise my eyebrows. “Like in those Kung Fu movies?”

Bruce doesn't answer, so I shrug, sliding down the pole with the supplies. When I get to the Batmobile, I plop down and stare at the wheels. Okay, I know Gotham's dirty and grimy, but these wheels? These wheels look like Batman was mud-bogging all day. I purse my lips, glaring at the filth, trying to figure out how to do this. What? Have you ever scrubbed and waxed tires before?

“Wash and dry the rims first.” Bruce offers from his place on the upper level. “And no water spots.”

So I do. I scrub the tires with the water, drying them with a clean towel, working until I think my fingers might fall off. You know, the training montages are so much cooler in the movies. When you watch them, you laugh at the hero, thinking about how dumb or whiny they are. But let me tell you, actually working like this? Even to learn a valuable lesson? Stinks. It stinks worse than the Vestri’s animal cages.

At least, when I scrub the tires, I get to answer interesting questions that Bruce throws my way. He quizzes me on the Super Villains of Gotham, their territories, and MOs, and poses scenarios where I have to figure out who’s responsible. Things like ‘out of control growth in the Gotham City Parks’ or ‘A string of robberies where only diamonds are missing’ are easy to figure out. Poison Ivy and Mr. Freeze.

But questions like random robberies or general thefts are harder to place. It’s only after he drops a vital clue that ‘all the objects taken are things that have to do with cats’ or ‘all the robberies have been off the rivers’ that I can figure it out. Catwoman and Killer Croc.

By the time I’m waxing the wheels, my fingers are red and singing, my brain wrapped up in a riddle. Literally.

“The one who makes it sells it. The one who buys it never uses it. The one who uses it never knows that he’s using it. What is it?” Bruce asks without hesitation. We’ve passed the more... I don’t know what to call them, normal super villains? And are on to the big ones. Right now, obviously, I’m trying to figure out how to talk to/figure out the Riddler.

The one who makes it... the one who— My mind whirls with the possibilities. Of course, there’s a thirty-second time limit. You’ll never know how long the Riddler will give you to answer a riddle, Bruce says, so I have to be prepared. Hurray for me.

The one that uses it never knows— “A coffin.” I answer just before the timer echoes through the cave, disturbing the bats overhead. “The answer is a coffin.”

“Very good.” Bruce still types at the computers. Honestly, how can he multitask like this? Does he have a second pair of ears and eyes? “Keep up on that rim, Chum. Now, another riddle. *Whoever makes it tells it not. Whoever takes it knows it not. Whoever knows it wants it not.*”

Okay... I scrub at the rim of the tires, my tongue sticking through my teeth, my brain squeezing. *Whoever makes... takes... knows... huh?* “I don’t—” I start to say, but then I notice something. Bruce’s fingers are

no longer clicking on the keyboard. I notice that the cave just got eerily quiet. I notice the sound of almost imperceptible breathing.

I hear the whoosh of an arm coming down, and I dodge, launching myself up and over the Batmobile, tossing the dirty rag right at the attacker's face. I already know who it is, of course. I mean, who else would it be?

I land on the other side of the Batmobile in a roll, leaping to my feet, just in time to see Bruce jump over, his cape spreading like bat wings. I exploded into a string of backflips, my palms digging into the stone and gravel of the cave. His movements are quick, precise, and insanely skilled. I mean, this guy is unreal. Batman is unreal. Bruce is unreal.

“That was a low blow, B.” I start chattering. I can't stop myself, even as I duck and dodge his attacks, not daring to go in for any of my own. Not yet. Not when I'm still working on my style. If I'm going to kick his butt, I need to catch him by surprise. Then again, who surprises Batman? “I mean, attacking a defenseless kid? Shame on you.”

I slide under a roundhouse kick that would've knocked me out cold. Does he know that these blows could really do some damage? Does he want me to be whacked over the head? Or does he actually know I'll

dodge them? “And after all I did for those wheels, which, let’s be honest, really needed a bath.”

My tongue flaps without a filter. How can I be Batman’s partner if I talk so much? But then I realize something. Why shouldn’t I keep talking? Why shouldn’t I be loud, obnoxious, and annoying? Distracting? “Look at them—” I grab the pole to the upper levels and swing around, launching right past Bruce’s ear, “Even after all that hard work, rubbing my fingers raw, there’s still mud flecks! Oh, and is that a water stain?”

I land in a crouch, looking for all the world like a frog on a lily, and grin, my laugh echoing around the cave like an imp’s. “Oh no!” I leap up and twist to the side, dancing out of Bruce’s way. “I think I got grease on the paint! Do they have car-safe masking tape?”

I think I’m doing pretty well. Until it happens. I don’t see it, but all of a sudden, I can’t breathe anymore. I’m on the ground, holding my stomach, wheezing. Bruce landed one hit. One hit and I’m down. “Gosh, B!” I hiss, sitting up with a wince, squinting up at his towering shadow. “That was harsh.”

“No. That was a mercy hit.” Bruce holds out a hand to me. “And you just let millions of people die.”

I blink at him. Then, I hear the timer still beeping from where it sits on his desk on the upper level. The riddle! I forgot! “Oh.” I rub my neck, my cheeks tomatoes, you know, the sundried, burning kind?

“Yes. *Oh.*” Bruce’s eyes narrow. “If you can talk and fight, you should be able to fight and figure out a riddle. Or fight and come up with a plan.” Bruce’s eyes soften, if only the tiniest bit, as he sets his heavy hand on my shoulder. “Never simply fight. Fight with a plan. Fight to win.”

“Yes, sir.” I drop my grin, if only for a second. Then, I lean forward, my eyebrows raised. “But... was I distracting and annoying?”

Bruce smiles. It’s small, but it’s real. And it’s for me. “Very.” He lets out his short laugh, his hands finding his hips. “That is a very effective tactic. And the laugh is a nice touch. Very unsettling. We can work with that.”

Overall, I can say that Bat orientation was a complete and total success... other than actually skimming past a water spot on the tires. That and—

“Oh, and Dick?” Bruce sits back at his computer as I return to my very important job of making sure his hubcaps are spotless.

“Yeah, B?”

“The answer to the riddle was Counterfeit Money.”

Huh. Go figure.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I KICK BAT BUTT

“They went to the department store in East End, so logically—”

“Master Dick, what are you doing?” Alfred walks into my bedroom, his eyebrows raised so much I think they might just lift off into space, his lips twitching like crazy.

I crank my head over, looking at him sideways. What? It’s hard to look straight at a person while doing a handstand. What am I doing, you might ask? Well, I’m helping out my boss. Or Batman, or Bruce. Or just B.

Below my hands is a map of Gotham City, ironically, the one Alfred gave me for my research. Only now, more locations have been circled and crossed off. Batman doesn’t really need help, but that doesn’t mean that things don’t move a lot faster when he does have someone in the Batcave, running through information, clues, and analyzing evidence and patterns from behind the scenes. That’s what I’ve been doing. The guy in the chair, set up with snacks, of course, getting to watch

everything through the HUD in Batman's mask. HUD or heads-up display. Yeah, I didn't know what it was either.

And let me tell you, watching Batman work the case from his point of view? Epic. Just plain epicness.

I'm not doing that now, though. I'd love to have a setup in my room; that would really be awesome! But no. I'm doing off-the-clock jobs, well, okay, I'm never really off-the-clock, but this is technically my free time, so take it as you will.

The past weeks have passed mostly the same. I wake up an hour earlier every morning to train with Alfred, honing my fighting style, strength, and overall awesomeness in every single thing. Even ballet. Just don't tell anyone about that. After that, I shower and head to school.

School is a lot more tolerable now. I mean, I liked it to begin with, but now that I have this awesome little secret. So now, when I get teased, my smile is real. My laugh is too. All of those kids giving Bruce Wayne a hard time have absolutely no idea. The only problem with school, though, is that I can't do the gymnastics team. Bruce never signed the papers, and never told me yes about the Olympics. I still practice after school, though, because I get to spend more time with Babs. And because I can. Just because I'm not on the team doesn't mean I can't be around.

But then, there's another problem. I'm not allowed to tell anyone our secret. No one, not even my best friend. So when Babs asks me what's changed between Bruce and me, I just have to say that he's let me into his life more, that we spend more time together. But I can't tell Batman's biggest number one fan that I'm living in the Bat's house, much less that I'm his budding partner.

It hurts, and sometimes, it's on the tip of my tongue, but Bruce explained it to me.

If people knew, Batman would be no more. Not just because how we operate and where we operate out of would be compromised, but the psychos of this city wouldn't care whether Bruce was in or out of costume. We'd have to leave Gotham.

So I keep my mouth shut, which, for me, is like a death sentence. Secrets are fun, but sometimes they really, really suck.

After school, like before, I come home, finish my homework, and study even more. I have to know everything, right? I wasn't a child prodigy before, at least not on the academic side of things, but boy, oh boy, are they making me one. Anything below a perfect grade is unacceptable. Now, you'd think that's cruel, but here's the thing: I don't move on until I know what I'm learning and understand. That's the whole

point. I can't just get a grade just to get a grade. I have to know and remember everything.

So Alfred pounds it into my brain again and again. I study until my mind's mush until I want to bang my head against the table, but to be honest? I really do love it. I get to learn so much more than ever before, and most of the stuff is actually fascinating. Especially Literature.

After that is my small window of free time, dinner, and working with Bruce for the rest of the night. I'm not going to tell you how much sleep I'm getting because you probably *would* call child services, but I love it. Staying up late to work with the Batman? Coolest. Job. Ever.

I mean, who doesn't want to train with the Master? The one who does it all right? Even when I get my butt handed to me, it's still amazing. Over the past weeks, I've learned so much. Do you know how fun it is to throw exploding batarangs? Or spar with an army of robots?

"I'm working the case, Alfred." I flip out of my handstand, launching into the air, arching over Alfred's head to land on one of the supports of my four-poster. I hang there like a monkey, grinning at him as all the blood sloshes around in my head, not knowing if I'm up or down. "Getting ready for tonight. We're going to hit another place!"

“Is that so, Master Dick?” Alfred brushes some nonexistent lint off his shoulder, sniffing. “Well then, I suppose you would not want to see the obstacle course Master Bruce had put in the backyard simply for your benefit.”

I think I lost my eyeballs. And my jaw. “What?” I jump down from my bed, trying to keep from shaking Alfred. “Where?”

“Out back, Master Dick. Master Bruce is waiting for you. Some early training—”

I don’t let him finish. I’m already out the door. I mean, wouldn’t you be? I tear through the house, sliding the rugs into ruffles, exploding out of the back door. I don’t even bother with the stairs. I mean, when you learn to leap off things way taller than a twelve-step stairway, it isn’t such a big deal. I roll onto the grass, popping up into a sprint.

Placed out of sight from the porch is a ninja course, and I mean the whole shebang. Warped walls, quintuple steps, unstable bridges, the cliffhanger, spider jump, and salmon ladder, you know, all the cool things that the guys do on TV? But like, there’s also a forest of bamboo with the tops leveled out, waiting to be jumped across. There’re insane jungle gyms and climbing nets.

And before it all, dressed in a white Karate *gi* with a black *obi* belt, is Bruce. I've seen him in his *gi* before, when he's trained me in the cave, but seeing him out here in the sunlight? Well, I have to muffle myself because from the look on his face, I don't think he would appreciate a squeal of flying spittle right about now. "Are you ready for this, Chum?" Bruce crosses his arms over his broad chest, nodding to the *gi* set out for me. And unlike Bruce's black *obi*, you know, black belt, I get a white one.

I pick up the clothes, then peer behind him at the course. "We going for a walk or something?"

"Or something." Bruce finally cracks a smile. Okay, when I say 'cracks a smile,' I mean more like a half grin. "Get dressed."

I slide out of my T-shirt and shorts and pull on the *gi*, tying the belt in place. I stand in front of Bruce, cracking my knuckles. "Doesn't look too hard." I mean, yes and no. But courses like this test everything. And Bruce will be watching. "I probably could do this in my sleep."

"Good." Bruce pulls a long cloth out of his *gi*, holding it out to me. Just like Alfred's been doing every morning since I found out Bruce was Batman. "Because you're going to be doing it blindfolded."

“Gosh, that stinks.” I take the blindfold, my nose wrinkling. “Am I graded on performance or epic fails?”

“You won’t fail.” Bruce’s face disappears as I tie the blindfold over my face, his voice painting him in my mind. I know why I won’t fail because failure is unacceptable. Besides, if I fail, that means I’m that much further away from actually going out at night to fight crime with the Batman.

I’ve learned patience, but that doesn’t mean I’m patient all the time. Working from behind the scenes is great and all, and we’ve almost backed Zucco into a corner, but still. That rush, that thrill from crashing into that Riddler thug, of seeing that young woman run away safe and unharmed, it hasn’t gone away.

Fighting Alfred and sparing with Bruce isn’t enough. I need to be doing something more. I’m ready, but I’m also not. I have to beat Bruce.

“Okay, uh huh,” I hold out my arms and wave them around, reaching out a foot and teasing the grass with my toe, “I feel... grass and dirt. And—” My hand brushes fabric. Bruce is standing right in front of me. I let out a small squeak, flipping back. “Hey! Not funny!”

“You aren’t the only one with a sense of humor.” Bruce’s chuckle tickles my ears, and I automatically fall back into a defensive stance.

He's standing right in front of the obstacle ninja-y course. Do I have to get past him to even start?

"You? Humor? Oh no." I snicker. "Just leave it all to me, B. I can be the comic relief for both of us." With that, I lunge forward into a handspring. I feel the whoosh as I launch over Bruce's head, his hair tickling my nose as I clear it with centimeters to spare. I land in a sprint.

In my head, I can see the ninja course. This might seem weird to a lot of people. Still, when you have to memorize as much as I do, and when you have to study Where's Waldo books and remember what something looks like after thirty seconds so you can describe it or draw it, which is horrible because I stink at art, then this is a piece of cake.

Maybe not the best way to describe it since I'm so terrible at it, but it's like painting a picture. Or maybe taking a photo of something. Isn't that what some people call it? Photographic memory?

Anyway, I leap into the first obstacle, the quintuple steps. The slanted platforms challenge how far you can jump and how to keep nailing those jumps. I mean, five steps, each six feet apart? Okay, so on a typical day, this would be easy peasy. Not to brag, but jumping's like my jam. But with a blindfold?

So I jump onto the first one. My bare feet immediately start sliding down the side. You're not meant to stand on these things. So I leap. If I miss the next step, I won't land in the water or anything; I'll crash into the grass and start the course over again.

The wind rushes past me. At first, as I soar through the air, I worry that I've overshot or missed the trajectory entirely. You know, aimed wrong? Instead, my feet slap onto a pad, and I start sliding down again. I didn't even realize I was holding my breath until it exploded out of me in a sigh of relief.

But there's no time to rest. I have to jump again, so I do. I jump and land, then repeat. You'd think it would be terrifying, doing all of this without seeing, and the course all smells the same, right? And it doesn't make any noise, so how do I do it? Honestly, I don't know. After hours of practice with Alfred, I guess I've gotten used to parkour without sight.

I clear the quintuple steps and stand at the resting platform, but not for long. Next, if I remember correctly, is the unstable bridges. And I'm not talking about a bridge with planks missing and fraying rope. For one thing, there's no walking across this thing. It's more like, well, more like insanely hard monkey bars, only you're not swinging one from the other. You have to move your grip along the edges.

I can feel it looming over me, so I jump up, my hands gripping the sides. I wish I had chalk, or wraps, or grips, but no. My bare hands bite into the hard plastic, my upper arms pulling the rest of my body upward. I know that as long as I stay on this plank, I'm okay with the blindfold. It's the jump to the next one that might be a problem.

So I tighten my core, swing my legs, and jump. You know, like you would jump on the ground. But in the air. Trying to catch a piece of plastic before you crash into the dirt. Who thought of this, again?

I make it to the end of the plank without a lot of problems. Holding onto things and jumping off is my thing, again, trapeze artist and gymnast over here. But jumping so short with such abrupt falls? Not really my thing. So actually, leaping across the swinging gap to the next plank is way better than I thought it'd be. Although I really do believe I almost smacked my brains out. Who can tell with a blindfold?

When I finally get to the safe platform, my upper body burns. It's a good burn, though, a familiar burn. It pushes me on, and reminds me that I still have a ways to go.

Warped walls, the cliffhanger, and spider jump all pass by, and by the time I'm standing below the salmon ladder, my body is slicked with

sweat, leaking through the armpits of my *gi*, slicking my cheeks under the blindfold. But, of course, they saved the best for last.

I love the name of this one, salmon ladder, because it's really what the fish have to do. They swim against the current, and I'll be jumping against gravity.

Basically, the salmon ladder is a pole you hold, that you have to get into the different slots by going straight up. It's like the mother of all pull-ups, oh, and the whole thing's twelve feet tall.

So I grab the pole and rest it in the first slot, wiping my palms on my *gi's* pants. Then, I grip the bar. I open my shoulders, taking a deep breath before snapping my knees and my core in. The bar lifts, then clatters down into the next slot. I control my legs, commanding strength from my arms. I repeat the motion, landing in the next slot with a dull thunk and a solid drop.

My face drips, my teeth grit, and I do it again. And again, and again. I love flying. I love swinging and jumping, and cartwheeling. But this? This really does stink. But it's important. What? I'm not that much of a baby.

By the time I get to the top, I want to collapse. I've already trained with Alfred, trained in gym class, then trained more when I got

home. I'm better than almost anyone ever. What? I am! Even still, I'm just a kid. I'm not superhuman.

But when I reach the top, a shadow stands over me. It's Bruce, his breath silent, his heartbeat so still you'd think he's dead. I've run the gauntlet, which, in the end, wasn't as hard as some of the things Alfred and Bruce have made me do. Ya know, holding my breath for pushing ten minutes? But I know it's not over yet.

Especially when Bruce says, "You're ready."

I'd have leaped for joy if he'd meant I was ready to go patrolling with him, you know, get out on the streets and have an actual fight? But when I pull off my blindfold, mussing my damp hair, when I see that determined, knowing look in Bruce's grey eyes, I know.

It's time to fight him. For real. For the grand prize.

"Now?" I pull myself up to my feet, running a hand through my hair, only managing to stick it straight up. "Up here?"

"Tempting, but no." Bruce smiles, but his eyes are still looking me over, still taking in every measly little detail. "After dinner. In the Batcave. We fight."

I toss the blindfold over my shoulder, hoping my grin doesn't look as tired as I feel. "Fight? You mean that's when I'm gonna kick your butt, right?"

"Confident, are we?" Bruce's eyes soften a little, a spark twinkling in his gaze. "That can be good, but too much can be dangerous."

"I walk on danger." I crouch on the edge of the platform, smirking up at Bruce. "I'm a Flying Grayson." I know, I know, I'm a showoff, but who wouldn't want to launch themselves off the platform and flip back down to the ground after a mike drop like that? I mean, really.

But when I'm back in the manor, back in my room, I'm not confident. In fact, my insides twist into knots like the Vestri's snakes, my hands shake, and I collapse onto my bed. I'm not scared, at least that's what I tell myself. I'm ready for this. Yeah, yeah, of course I'm ready.

Only... I have to beat Batman.

"Master Dick," I don't even hear Alfred walk in. I don't even feel his hand on my back. At least, not at first. *Whap!* What? At least he dodges the blow this time.

I sit up, lowering my head. “Sorry, Alfred.” I really need to stop doing that. What if I accidentally break my history teacher after falling asleep in his class?

“Master Dick, are you alright?” This time, *I* raise my eyebrows. I mean, I know Alfred cares, but this kind of gentle question? And here I thought I knew the guy. Huh.

Alfred isn't Bruce, but still, I know I won't get away with a lie. So I tell him. “No. I have to fight Batman. How should I be?”

“You are ready.” No hesitation. No sugar coating or lying about my skill. No bias because I know that Alfred says things the way they are.

Three simple words, but like every other thing in my life, it means so much more. I don't think I'm ready. Then again, I'm probably never going to think I'm ready. I want to get out onto the streets, but there's a literal mountain standing in my way.

But if Alfred says I'm ready? Well, I'm just going to have to suck it up and fight. So I smile at Alfred, saying what I don't say enough.

“Thanks, Alfred. For training me.”

Alfred's mouth twitches, and he gives a short bow, something no one else would do. Okay, almost no one else would do. "It was and is my pleasure, Master Dick."

The same thing he said to Bruce my first time in the cave, but it means everything to me. Not for the first time, I realize that he's not here for a salary. He's here because he cares about us. And honestly, where would the two of us be without him?

I'm left to contemplate my life's choices until dinner. I don't doubt my resolve to do this. I'm not going against my promise. Wow, I'd be such a wuss if I gave up so quickly, but I'm questioning tonight. Confidence? What's confidence? I don't have no stinkn' confidence.

But that doesn't matter. I'm doing this, and whether I kick Bruce's butt or he lays me out with three moves or, even more embarrassingly, one move, I'm still going to do it.

So I go to the dinner table with a skip in my step. After all, getting the crap beaten out of you by Batman would still be cool. The banquet hall's a lot nicer now that Bruce comes to dinner. I don't know whether he comes because Alfred makes him or because he knows I can hunt him down and have dinner with him in the Batcave. Either way, we sit together, eating and talking. I would say 'chatting', but Bruce never

really ‘chats’ with anyone unless he has that whole billionaire showboat persona up. So we talk about Gotham, his experiences over the years, which are much more interesting told by him than by the files, and I tell him about my family and the circus.

“And that’s how I learned to walk.” I stab my fork into my beef Wellington. “The guests watching almost had heart attacks.”

“Impressive.” Bruce takes a bite, waving his fork at me. “The Grayson family is truly incredible. Such skill at such a young age.” Bruce smiles, his eyes taking on that rare glimmer. “Just think of how far I would have come if I started training that early.”

“Everyone tremble in fear—” I start, deepening my voice and letting it roll like C.C. Haly’s, “Before your very eyes witness the wonder of the bodacious, baffling, Batboy!” I leap onto my seat, my feet landing firmly on the arms, lifting my fork into the air. “Witness his daring deeds as he performs his meticulous mastery of the martial arts!”

“Are you sure that’s me?” Bruce laughs as I plop back down in my seat, ignoring the look Alfred’s giving me. “Wouldn’t you be the Batboy?”

“You know, I don’t really like that name.” I take a bite of my beef, chewing thoughtfully. “I was thinking something else. Batman and

Batboy just don't roll off the tongue. I need something else. Batman and—”

“Batwing?” Bruce offers, taking a sip of his tea and looking at me from over the rim. “Imp?”

“No... but I have a list!” I pull a piece of paper from my back pocket and slap it on the table. Bruce grabs it and begins to scan through the list, his eyes narrowed.

I hold my breath when he finally looks up at me, an eyebrow raised. “Bitten? Pup? Microbat?”

My cheeks explode. “Okay, so the list isn't that good. The whole ‘bat’ thing's kind of limited, you know? But, who says I have to be a bat?”

“You want another code name?” Bruce pushes back from the table. “Think about it more after our fight.”

Oh, right. That's now, isn't it? I push back from the table, trying to keep from bouncing on my toes. I need to save all this energy, bottle it up, and let it explode during the fight. Okay, maybe not explode, more like feed it into the fight.

“You ready for this?” I crack my knuckles, smirking to cover up my trembling lips.

“Meet me in the Batcave in five,” Bruce says, nodding at Alfred.

“We’re ready.”

I dress in my *gi* almost immediately after I step out of the elevator from Bruce's office to the Batcave. Bruce is already ready, waiting in the arena, his arms crossed over his chest. Alfred stands beside him with two weapon options. A *bō* staff and a katana. I’ve learned swordplay, but I already know that this isn’t going to be a duel. So this has to be a test.

Well, okay then. When I get up to the arena, I bow. It’s a custom in a lot of martial arts. A recognition of the student that they are entering the training grounds, that now is the time to be ready and aware. My feet stop at the edge, not waiting to step in. Because I know that if I step in, it’ll happen. It’s going to start.

So I rip the band-aid off. I take a big step in and stroll up to Alfred, accepting the *bō* staff, twirling it around in my hands before resting it against my shoulder, coming to stand before Bruce. My heart pounds in my chest like it wants to be a part of a rock band, and my palm slides down the staff. This is really happening.

“The rules are simple.” Bruce locks eyes with me. It’s impossible to look away from him. I should know. “We fight until one of us is knocked out or otherwise beaten.”

“Don’t hold back.” I don’t know why I’m signing the papers of my doom, but there it is. I want to earn this victory. I want to say that I can actually beat the Batman. I don’t want any of this being cheapened by Bruce going easy on me. “If the people in the streets don’t care if I’m a kid, you can’t either.”

“Fair.” Bruce puts his knuckles against his palm and gets ready to bow. “I will be fighting with my body alone. I won’t use a weapon.”

“I will be fighting with my body and the bō staff.” I hold out the staff, letting it rest in both palms, getting ready to bow. “So... is there a time limit to this thing?”

“No.” Great, so we could be fighting until one of us falls asleep? “But Alfred will keep time and act as a referee.”

Referee? Why? To make sure we don’t kill each other? Oh well. We bow, keeping our eyes locked on one another. When you bow, even out of respect to a Master, you never avert your eyes. I don’t know what kind of jerk would, but sometimes you could get attacked.

When I lift out of the bow, it's time. I fall back into a defensive position, my bō staff out, pointing right at Bruce. I wait.

He makes the first move. It’s a blur, but I see and leap out of the way. But, unlike before, when I dodge, I dodge to the side and in, my bō

staff snapping forward. Bruce recovers, but my hit lands. The third strike I've managed to land on B, at least, outside of practice.

I jump away as soon as my toes touch the ground because Bruce is on me again, a punch heading straight for my face. I slide to the other side, catching his feet with my staff. He doesn't even trip. Oh well. It doesn't matter because my arms are up, Bruce's fist cracking on the wood of my staff, his leg coming out to kick me. It's a blur. He's a blur. But so am I.

I shove my arms up, throwing off his arms, then whip my staff up again, banging into his chin. In the lull, I leap up, landing two kicks to his face, one foot after the other, before rolling away, launching back onto my feet from a handspring.

Bruce is on me again. I swear this guy's made of titanium or something because he keeps coming. But I don't want this fight to last long. I have to make a plan and fast. Bruce is a beast with the speed of a cheetah, and just dodging his blows is a pain. I don't want to hurt him, but I want to get him out of the fight.

What I need to do, though, is scary. If I judge my strength wrong, I could kill him. They say curiosity killed the cat. But in this game? Hesitation kills the kid. So I make up my mind. I flip around him,

performing split kicks, whacking my bō staff into his knees, and even manage to trip him up once.

My body's slick with sweat, and my breaths are coming in quick, controlled bursts with every movement, snapping the power into my limbs. When he comes in for a series of punches to the stomach, I take my chance. I flip backward out of the way, then leap forward, clearing the distance between us in one jump. My foot lands on his solid chest, and I push off, using it like the springboard of a vault. I tuck my arms in and twist, but when I fall back down to earth, I whip out the arm holding the bō staff, yelling with the force. *Crack!*

I land in a slide, my bō staff held out to the side, looking, looking, looking. Bruce teeters, his breaths hitch, but he's righting himself. *Oh no—*

I don't leave him the time to recover. I lunge forward and kick out my leg, my most powerful weapon. It catches Bruce's side, launching him back. He crashes to the ground, but he's still coming up. *Too fast... too fast!*

"Oh no, you don't!" I smack into him. It's like tackling concrete, but he still goes down, his eyes narrowed. I raise my fist over his face. "I haven't worked my butt off for nothing!"

CRACK!

My fist slams into his nose, and his head slams into the arena floor. But he's still getting up, pushing me off him, getting ready to attack. This guy's unstoppable!

I let out a huff, wrapping my legs around his neck as he stands, so I'm hanging like a noose, and squeeze them tight. I can't cut off his air; he can stay conscious for too long without air. I have to cut off his blood supply. My thighs press against his carotid arteries and jugular veins, my ankles locked. His hands are grabbing me, trying to shove me off. He tries to catch me and hit me, but I swing out of the way. What? When you do the trapeze and gymnastics and everything else they make me do, you can move your upper half without moving your bottom half.

I count in my head. *One, two, three, four—*

Bruce manages to grab my arm. He jerks me up within range, but I still don't move my legs.

Five, six, seven—

I twist my arm free, grabbing his wrist instead.

Eight, nine, ten—

I make the mistake of hanging onto his wrist for too long. *Snap!*
Pain shoots through my body.

Eleven, twelve, thirteen,

I have to let go at twenty seconds. I could seriously injure him or even kill him after twenty seconds.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—

Bruce grunts, stumbling back. *Maybe... Maybe...*

Bruce topples forward, and I let go, kicking off his back and flipping up, landing on his prone body with a thump. I don't jump for joy. I don't do a jig. Instead, I slip off Bruce and run right to his side, checking his pulse and feeling his breath.

Alfred comes up behind me, a glass of water already in hand.

“Well done, Master Dick.”

“It took too long, though.” I frown, flipping Bruce over and letting him breathe the cave air. “If I took that long with a criminal, a lot of things could've gone wrong, especially if he had friends.”

“Good thing what you did would take out any normal, even skilled criminal.” I don't jump at Bruce's voice, which I'm proud of. Instead, I help him sit up. His eyes are already open and alert, his lips twisted into a smile. There's no mistaking that look of pride that tickles me down to my toes. “If you can beat me, even after a couple of minutes, then you are well on your way.”

My hands shake as I help Bruce to his feet. Is this real? Did I really just do that? I won? I really won? No way! No, stinkn' way! I finally crack a grin, flexing my muscles, even though they're nothing compared to Bruce's. Again, not to show off, just for fun. "Yeah! Look out, Gotham, 'cause the partner of Batman's coming on patrol!"

"You did well, Dick." Bruce's hands feel good on my shoulders. The look on his face eases my doubts. See, if he were like this all the time, I wouldn't worry about anything. He has his moments. "I'm proud of you. You will come out on patrol with me. The Bat's shadow."

I can't help my heart skipping, my breath hitching, or my eyes sparkling. I'm going to go out on the streets. I'm going to help Batman track down Zucco. I'm going to make my parents proud.

"So, I've been thinking," Okay, so I haven't really been thinking about this until now, but if I'm going to go out with Bruce, I really do need a codename. What? Can you see Batman always calling his pint-sized partner 'chum?' I mean, it does have some pretty good irony to it since 'chum' is like, fish bait or whatever. But still. A code name. A code name that will go well with Batman. A code name that means something to me. A code name that will be my superhero name.

“No, no driving the Batmobile.” Was that a joke? Did Bruce just joke? Everyone, stop whatever they're doing and come over here because Bruce Wayne just made a joke. Okay, a good one, at least.

“Not that,” I pout, but only for a moment, “At least, not yet. I mean, I should know how to, right? Especially if—”

“What were you saying, Chum?” Bruce’s hands slip off my shoulder, and he lets them rest at his sides. As if I’d attack him again, sheesh! “What were you thinking?”

“My name. I mean, my code name.” I can’t help the red flower that blooms on my cheeks. What if he doesn’t like it? What if it’s like the other ones? I mean, the more I think about it, the lamer it sounds, but then again, it means something. To me, to my family. “I think I know what I want to be called.”

“Shoot.” Bruce inclines his head. Alfred steps closer. Either this’ll be it, or I’ll just hide in my room for the rest of my life. Or, you could just put ‘He thought it sounded cool’ on my grave.

“Robin.” I almost fumble the word, bouncing on my toes. I don’t look heroic or even like a protégé. I look like a kid. But then, that’s the point, isn’t it? I’m a kid, and they’ll underestimate me. That’s my superpower. “I want to go by Robin.”

“Robin... like the bird?” Bruce raises an eyebrow, looking so much like Alfred, you might just think they’re actually related. Or like, Alfred raised him or something.

“Yeah,” My blush fades, and I plant my hands on my hips, grinning. Why should I be ashamed when I’m doing this for them? “It’s a family name.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SHADOW OF THE BATMAN

“I can't believe they said that to you!” Babs stuffs her mouth full of pita pizza, her squirrel cheeks bulging angrily. “Those high society jerks! Dad says most of them dabble in the criminal, you know.”

I take a bite of my sandwich and let Babs keep, well, babbling. I've just finished a story about the latest party Bruce and I went to because I can't tell her about what happened last night. You know, kicking butt and taking names?

“Honestly, though, who'd walk up to a kid and start talking about how horrible it is that they're living where they're living? And asking about what it was like watching— *ohhh*,” Babs bites down angrily on the mutilated pizza, her lips pursed. “I outta get Dad to arrest them.”

Then, I make the worst mistake of my life. I open my mouth. “It's not that bad, Babs. You get used to it. Besides—”

“Skratch Dad arresting them. We should sic Batman on them!” Babs scowls at me, though I know it's not me she's mad at. Still, when those green eyes snap at you, you really should take cover. “Dick, that shouldn't be something you have to get used to! Do you want a cookie?”

Yes, this is normal, and no, it's really not so out of the blue. I accept the cookie and take a bite. Babs made them. They're chocolate chip, the best in the world, in my personal opinion.

She's right, though. This isn't something I should be used to, you know, the whole 'poor little orphan Dick' spiel that goes on at every party? But it is, and I really am sort of used to it by now.

But I wish I could tell her. I wish I could tell her that tonight I'm going on patrol with Batman. Tonight, the world's gonna get a brand new superhero. And tonight, she'd better like my persona and rant about me tomorrow at school because otherwise— well, okay, so it's not that big of a deal, but what if she hates my alternate identity?

“—all the time. Hey, are you listening?” *Snap, snap, snap.* Babs' fingers click under my nose, and I blink, looking at her with that dumb boy look. Yeah, you know the one. “Dick, were you listening?”

I rub my neck, holding out my cookie in defense. “Something about sleep?”

“Exactly!” Babs looks me up and down, reminding me so much of Raya that I want to laugh. But like always, instead of critiquing me, her eyes soften. “You haven't been getting enough sleep, have you?”

I blink at her. Well, yeah, I haven't been getting enough for a kid my age, but I don't feel tired. And I can't be Batman's partner if I sleep through the night! But I can't tell her that. So I shrug. "I get enough. I mean, I'm not like a vampire or anything, staying up all night. I just wake up early to train."

Babs sighs, grabbing her own cookie out of her bag. "I blame those late-night parties. But hey, maybe a super villain would attack one, so you could see Batman again." She grabs my arm, her eyes emeralds. "Maybe I could finally get an interview with him! Oh, Dick, do you think I could go to one?"

I laugh, ignoring the looks and kissy noises the boys are sending our way and the giggles from the girls. We're friends; gosh, why do they have to do that? Babs doesn't have cooties, don't they know?

"If I can talk B into it. But Babs, if you came, it'd be the most boring night. It's just your luck." I pat her hand, winking.

I like school, mostly, but today, other than talking with Babs, the day seems unreal. I mean, tonight's the night, after all, so all I learn is how agonizing minutes are when you actually watch the hands on the clock and how annoying people find it if you drum a ditty on your desk.

So, when Alfred comes to pick me up, I catapult into the limo, sliding up to the window and looking into the driver's seat, my toes wiggling in my tennis shoes.

“Ready, Alfred?” I ask even before he buckles his seat belt. Rude, I know. I mean, I already know he’s not ready, and I know we aren’t going out until tonight, but still.

I’m rewarded for my question by a lip twitch and a double raised eyebrow as Alfred snaps his seat belt in place, adjusting the mirrors so he can look at me. “Ready for tonight, Master Dick?”

As questions go, it could’ve been way worse. I nod so much that I think my head might fall off my shoulders and roll into the passenger seat. “Born ready, Alfred. Let’s do this!”

Without a word, Alfred drives us home, leaving me to dream about tonight. I already know what we’re going to be doing, hitting another extortionist site and gathering info about Zucco and clues to his boss, but still.

It’s my first night. First night. My debut.

So far, I’m just hoping that I don’t make a fool out of myself. Goals being a) don’t have Batman have to save you and b) actually do your job right.

But what if the criminals don't take me seriously? I mean, that's the point, but after I prove myself. After they know what I can do. Will people think it's silly to have a kid out fighting crime? Or will they actually like me, like when I was a Flying Grayson?

Will they look up in wonder or roll their eyes? And why am I even worrying about this?

When we get back to the Manor, I dive right into my schoolwork. Or at least, I try to. But when I end up scribbling my Lit. essay over my algebra, Alfred sends me to the yard to play with Ace. And by play, I mean get my nerves out by running up and down the lawn, bursting through hedges like a maniac.

It doesn't work, though. By dinner, I think I'm about to explode or implode or some sort of plode from all the energy buzzing around like bees in my head.

"What's wrong, Chum?" Bruce eyes my shaking hands as I shove spoonfuls of soup into my mouth. Of course, he'd think something's wrong. It might be below freezing in here for how much I'm shaking. Or I have ants in my pants. Either works.

"Nothing." I grin at him, holding out a hand that jitters around like it has a life of its own. "Just excited! The first patrol, you know?"

“No.” Bruce’s eyebrows raise, and he sips his soup, cool, calm, and collected like always. “I was not excited my first time.”

“Well then, you missed out on the butterflies!” I squeeze my spoon, bopping it on the table. “And the ants. All the bugs. You know, I haven’t been this nervou-cited since my first performance! I kinda missed this.”

“You mean ‘nervous’ and ‘excited?’” How can he be so calm? Isn’t he nervous about taking me out on my first night? It’d be nice if he had that much faith in me, but I’m still just a kid. Going out to fight criminals. With Batman. Most grown-ups would be nervous.

“No, nervou-cited. It’s a word.” I drain the rest of my soup, ignoring Alfred’s look. Honestly, do I have to practice etiquette when it’s just the three of us? “It’s a word that works. Like smad. Or absotootly.”

“Still not words.” Bruce finishes his soup and slides back from the table. “Alfred, bring the dessert down for me in the Batcave. You—” He points at me, his eyes hard, his mouth twitching, “Meet me there after dessert.”

Have you ever had that feeling where you want to throw up, but you know if you do, you won’t get to do something you want to do? So you swallow it down, and it tastes terrible? Yeah, that feeling.

I want to tell myself I'm really not nervous, you know, not anxious. I've done crazy things before, like going out to stalk the Gotham streets by myself at night. Or jumping out to swing on a trapeze.

But if I've said it before, I've said it a bajillion times. Going out by yourself and going out with Batman is something else. So when I eat my dessert, I'm not shaking anymore. I'm still frozen. I'm excited, well, yeah, of course. I'm ready. Both Alfred and Bruce have told me that.

But can I actually do it? Can I take Zucco down?

I still see him in my nightmares, but my sleep's so short, my days so full, they seem more and more like just bad dreams. But that doesn't mean they don't still shake me to my bones and leave me slick with sweat and, in most cases, sobbing over their dead bodies.

I know there're a lot worse bad guys out there, like Zucco's boss, the Joker, or the Riddler. But there it is. Those super villains might be horrible murderers... but I've never met them.

They haven't done anything to me yet. They haven't taken anything away from me. Everyone should know that the stakes are higher when it's personal. That's just a fact. A fact that beats me over the head as I push my plate away and thank Alfred for the cherries jubilee, which isn't my favorite but is still pretty good.

It's a fact that grabs me when I walk into Bruce's office and pull on the weights of the grandfather clock. It's something that pokes me in the side as I step into the airy chill of the Batcave, my eyes adjusting to the blue lights and shadows as I stand in front of my boss. Or my partner.

"This is for you." Bruce holds something out to me, his steely eyes hard. "It's temporary until your suit is finished."

My suit— I don't know whether I want to throw up or hug Bruce. I get my own superhero suit. I did think about it. What? Just because my artwork looks like chicken scratch doesn't mean I didn't jot down some ideas in my notebooks.

This isn't what I was expecting, though. It's an all-black ninja—*yoroi* made of thick but bendy fabric. Well, okay, it doesn't have the cowl. Instead, attached to the *uwagi*, or jacket, is a dark hood, and on top of the pile is set not only *tabi* socks that double as shoes but also a domino mask.

I grin up at Bruce. Apparently, he did like my 'street ninja' getup from when I snuck out of the house. "I get to be the little ninja, huh?" I start to slide out of my clothes, slipping on the *hakama* pants, the *uwagi* jacket, and pulling on the *tekoh* gloves, *tabi* sock—shoes—whatever you call them, then yank on the *kayhan* to keep my pants from billowing all

over the place. I fasten the belt and then look down at the mask in my palms. I know it's ready to be shaped to my face, glistening black in the lights of the cave, the edges curved and pointed up like wings. Except for my face, I'm all black.

The mask is the final piece, the part that will keep me from being recognized, as silly as it sounds. "What's this made of?" Instead of putting on the mask, I pull at the fabric. It's comfortable and loose, and I have a full range of motion, which is important. I don't know how some heroes fight in clunky armor or costumes.

"A Kevlar titanium mesh." Bruce pulls on the cowl of his Batsuit, replaced instantly with Batman, even down to the voice. **"Fireproof, bulletproof except in close range, cool in the hot and warm in the cold weather."**

So, yeah, why can't I wear this all the time? "Awesome." I run a hand through my slicked-back hair, musing it until it parts in the middle, framing my face with the wild raven locks. Any small changes help separate Dick from Robin. Then, with a deep breath, I put the mask on my face.

It sticks to my skin, somehow, the white film over my eyes popping up a small HUD display when I blink. You know, it shows me

thermal scans, X-ray versions of Batman and Alfred, and all that cool jazz. “Even more awesome!” I pull down the hood of my *yoroi*, letting it cast my face in shadow, and strike a pose. “How do I look?”

Alfred’s mouth twitches, and he nods. “Like a hero, Master Dick.”

“You look like an imp,” Batman growls, though the corners of his mouth twitch too. **“Grab your staff and get to the car. Ten seconds. Let’s go.”**

I use the butterflies fluttering around in my stomach to power me into a jump and sprint, snatching my *bō* staff, my own, not just a training one, that can retract into a small pole about the size of my forearm, and slide it into my *obi* belt.

Then, I leap into the open doors of the Batmobile, settling into the seat and strapping myself in. Batman follows, silent as he jumps and whooshes into his seat, turning on the car, so it purrs, tickling my butt. “So, when do I get my own utility belt?” I lean over to Batman, eyeing the shiny golden belt strapped around his waist. You know, the one with all the tools in it?

“There.” Batman points to my feet. “Strap that on. Everything is where it is in mine.”

My eyes almost pop out of my mask as I look down between my legs. Some observer I am. On the ground is a shiny, brand-spanking-new utility belt with the bat symbol on the clasp. I don't lunge for it. That would be stupid because I might as well be strapped into a crazy chair with this seat belt. So instead, I hook the belt with my foot and bring it up to my chest, letting the prize slip into my hands. Each pocket of this baby has something incredible inside. Binoculars, handcuffs, batarangs, bolas, flash grenades, smoke pellets, and a rebreather, among other things.

You know, literally something for everything. "Sweet!" I pull out my grappling hook as Batman puts the pedal to the metal, leaving us to explode out of the cave. It's only when we are in the tunnels and careening through the Gotham streets that I realize that I forgot to say goodbye to Alfred.

"So, we hitting the bakery tonight?" I cross my arms behind my head and lean back into the seat. Hey, I might be nervous, but that doesn't mean I have to act nervous. Plus, this mask rocks.

"Not yet, Robin." That's the first time Batman's ever said my name. Okay, well, my new name anyway. I like the way he says it. **"First things first."**

He doesn't have to point. I look out of the window and see the Bat signal blazing against the darkness, a call. A warning. And gosh, does it look cool. "The Commish needs our help?" I sit up straighter, cracking my knuckles. "Are they coming with?"

"No. But he knows what we are doing." Batman doesn't look at me. And honestly, the way he's barreling through the streets, I don't want him to. I don't want to die tonight. It's not on the to-do list. **"Listen carefully, Robin. Not everyone at the police station is your friend. The cops of Gotham can be easily bought and sold. Only trust Gordon, Yin, and Bennett. No one else."**

"Okay, Bats." I scowl at the GCPD as we pull to the side of the building, parked in shadow. "But really, that sucks. How do they even become police officers, then?"

Batman doesn't answer. Instead, he pops open the doors and pulls out his grappling gun. I copy him, unfastening my seatbelt and holding up my gun. I've practiced this a little on the rock wall in the gym, but this is a different ball game. *Click, snap!* My finger squeezes the trigger, and the line shoots up with Batman's, hitting and holding onto the roof of the building. With a click of a button, we're zipping up, the wind rushing against my face. I blink in the darkness, activating the night vision in my

mask, turning everything an icky green. Okay, so that stinks. I blink again, shutting it back off. If Batman doesn't bother with it, neither will I.

Batman lands on the edge of the building first, silent, solid, his cape billowing out in the wind. I land next to him in a crouch, hiding in his shadow. I see myself, with my black ninja suit and hood, fading into the darkness of his cape. Completely hidden... except for the belt blazing gold around my waist.

Oh well.

Standing next to the giant spotlight of the Bat-signal, his back to us is Commissioner Gordon. He's just like I remember, trimmed red hair streaked with white, dressed in a tan suit, his tie fluttering like a flag.

I trail Batman as he strides forward, but instead of standing next to him when he stops behind the Commissioner, I leap up to the signal and perch there, like my namesake. Gordon doesn't even notice.

"Commissioner." Batman's voice is enough to make anyone jump, but I still muffle a laugh as Gordon spins around, letting out a sigh. How many times has this happened to him? You'd think that Batman couldn't sneak up on him anymore.

"Batman. I'm glad you came." Gordon straightens his tie, which doesn't do much good. "Yin came to me with three more locations."

Gordon holds out a small tablet, which Batman takes, his white eyes narrowing. “The last ones, after you shut down the bakery tonight.” My heart pounds so loud in my chest that I’m sure Gordon hears it, but he doesn’t turn around. I knew we were close, but only three more! We could have Zucco in by the end of the week! Or sooner, depending on how slippery he is once all his guys are caught. Who knows, maybe he’ll go running back to his boss and leave me alone.

Then again, I haven’t been almost-kidnapped in a while. Maybe Zucco realizes that I’m being guarded and watched twenty-four seven.

“**It’s about time.**” Batman doesn’t seem happy or annoyed. He just sounds... like Batman, I guess. But I know that Bruce is pleased under the cowl, under the stern. He wants this. I want this. We’re so close! “**It shouldn’t have taken this long for a street-level thug.**”

“I know what you mean.” Gordon runs a hand through his hair. “But once we get him and learn who the ‘boss’ is, I’m sure it will all come together.”

“Darn right!” I finally speak up. The reaction from Gordon is so priceless that I’m glad my HUD display records everything. I want to replay this again and again when I have a bad day. He jumps, trips, and fumbles for his glasses as he whips around, squinting at me. I launch off

the signal into a quadruple flip, landing smoothly onto the gravelly roof of the GCPD. I flash Gordon a grin so wide and white that it must blind him against all the black. “Nice to meet you, by the way, Commish.” I slide over to Batman, standing back in his shadow, putting my hands on my hips. “Robin. New partner to Batman!”

Gordon’s eyebrows shoot up into his receding hairline.

“Batman... who—”

“**Robin,**” Batman repeats as if that’s obvious. “**My new partner.**”

“That’s what I said!” I tap my ears. “The name’s Robin.”

“But... a kid?” Gordon looks me up and down. I read his face like a children’s book. He’s impressed with my moves and sneakiness, but worried. Worried that a kid’s out on the streets of Gotham, working alongside Batman. I’m probably going to get this a lot.

“**Robin’s ready.**” That’s all he’ll get. And the Commish knows it. I can tell he has a bajillion questions, but no one, *no one*, questions Batman.

“Well... send the report after you clear out the bakery.” Gordon folds his arms behind his back. “And be safe, Batman and...Robin.”

“See? See? I knew it would sound good!” I hiss to Bats as we fade into the night. We don’t go back to the car. Instead, we leap off the GCPD, shooting our grappling hooks. They catch, and soon, I’m swinging out over the city streets like a real bird through the skyscrapers.

The rush blows back my hood, and the motion sends my heart up and down, from my stomach to my throat, like it’s on a seesaw. But I’m laughing. Batman is silent, but Robin isn’t. People look up and point, watching the Batman and a smaller figure glide past.

Occasionally, we land on rooftops and sprint, catapulting off the other side. This is the way to travel through the city. I don’t care how cool the Batmobile is.

Flying is what I was born to do.

So when we land at the edge of a building overlooking a tiny cafe bakery, I can’t help but sigh. Then again, I know I’m in for something even better than flying. Well, okay, maybe. What, you might ask? Well, even at this very moment, a group of five thugs strolls into the bakery, not caring about the ‘We’re Closed’ sign.

I look to Batman, who perches on the edge of the building like a gargoyle. Literally. I mean, with his sculpted features and pointed cowl, he blends right in. All I get is a small nod. Barely a nod, more like his

chin bobbing. But that's all I need. We leap down to the street, staying in the shadows, peering in through the glowing windows. A group of women, some barely eighteen, some almost grandma-aged, all dressed in smart aprons and uniforms.

They're cowering, pulling money out of their register, one of the girls even taking pastries out for the thugs with shaking tongs. My eyes narrow, and my blood boils. I crack my knuckles. I don't need a sign from Batman here. We've already practiced fighting the robots in the training arena together, so I know what to do.

When Batman kicks the door open with a bang, I leap over his head, six batarangs in hand. I toss them just before I land in a sprint, the projectiles smacking into the crooks. All hell breaks loose. The women scream, ducking behind the counter as the goons pull out their guns, shooting at Batman and me. All hell breaks loose.

But I dodge. And as I dodge, I chatter. "Wow, you're all so embarrassed about your diet that you had to come here at night?" I spring onto the counter, then off it, smacking feet-first into a thug's face. "I mean, pie's good and all, but this seems a little much, yeah?"

"Who are you—"

I cut the guy off. I would love to answer him. Instead, I nick a pie off the display counter and hurl it. It smacks into another guy's face. "There you go!" I cheer, kicking my legs through the first thug's leg and slamming a hand into his neck on the way down. "You can drool over that all night!"

I know I'm the only one talking, but it's working. Thugs are turning to me. With guns, yeah, but also with confused and annoyed looks on their faces, leaving Batman to clear them out with no problem.

I take down my two, he takes down the rest, and the bakery fades into dead silence, well, except for the bang as Batman pins the one that's still conscious against the wall, growling in his face, holding him by the lapels.

My job is to secure the rest, which is easy. I mean, they're all drooling, though one's covered in banana and whipped cream. I brush off my hands once the last one's all trussed up. I'm sorry, but I can't resist. "You all just got creamed!" I crow. Okay, okay, I know it's bad. But hey! I can enjoy myself, can't I?

Batman's interrogating; my job is done, so I stand there. At least until I realize that the bakery staff is still trembling behind the counter.

Batman doesn't ask if they're okay. If any of them have been hurt. He doesn't even bother with them.

But me? I leap onto the counter, peering over, giving them all a smile. One girl shrieks at the sudden appearance of a boy on their counter, but most of the girls relax. I slip onto their side, walking up to the oldest, probably the manager or something, and offer her a hand. "Is everyone okay?" It's such a simple question, but one girl nods. Okay, so she's not a girl, she's in her mid-twenties or so, and her belly's swollen. There's always a mother or a kid, isn't there?

I help them up, guide the mother-to-be over to a chair, and ask where there's water and who would like some. When you're a hero, you wouldn't think you'd play waiter to the civies, you know, civilians? But there it is. I can't just leave them here until the police come. Besides, criminals aren't the only people who need to spill information.

"And here you go." I hand the last one water, getting another muffled thank you. So, I cross my arms, cocking my head to the side. "How long have the muffin men been comin' round?" I jab a thumb over my shoulder, pointing at the trussed-up baddies.

"A-a year now." The manager's voice trembles, but she's taking deep breaths. Good. "They usually come with a man, their boss."

I hold a hand over my head. “Tall, skinny, three-piece suit? Blue and brown eyes?”

“That’s him.” Another girl offers, leaning forward, her eyes so wide they might as well be soccer balls. Why would someone still work here if thugs like that came in and threatened them every other night? What’s wrong with people in this city? “He stopped coming a month ago, though.”

“Do you know anything about his boss?” I grab a tray of pastries that the girls set out for the crooks and hold it out for them, passing it around. Mom told me that chocolate’s good for girls. “Who is he working for?”

“Nothing.” The manager shakes her head, taking a bite out of a brownie. I’m getting so many grateful looks, I think I might cry. I actually helped save these women. I saved them. That feeling is back, that thrill. “I’m sorry, I don’t know more.”

I wave a hand. “Daw, don’t worry. Bats and I are on the case.”

“And... who are you?” One of the eighteen—year—olds leans forward. She’s pretty, with cropped black hair and smooth, pale Asian features. What? I observe everything! “Aren’t you a little... young to be out here with Batman?”

“The name’s Robin.” I jab my thumb in my chest, flashing them all a grin, making a few of the girls giggle. Apparently, I’m just so adorable. Well, I can work with that, I guess. “Batman’s new partner!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I FINALLY GET KIDNAPPED

“Oooh, that looked like it hurt.” I slam my bō staff through a thug’s legs, sending him headlong into a concrete post, the bang echoing in the darkness of the parking garage. “Apparently, crime *doesn’t* pay, huh?”

“Get outta here, Batboy!” Another crook lunges at me, this one dressed in a ratty T-shirt and jeans, his belly jiggling with every step.

I laugh. “Sure thing, Jello.” I duck under his punch, landing a series of blows on his stomach. What? Watching it shake is funny. I laugh again, the sound echoing and rebounding through the level. To my right, Batman’s clearing out his group, his movements quick and efficient. “You know,” I flip over the chunky man, grabbing his exposed tighty whities on the way down, pulling them back with me. “I’ll get your name right when you get mine. It’s Robin. That’s R—” I let go of the underwear, letting it snap back into his butt with a grin. “O-B—”

“YOU LITTLE—!” I duck under more blows, dancing and flipping away. Five more thugs groan on the ground around him. “Shut yer mouth!” This guy’s all I have left.

“—I-N.” I finish anyway, leaping into an unnecessary but fun cartwheel, launching onto my feet. “You know, Robin, like the bird?”

“I’ll FRY you like a bird!” Jello-man roars, whipping out a gun.

I raise my eyebrows, my mask adjusting to the expression. “Oh no... a gun. What am I going to do?” I clap my hands onto my cheeks.

“I said shut up!” Howls the man, his face so jiggly and red he might as well really be strawberry jello.

“No, you said ‘shut yer mouth.’” I bring my arms in front of me, cracking my knuckles. “But really, you’re talking just as much as me, so, dido, Jello-bro.”

I zip forward so fast I’m a blur. I know, I know, you’re not supposed to charge right at a guy with a gun, but this goof? Please. I’m a professional. My fist cracks into his face, sending him catapulting back into the pillar. There’s the crack of concrete and a *whump* as he lands on top of the other guy I decked.

I roll my shoulders and spin my bō staff, letting it rest on my shoulder with a smirk. What? These guys are jokes. Henchmen, maybe they’re just as ridiculous as the cartoons. So sad.

“**Well done, Robin.**” Batman’s behind me, that looming presence that I’m used to by now. So I don’t jump. Instead, I glance over at him.

He's not smiling, per the norm, but he does have that slight upturn of one corner of his mouth. I know he heard my chattering. "That was the last of them. We should have him."

'The last' being the last of the Zucco extortionist sights. 'Him' being Zucco. But that's the thing: after all these jobs and goons, there hasn't been one single sniff of Zucco. In fact, I haven't seen him since I got shot in the locker room. At least, I haven't seen him in person.

"I don't see him." I know that's obvious, but Batman isn't the only one who gets frustrated with these things. I mean, when you work your butt off to find someone, and you get nowhere, even after clearing out all their possible hiding spots, well... "What's the next step, Batman?" I pound my fist into my palm, waiting in his wings. I'm ready. I'm waiting. It's about time Zucco's taken in. But... where is he? Shouldn't he have shown himself by now? Or did he already run back to his boss with his tail between his sorry legs?

"What did you notice about these crooks, Robin?" That's not an answer to my question, but then again, when does Batman ever really answer a question?

I look the goons over. Most of them wear T-shirts, jeans, and sweatshirts. But I'm sure that's not what Batman means. It could be that

they're the dirtiest and saddest looking out of all the goons, but that's probably because we're in Two-Face's territory, Crime Alley. Some of them have piercings, but nothing of note. But what does catch my eye are their tattoos.

I lean forward, squinting, blinking three times, my HUD zooming in on the galoots knocked out and tied on the ground. All of them have bird tattoos. All in different places, sizes, shapes, and colors. But they're there.

In fact— “Wait a second,” I tap my newly added gauntlets, which activate a small, blue holo screen. I zip through a few files I got from hacking into the Batcomputer. I know, I know, but technically it wasn't really hacking since I knew the password. I was just... perusing a bit. I click on the file labeled TZC and scroll through articles and pictures. Finally, I pull up one of the goons from our other missions and zoom in. Batman's right. Of course, he's right. He's always right. He's right because: “Birds... gosh, they all have bird tattoos!”

I look up at Batman, not expecting a response. Of course, all I get is a narrowing of his eyes, but of course, that's enough. “Penguin? Really?” It's the only logical explanation. Birds are his whole thing,

okay, maybe not, but they're like, his brand. "I thought it was going to be Black Mask."

"We can't be sure until we interrogate Zucco," Batman growls, sliding his grappling gun out of his utility belt. **"None of these scum will talk."**

"So either they don't know anything, or—" Or I didn't give them enough credit. Huh. Well, if they don't talk to Batman, serious points. I can't even stand not telling him something when he gives me the bat-glare, and he's been training me to resist interrogation. I'm not going to tell you what I've been doing to get ready for that sort of thing because you'd *definitely* call child services.

We leave, zipping through the city as the red and blue lights flash towards us. I don't know whether to be glad or not because I really do like a lot of the officers of Gotham. Such a shame I can't trust any of them.

When we get back to the cave, I'm yawning. What? It's two o'clock in the morning! I have to be up in three hours and thirty minutes on the dot! Thankfully, it's not a school night. So I pull off my mask, rub my nose, and run a hand through my hair. "G'night, B." I stumble towards the elevator, back up to the Manor, before I take off my suit. You

know that feeling when you suddenly get hit by a ten-ton weight? Like, you've been running on adrenaline for too long, and then it's just like 'Wham-O!' you're tired?

Yeah, that's it. So I don't even hear Bruce's goodnight or see Alfred in the hallway. I don't even feel him helping me out of my suit and into my PJs. All I know is how good it feels to crash into bed. Sheets? Who needs sheets or blankets? As soon as my head hits that pillow, I'm gone.

I don't even dream. It's like I don't have the time. One minute, I close my eyes, and the next, my alarm goes off too soon. I blast out of my bed, trip on the strewn blankets, and fall flat on my face with a groan. "Ohh..." I drag a hand down my face, struggling to get to my feet. "How does B do it?"

"Master Dick—" I jump at Alfred's voice, which causes my cheeks to burn like hot chili peppers. What, I don't flinch when Batman speaks up, but I do when my Butler clambers into the room? I blink at him, my eyes sagging. I feel as if someone's trying to push them shut. Maybe I can tape them open.

"Yeah... mmm... what's that, Alfred?" I want to die. I shouldn't be stumbling around or slurring through my words. I'm better than this! I

have to start training in ten minutes! I smack myself on the cheek, which only brings a prickling sensation and an eyebrow raise.

“Goodness me.” Alfred grabs me before I fall forward. Okay, just kill me now. This isn’t happening. But oh... the ground looks so good right about now. “Master Dick, get back in bed.”

I want to cheer, but I don’t. I can’t. I can’t get back in bed! I have work to do! Zucco’s out there, and Bruce and I have to find him, catch him, and make sure it’s the Penguin pulling the strings. So I complain instead. Okay, I don’t *complain*. That’s babyish. That’s sissy. So I argue. “No... I’mma fine, Alfred.”

“No arguing, Master Dick.” Alfred hustles me back to bed, which isn’t something I want to do right now. I don’t think I can hustle anywhere. “Chop, chop. Back under those covers. And I don’t want to see you up until Master Bruce gets up at three.”

“What?” I don’t shout. I don’t yell. I can’t. Instead, it’s more like a lame protest. If words were food, that would’ve been a wet noodle.

So I slide into the covers, my head hitting the pillow. I sigh, and Alfred tucks me in. Yeah, yeah, I know. My butler tucks me into bed. Laugh it up. But hey, at this point? I don’t care. I sleep, dreaming about

Alfred and Bruce arguing. They say some weird things, but most I don't remember.

But, soon, their words make a lot of sense. Like they're actually having a conversation right here in my head. "—Horrible idea, Master Bruce!" Alfred's voice is stern and clipped, like it gets when Bruce aggravates him. "You cannot use the boy as bait!"

"He might be the only thing Zucco will come out for. It will be crowded and easy to pick off a boy without someone noticing. And I already made the announcement."

"But Master Bruce! What if he does not come? Or what if another villainous fiend comes?"

"Dick can handle himself." Bruce's voice is hard, maybe even harder than Alfred's. "I've trained him for this. You said this would happen a lot. He's my ward. This will be good practice."

My eyes pop open, squinting in the glaring afternoon sun. The arguing keeps on going. So, that wasn't a dream. Bruce and Alfred are standing in my room, shadows against the light. "Good practice? He's a *boy*, Master Bruce!"

"He's my boy." I know it's a retort. And I know that this is no laughing matter, and Bruce's talking about using me as bait to lure Zucco

in to catch him, but those words tickle me. My heart swells a few sizes too big.

“Goodness, Sir.” Alfred’s shadow straightens, his arms tucked behind his back. “But I do believe you are correct. Just... do not lose him.”

“He won’t.” I pop up, grinning at them from behind my bedhead. “And yeah, I can take care of myself.”

I rarely startle Bruce or Alfred. I mean, they are the masters of silence and sneakiness. But when I do, I can’t help the grin that explodes on my face. Bruce’s wide-eyed hop and Alfred’s strange noise of shock are enough to make me laugh a little. “What’re we doing, again?”

“I didn’t know you were awake, Champ.” Bruce comes over to sit on my bed, which is rare, even now. So I scoot over and don’t complain when he squashes one of my toes. “What did you hear?”

“We’re going to use me as bait to catch Zucco.” I slam a fist into my other palm. “And I’m all for it!”

“It could go south very quickly.” Bruce’s steely eyes harden, his lips thinning into that pressed line. “And he might not show.”

“Oh, he’ll be there.” I let my grin go savage, just like Raya’s lion. “He’d better be. I want to introduce him to a friend of mine. Knuckle sandwich.”

Bruce explains the plan when we go to lunch or breakfast, or whatever you would call your first meal of the day, when it’s at three-thirty. Tonight there’s a game of the Gotham Knights vs. the Central City Cougars. Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson will be there, as promoted on the news. In fact, Bruce got us VIP tickets. I mean, only the best money can buy, right?

Theoretically, since Zucco’s out to get me, he’ll use tonight’s packed-out stadium and craziness to try to grab me. But that’s when the police will move in, and Batman will show up.

All I have to do is wander off and get lost in the crowd. Easy peasy, right? But then, there’s always a chance... “Keep this in your wristband.” Bruce hands me a lockpick, small enough to slide into a small notch in my bracelet but big enough for my fingers to grab and use. I know, I know, I wear a bracelet. But where else am I supposed to hide it?

“Thanks.” I tuck the pick away, hoping I won’t have to use it. I shouldn’t have to use it because I’m just that good, but still, I’m going as Dick Grayson, not Robin.

I dress in ordinary clothes tonight. This isn’t a gala, where Bruce and I go in stiff suits, or school, where I dress in my uniform. In fact, it’s not until I tug on my T-shirt that says *‘Dad’s Little Terror’* that Alfred got for me, and pull on the khaki shorts, that I realize that I haven’t been out of the house for anything normal or fun. Ever. And patrols don’t count. Robin goes on those. This is Dick Grayson’s time for fun. At least, unless Zucco shows up.

So I slick back my hair, pull on my sneakers, and cartwheel down the stairs to join Bruce by the door. He’s wearing a grey polo, but he’s wearing jeans. For once, we’re going out as an average ‘family’ if you could call us that.

Alfred ruins the picture, though. He wears his suit, pressed, fitting, black cabby hat, and smart white gloves. “Come on, Alf!” I grab some fan gear that Bruce has set by the door, you know, some beaded necklaces and the giant foam #1 Fan hands? And jam them on him. He doesn’t look amused, but I still smile at him, grabbing some necklaces and letting them slide over my head. “Let’s go, let’s go!”

“You would think we deprived the boy of social interaction, Sir.”

Alfred deadpans as I explode out of the front door and make a beeline for the car. “Or stocked him well and good on sugar.”

Bruce laughs, opening the door for me before Alfred can get there, still wearing the necklaces, still waving that #1 Fan hand. “It’s about time we got the kid out and about, huh, Chum?”

“Even if this *is* a mission.” I bounce on the seat. What? Can’t I be excited about something? Something other than school and missions? I mean, I haven’t actually been a normal kid... actually, ever. I mean, when you work at the circus, that’s really your whole life. I mean, yeah, we explored the places we went, but that was mostly touring. We never had a hometown, a favorite restaurant, a sports team...

So when Bruce sits down next to me, I ask a very important question. “So... what’s football all about, anyway? I mean—” I lean back, looking up at the ceiling of the limo as Alfred pulls us out of the drive, “I know that in London, they call ‘soccer’ football. But here you have to get touchdowns... right?”

So on the way to the Gotham Knight’s Stadium, Bruce explains football to me. Which is good because I don’t want to scream ‘GOAL!’

whenever they get a touchdown or get confused when something like a flag happens. Even if this is a mission, I want to enjoy myself.

The Stadium is flooding with people, both Gotham Knights and Cougar fans from Central City. Reporters are everywhere, which is annoying, but I still smile and laugh for them. Hey, if I can rant to Bruce, I can rant to them too. Plus, it's worth it to see the female reporters swoon and melt. I mean, I know I'm adorable. Just what every twelve-year-old boy wants to hear, right?

After a few small interviews and pictures with Bruce, we go up into the Stadium. I didn't know how big these things actually are. I mean, this thing holds something like a hundred thousand people. Thankfully, Bruce and I get a suite up at the top. And by suite, I mean a nice, fancy room with a bar, monitors of the field, and a wall of windows looking out over the field above the heads of the crowd.

I'm almost sad that we don't get to sit with everyone else, but then again, I'll get lost around halftime anyway, right? So, for now, I sit with Bruce on the couch and lean forward, squashing my face against the glass, waiting for the game to start.

When it does, I make up my mind. I like football, but I like gymnastics better. What I really do like about football, though, are the

quick dodges, the mad dogpiles, and the fantastic nail-biting passes. I love it when the crowd erupts into cheers when the band explodes into a symphony of brass and drums. That, along with the flashing lights and spectacle, makes me feel right at home.

Then, there are the cheerleaders. What? I love watching their aerial acrobatics, mid-air splits, daring twists and flips, and I almost want to join them. I mean, I do have a flashy leotard hidden somewhere in the Manor.

When halftime comes around, Bruce orders us hot dogs and nachos while I declare that I'm going to the bathroom. Why do I say this so loudly? Because you can never know if the people in your suite are working for the bad guy. Zucco's had a day and a half to prepare for this, so anything's possible.

I swallow a surge of puke as I slip out of the suite door and bang down the concrete steps, emerging into the swarm of bodies. I know Bruce'll be watching, waiting, but what if I can't handle myself when I see Zucco? If he even comes. What if I freeze like last time?

So I squeeze through crowds of people, almost getting stuck between two beer-bellied guys in jerseys, and stumble headlong into a poor lady and her kid, spilling his bag of goldfish crackers. I know, I

know. Worst hero ever. But hey, I'm still a fledgling hero. Give me a break.

My hands shake, and my face is red as a freshly washed beet when I sneak towards the bathroom. I'm so focused on that stick figure picture of a guy with the words 'Men's' underneath that I don't hear the breath behind me or react to the arms that grab me.

I want to scream, the clammy fingers gripping my arms make my skin crawl, but something's pressed over my mouth. So instead of a cry for help, I get two huge lungfuls of sweet, sickly air. I know as soon as my eyes get heavy and my brain gets fuzzy what's happening to me.

But all I manage is a thought about how oblivious and unhelpful these people are. I mean, really, who doesn't notice a kid getting grabbed and carried away?

My arms and legs turn into wet, sad, limp noodles, swinging as I'm manhandled towards a set of stairs, but no one does anything. No one even looks at us. What? My tired brain asks. Do kids get pushed around with white rags over their mouths all the time?

By the time we get to the stairs, my head's lolling back, my eyes staring up at the blurring lights, the ceiling soup— then, I only know blackness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I GET UN-KIDNAPPED

Everything's thick... heavy. Numb. I try to move my head, only to get rewarded with the world, whatever world I'm in now, spinning like a top. My head pounds like my brain wants to get out and jump into the dark. Because it's dark where I am. And I bump around, rolling like a log. Where am I? Where's Bruce? What happened?

The sweet smell, which honestly could be Alfred's laundry detergent cranked up to a hundred percent, still clings to my nose. My oh-so-helpful mind reminds me of the least helpful thing at this very moment. *Chloroform*. I was just knocked out by chloroform. Only, I couldn't have been out for long since Bruce made me build up resistance to the stuff, so that means I'm in one place.

The stinky, dirty, wrapper-covered trunk of someone's car. Oh, joyous day. Why did Raya find kidnappings 'romantic' of all things? Because this royally sucks. If I could move my arms, I would be smacking myself. I wasn't supposed to get caught. I'm too good to get caught. But apparently, I'm not that good in mobs, at least, not out of costume.

The car hits a bump, and I slam into the ceiling, hitting my already pounding head. I can't help the groan. Ohh... this really does stink. I try to move my legs and arms, only to finally discover they're tied. My arms are fastened behind my back, and my legs are trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. But not with rope, chains, or even duct tape.

Whoever got me decided it would be best to tie me up with zip ties. How kind of them. I mean, why not choose the hard, unforgiving plastic to restrain a child? I know the lockpick won't really do me much good— unless I can wiggle it into the lock thing-y that pulls these things tight, but there're other ways.

Taking deep breaths, I slowly turn my hands so my palms face each other, ignoring the sweat slicking them. I mean, the sweat will end up being helpful in the end, but still, I can't focus on why I'm sweaty at all. *I'm not scared. I'm not scared... I'm not.* So I slowly work on slipping one of my thumbs out of the hard plastic.

There's no one here to watch or stop me, so I manage to get my thumb out, then another finger, until my hands are free. Undoing my legs is easier because I can use the lockpick to slide the thing apart.

But I make a huge mistake. A rookie mistake. I make a noise. I'm sorry, but when you just managed to free yourself from zip ties for the

second time, you can't help but celebrate a little. But then again, it's not worth it if your captors know you're free, is it?

Someone slams on the brakes, which is rude because I almost bash my brains out, slamming into the trunk, my head banging only inches away from a metal loop that could've killed me. But we don't think about that, do we?

What I think about, though, is the slam of the car doors, the stomp of footsteps, and the sudden light of a streetlamp flooding my prison. So I do the most logical thing in the world. I scramble to get out of the trunk.

Word of advice? Never try that until you can actually see. Hands grab me, ripping my arms behind my back. I kick, I scream, I do everything right. But I can't fight. I can't because I'm Dick Grayson, not Robin.

My blood runs like ice when my eyes finally adjust to see who stands in front of me. *No... no... It's him. Murderer!* "Well, hello again, Sonny." I hate him. I hate that voice. The voice that haunts my night terrors. The voice that killed them. He killed them. I hate how much I tremble, freeze, stop fighting, stop screaming. I hate how I might as well be dead already.

I hate the whimper that squeezes out of my mouth. Maybe I can just say I'm a good actor. Yeah, that works. I'm a really good actor, and this is all a show. A show to prove that I'm not Robin. To prove that I'm not really a fighter. Yeah... I'm just a really good actor.

That's what I tell myself when they pull a dirty cloth into my mouth, yanking it so tight it bites into the corners of my lips. That's what I tell myself when one of the thugs pulls out a syringe filled with a clear liquid.

That's what I tell myself when I feel the sting of a needle sliding into my neck, filling my veins with a burning, tingling sensation.

"Noo..." Yes, it's all acting as my words slur through the gag as I fall limp again. It's acting, but it's not fair. Because I've let him down. I've let him down. "Bruc'll c'm me...."

"I'm sure he will, Sonny." The voice whispers into my ear. But I don't really groan; that's just acting. My head smacks into something, but I don't even feel it. All I feel is my head lifting like a balloon, floating away from my body and into the clouds.

When I wake up, I keep my eyes closed. The drug they used was another one Bruce trained me to resist, but still, there's no escaping this pounding headache or the boiling pot that's my stomach.

I let my head still bob against my chest. I let my hands and legs go limp. Instead of opening my eyes to show my captors that I'm awake, I take in the room and my situation. You know, because I'm not scared.

I'm tied to a chair. The cold metal bites into my skin, sturdy and unbreakable, and from the way it doesn't shift, I'm sure it's bolted to the floor.

My restraints are zip ties again, but this time they're tightened so much I can feel something warm tickling my skin where they gnaw and burn. I still have the gag stuffed in my mouth. The rag tastes like sweat and dirt.

Gross.

Sounds echo around me: footsteps, breath, and whispers. But unlike in the movies, I'm not in the center of a dark room with a spotlight on me. I'm near a wall, sitting with other things, and it's not dark. In fact, I can see the glint of fluorescents from behind my closed eyes.

The air's salty, with that sea smell that Mom always complained about when we ate fish for dinner. Yeah, you know the one.

So, either I'm by the sea, at a fish market, or both.

I'd love to sit like this, asleep, unbothered by anyone. But if it sounds too good to be true, it's too good to be true.

“Wakey wakey, Sonny.” If it were only a voice, I’d ignore it. But someone slaps me across the face. My eyes pop open, and my cheek smarts. And I see the one person I never want to see again. Zucco.

Murderer!

“Aw, there’re those pretty blues.” Zucco’s too close. I shrink back into my chair, you know, because I’m such a good actor, and that’s what a scared little boy would do when a knife—thin man leans over them, his breath smelling like coffee... and something else I’ve smelled on the Gotham streets.

I want to say something, you know, shoot him a witty retort, but I can’t. I can’t do anything but grunt through the gag, the drool leaking down my chin. *It’s all an act... that’s all this is...*

Zucco grabs my face and squeezes. My eyes widen because I’m just that good at my job. The reason I shiver at the touch of his clammy hands isn’t because I’m afraid. *I’m not... I’m not...*

“Daw, you miss your Rich Daddy already, Sonny?” Zucco isn’t the only thug in the room, but he’s the only one I see. His other hand slides a knife out of his jacket. I want to close my eyes, you know, for effect, but I can’t. “What, you miss your silver spoons and silk blankets? Your caviar and champagne?”

This would be a fantastic time to shoot back that pickled fish eggs are gross, and I'm too young to drink, but all I do is whimper, my eyes seeing spots dancing around Zucco's face. *I'm not scared... I'm not scared... Bruce, where are you?*

"After all you've gotten," Zucco teases my throat with the knife. I think it's the same one he used before. Its serrated edges tickle me, "I think I've done you a favor. Circus freaks for a rich freak. A good trade-off, don't you think?"

I scream behind the gag. My face puffs and burns behind my restraints. It's stupid, I know, but I thrash against the zip ties. My wrists protest, my ankles complain, but I don't care. How dare he!

Zucco laughs; my reaction is just what he wanted. Because I'm acting, you see? See how good an actor I am? "Oh, poor little Prince of Gotham." His coos make the puke come up again. I think I just threw up in my mouth. My head pounds, but that's the drugs.

"Yo, boss!" A goon calls from behind Zucco, a blur in the warehouse. "The interested party is on their way. Should be here in—"

I sob with relief when not an interested party, because I don't want to think about that, but when sirens blare outside.

Zucco growls like Raya's lion, well, maybe not, because I know her lion would've never hurt me. He grabs my shirt and pulls me right into his face, the knife now glistening at the corner of my eye. "You always have your little friends to save you, don't you, *Grayson?*"

My skin crawls. Shivers race up and down my back. I hate the way he says my name— my family's name. *Murderer!* Something's shoved into my hands, something that crackles in my grip.

His hand digs into my cheeks. His nails bite, pinch, they grip. "I haven't got you yet, but I will. Count on that, Sonny."

Then, he's gone. Gone, gone, gone. Gone before the police come storming in, catching the goons he left behind. *Gone, gone, gone. Again!* Something burns behind my eyes. I can still feel his hands on my face. My fist still clenches whatever he shoved there.

A police officer runs over to me, saying something over the walkie. I don't hear it. All I hear is the snick of my zip ties getting cut. All I feel is the release of the gag and the sweet relief of fresh air.

When I get up, I stumble into the officer's arms, but that's just because I'm such a good actor. *Yeah, ... such a good actor.* "B-Bruce?"

I don't want anything else. I don't want a blanket, water, or anything. All I want is a hug. All I want is Bruce.

The police officer helps me outside, where the police are— where the ambulance is. Where *he* stands, arguing with Detective Yin. Where he looks up and over at me.

And I see it. The look of relief. The look he gave me when I woke up from my first night terror at the Manor.

So I don't care if my leg's hurt or if my head still pounds like someone's banging a hammer on it. I don't care if the officer tries to stop me. I break into a run and slam into Bruce.

He makes a noise when I wrap my arms around him and bury my head into his chest. He stiffens at first, then he enfolds me in his arms.

Now I can cry. Now I can shake. Now I can hand him what Zucco stuffed in my hand because I got it. I completed the mission. I have what we've been searching for.

A clue.

I want to say that Bruce took me home, and we went right down to the Batcave to investigate. I want to say that I was actually acting, that I'm stronger than this. But when Bruce guides me into the limo, and Alfred adjusts his mirror so he can give me that look of rare concern and care, I lose it.

I don't care about what just happened, all the questions detective Yin asked me, and the recording device. I'm just ready to sit in a chair that doesn't lock me down to get away from the feeling of dizziness and nausea still swirling around in my stomach. I don't even care when Bruce pulls off a patch stuck on my neck, revealing that he planted a tracker on me just in case this happened.

All I do is sniff through snot and wheeze through tears.

Raya would call me a sissy, a baby. She'd tell me that I look terrible, that I should've expected this. But I don't care what Raya would've said. All I care about is how Bruce carefully cleans my ankles and wrists, his huge hands rough and strong but lithe and gentle all at the same time, if that's possible. The rest of the ride, I lean against his shoulder. I know he doesn't like hugs or cuddling, but right now? Well, he can just suck it up.

I didn't know how late it was until Alfred put me to bed. I mean, I knew the game was in the evening, but my time stuffed in a trunk and passed out in a warehouse was like a dream. I've already been sleeping most of the day and night away, but drugged sleep doesn't count, so as soon as my head hits the pillow? Boom.

At first, I'm afraid I'll have nightmares. I mean, I was just kidnapped by the worst human being in the world. But no, the darkness wraps around me, comforting and cozy. Before I met Bruce or knew he was Batman, I thought it felt like a blanket in my dreams. Now I think it's Batman's cape keeping me safe.

I would've slept the rest of the night and the morning away, but something buzzes me out of my snooze. Literally. One eye pops open at the buzzing underneath my pillow. The other eye pops open as I lift my chin and lift the fluffy thing, peering underneath with bleary eyes. A light flashes, and I'm blinded. But only for a second. The next, I'm dragging my phone out from its little cave, squinting at the screen. The word 'Babs' scrolls across the screen over a picture of her in her school uniform, her mouth half open, her hand trying to block the camera.

With a sigh, I tap the answer button and slide my ear over the speaker. I don't even have to say anything. She's off. "Oh, Dick! Dad just told me what happened at the game! Are you alright?"

"Mm-hm," I mumble into the phone, dragging a hand down my face. "Babs... you know what time it is... right?"

“I know, I know! But I couldn’t wait!” Babs’ voice laughs, but I can tell it’s forced. She’s not as good at covering up her jitters as I am.

“Man, you really are the poster boy for kidnapping, aren’t you?”

“This is the first time, Babsy.” I groan, scrambling to get onto my back, staring up at the plaster ceiling, tracing the shapes with my eyes.

“The others were almost kidnappings. Almost.”

“Too bad the Batman wasn’t there.” Babs sighs, and I can hear the hum of music and the clink of dishes in the background noise. The Commish is probably making dinner. Late dinner. And she gets on me for staying up too late. “He could’ve saved you before you got captured.

Even Robin—”

She hasn’t talked about Robin much yet, even when I sneakily drop him into conversations. So my ears perk up, and I scoot higher against my pillow. “Oh yeah? Even Robin, huh?”

“Yes, Robin.” Babs lets out a huff. “All I’m saying is that if they were there, you would’ve been alright.” She doesn’t know how on the nose she is. Then again, if I were Robin, Zucco would’ve never even come in the first place, and the clue he jammed into my hand wouldn’t be down in the Batcave analyzer.

“Well... I probably should go back to sleep, Babs, you know, PTSD and stuff?” I hate blowing off Babs, but I’m so tired, and it’s so late— or early. Besides, she has better things to do than worry about me. Why does she have to fuss so much? I mean, I know she cares, and she’s not nearly as bad as Raya, but still. Why do girls have to blow things so out of proportion? I don’t understand them.

“Right... right... Well,” I can practically see the pleading puppy eyes Babs is making on the other side of the line. I can see her lips purse, her nose twitch, and her green eyes soften. What? We’re friends. Don’t make it weird. “I’m glad you’re alright... Dick. G’night.”

“G’night, Babs.” *Click*. She’s gone. Gone, leaving me to rest my phone on my chest and stare at the ceiling. I’m never telling anyone about this, especially not the guys at school. So what if Babs called me in the middle of the night— er— morning? We’re *friends*.

I don’t sleep. I can’t anymore. I don’t blame Babs, but honestly, once a phone buzzes under your pillow and your friend, who’s a girl, because she’s *not* my girlfriend, calls you, your brain refuses to shut down.

So I wrap myself in my dressing robe— yes, I have a dressing robe— and plunk down in front of my TV. When in doubt, distract

yourself by playing video games. At least until the sun comes up. When it does, I'm out of my room and in the training room. I don't care that Alfred isn't there. I need to train.

As I heft weights, climb ropes, and fly through vaults, I can't help the voice chattering in my head. The voice tells me that I was weak, that I let Bruce down. That I couldn't save myself.

That I was scared. I want to argue, but the voice is right. I wasn't able to save myself. I was weak. Because Dick Grayson isn't Robin, just how Bruce Wayne isn't Batman.

As my fists and feet pound against the red punching bag, sweat dripping down my face, it finally hits me. I am three people, just like Bruce. I am the Dick Grayson that the public sees, my schoolmates and the reporters know, the Dick Grayson I am at home and around Babs and Robin.

Now I know why Bruce is so confusing, why it is hard to know who he really is. Because he isn't one thing, he's all and none of them at once.

Is that what I am? I'm too young for an identity crisis! *Bam!* I slam my fist against the punching bag. I want this. I do. I want to be Robin. I want to be Dick Grayson. But I also want people to know me.

Who I really am. I can't let Robin be too different from Dick Grayson and vice versa.

If Bruce's identities don't touch, I need to blur the lines between mine and smooth them out. I will always be that boy from the circus; that will be my foundation. *Wham!* I launch into a double flying kick, which is my favorite move.

Robin will be bolder and cocky but not arrogant. Kind, but not weak. Dick Grayson needs to be consistent. I can't split him in half, either.

Yeah, I'm way too young to have to worry about this. But here I am, a kid stressing about my double life. Double now because I refuse for it to be a triple life.

Boom! I didn't even notice how hard I was hitting the bag until it rockets off the hook and slams into the gym equipment, knocking over weights with an echoing crash and sending balls bound with slaps against the hardwood.

Oops. My eyes almost pop out as I scramble forward, chasing after the equipment. Of course, that's when Bruce and Alfred show up at the door.

“Yikes!” I grab a ball, fumble it, and end up on my butt. Wow, really proving myself over here. Hero of the century.

“How are you doing, Chum?” Bruce is beside me in a second, already cleaning up my mess. I want to be embarrassed, but he doesn’t seem to mind. Besides, he asked me. He cares. And that’s a very good question. How am I doing?

“Better.” I leap up onto my feet, unwrapping my wrists. I can’t believe I knocked the punching bag off the hook. But why am I better, you might ask? I’m better because they’re here. They care. Babs, Alfred, and Bruce. Two know both sides of me, one knows only one, but that’s alright.

I almost cry when it hits me. These people who were once strangers— they care about me. Even now, Bruce’s hands are on my shoulders, which I’ve found is his version of a bear hug. Even now, Alfred is handing me a water bottle and a towel to wipe my sweaty face.

I’m here because they want me. Because they care. Because we’re a weird, bizarre family.

A family.

“Yeah... I’m better.” It’s true. I smile up at Bruce, letting him see everything without having to read subtext or subtitles. I let him see

because I'm ready, oh so ready to get working on that clue, to find Zucco and kick his sorry butt.

“Good.” Bruce's eyes soften, and his fingers squeeze my shoulders. “The first time is always the hardest. I'm sorry I wasn't able to get to you sooner.”

He's apologizing to me? He's blaming himself? But I'm the one who let myself get grabbed! “Hey, you're not the one who was only paying attention to the bathroom.” I shake my head. “I was sloppy and got grabbed. So what? I got what we need.”

“You did.” Bruce goes from soft to hard in a split second. “And we need to analyze it ourselves. I want you in on this. But Dick, what did he say to you? I know you didn't tell Detective Yin everything.”

So I tell him. I tell him everything I remember, from the moment I was grabbed until I was in Bruce's arms. I tell him as he and Alfred lead me to the banquet hall, where we have a quiet breakfast of pancakes, which soothe my stomach even more. I tell him as we walk to his office and take the ride down to the Batcave.

Every single detail, from the pounding chloroform-induced headache to the blinding street lamp, to the way they zip-tied me to the chair.

By the time we're in front of the computer with all the evidence that the GCPD collected with Batman from the crime scene and the testimony of the thugs, I know exactly what happened to me.

It was a quick grab and go, a short drive to a seaside warehouse, and an expected trade-off. You know, to the interested party? We know it isn't Zucco's boss because why wouldn't they just take me to him? So the logical conclusion is someone wants to buy me.

I ignore the growling rumbling in Bruce's throat when he finally writes that down in the report. But even with all that figured out, there are still so many questions. Like, who wants me? And why? Why Zucco and his boss?

Questions with answers we will only get once we have Zucco ourselves. Which brings up the clue. Zucco didn't give it to me as a clue. In reality, it's a taunt, a punch in the gut.

Over at the analyzing station, sitting so innocently on the counter, is a crumpled poster. A poster of the Flying Graysons, only someone, and I know exactly who, scribbled out the 'Flying' part and wrote 'Falling' in its place in red, splotchy ink.

“It’s not blood.” Bruce stands behind me, dressed in his Batsuit. I’m glad he said that without me having to suffer through watching the analyzer confirm anything of the sort.

If it were my parents' blood... I still have to choke back a gag. “Good. At least he isn’t that much of a sicko.” I scroll through the results of the chemical analysis. “Oh, this has ink and paper on it. What a surprise.” I look back at Bruce, wiggling my eyebrows. “Call the cops. We can find him at a printer store.”

“See that?” Bruce points to a list of chemicals off to the side. A list of ‘foreign’ components, which simply means not what it’s supposed to be made of or have on it. You know, things like dirt and stuff. But, instead of dirt, this has stuff like ethyl maltol and phosphorus from lawn fertilizer. Not the mix you would expect, right?

“Whoa...” I turn to the poster and slip on some gloves, pulling it carefully under a microscope. Just as I thought, there’s the smallest stain of blue on the edges and a few scuffs of grass stains. Cotton Candy and manicured turf.

“There’s also water stains rich in iodine and magnesium. And sea salt.” Bruce's hand jumps out at me from the microscope. His huge

sausage fingers— don't tell him I said that— direct my eyes to the wrinkled spots where someone got this thing wet.

No, it can't be. It's too easy, such a *duh* moment. But... what if it is? What if... I pull my eye from the microscope, not bothering to look at Bruce. Instead, I stare at the poster. The clue. It's so obvious. "He's at the circus grounds on Amusement Mile." Am I embarrassed that I didn't think about it before? Maybe. Will I get over it? Yeah.

I take the poster in both hands, my fingers trembling as I look it over. This is it. This is finally it. Tonight, Tony Zucco will get what he deserves. So why do I feel so sick?

"Suit up." I raise my eyebrows as Bruce pulls his cowl over his face, becoming Batman instantly. "**We're leaving now.**"

"Now? As in, right now?" I point to the ground, trying not to look as dumbstruck as I feel. It's not even lunchtime yet! Batman doesn't work during the day!

"**Yes. Now.**" I know that's all I'm getting. Okay, so apparently we can work during the day. Huh.

I slip into my uniform and jump into the Batmobile with Batman, who floors it without a word. I crack my knuckles and pull my hood over my face. This is it. *It's time. Time, time, time.*

But, as we drive through the tunnels, I notice something. We're not heading towards Amusement Mile. In fact, we're heading down a tunnel we haven't gone down before. And, instead of going up into the city, we're in another cave when we stop. Only this one's all metal, lights, and sleek shiny things.

When I jump out, I realize where we are. I mean, if the bat armor, plane, motorcycle, and stuff didn't give it away, the giant Bat—symbol over the thick titanium blast doors would.

“The second cave under Wayne Tower?” All I get is a nod as I wander around, not caring how my mouth almost hits the floor with every awesome design of weapons, suits, or vehicles. “Gosh... this—“ I can't help myself. I'm cartwheeling around the cave, base, whatever you want to call it, my laugh echoing off the walls. “This is the coolest thing ever! Can I fly the plane?”

“That would be a no, young Robin.” I didn't even hear the man come in. I mean, you'd think with the echoing quality of all this, I would, but nope.

A man dressed in a simple suit stands beside Batman. Both of them, let me stress this, *both* of them are smiling at me. Even Bats.

The man is tall and thin, probably in his late fifties or early sixties, his hair a tamed shock of wiry gray curls, his mustache groomed, but not as much as Alfred's. His teeth shine bright white against his skin, which could be coffee with cream right out of the cup.

I squint at him. He looks familiar, but more than that, he can only be one person. Alfred knows. Dr. Thompkins knows. He can only be Lucius Fox.

I stop my obsession session and bound over, smiling up at him. "Robin." I thrust out a hand. "Or Dick. Whichever one works."

The man, Mr. Fox, accepts my hand, giving it a firm shake. His smile is contagious. And here I thought I was the good-natured one of the group. "Good to meet you, Dick. Call me Lucius. I work for Bruce."

"I kinda figured." I gesture to the room with a finger. "Did you make all of this?"

"Bruce provides plans and ideas; I make them happen." Lucius elbows Batman, which I thought only I could get away with, but oh well. "And you know, I also run the business for 'em, since he's so busy all the time."

"Lucius here helped me design and build the Batcave."

Batman ignores the jab, well, both of them, though his smile lessens to

more of what's typical for Batman. A slight upturn of the lips. **“And yes, he helps me run the company.”**

“Cool!” I let go of his hand, putting my fists to my hips, nodding. If Lucius helps Bruce, that means he has more time for me. It also means we get more awesome toys to play around with. “Now... when do I get my own motorcycle? Because I'm not riding in a sidecar.”

Lucius wiggles his eyebrows, and I decide that I like him. I mean, Bruce likes and trusts him, so that would be reason enough, but more than that, this guy is a normal person. Not like Bruce and Alfred. I mean, I love them to death, but when I'm the only one who knows how to have a good time around the house? I mean, any change is welcome. “I have talked to Bruce about that. I was thinking—”

“Not yet.” Batman's interruption is so smooth that it doesn't even sting. Instead, I laugh, and Lucius gives me a knowing wink. If I can complain to Alfred about Bruce's shortcomings, I can joke with Lucius about Batman's habits.

“Right, right, we're getting distracted.” Lucius claps Batman on the shoulder and motions for us to follow. “Time to show you why you're really here.”

I can't help the skip in my step. Tonight I face Zucco, sure, but finally, I'll be meeting him as Robin, not Dick. Robin doesn't know Zucco. Robin isn't afraid of Zucco. Robin has Batman to back him up. Plus, we are about to get something cool to use tonight. My mind whirls with the possibilities. If not a motorcycle, what about a jetpack? Or some new accessories for my utility belt? Maybe an attachment for my bō staff?

We stop in front of a tall tube, which looks a lot like the elevator in the Batcave, the seam obvious in the metal casing. Lucius clears his throat and straightens his collar, sweeping his arm back. "Batman and Robin, I present to you the result of countless hours of hard work and care—"

The doors slide apart, and I'm mute. *No. Stinkn'. Way.*

"The Robin Suit."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THE BAT GETS NAPPED?

The suit is a work of beauty. It's not black, at least, not all black and grey and dark like Batman's suit. It's a deep red vest with green sleeves, held together by bright yellow clasps. The sides of the vest swoop down to the paler green pants like a tail. The boots are sleek, shiny black with green and gold armor plating. The gloves are black as well, but also have that bright green armor, flashing like a stoplight.

Swooping over the costume is a cape, black like a bird's wings but with a shiny golden lining. While Batman's cape spreads out to look like the wings of a bat, I know mine will look like a bird.

The crowning jewels on this beauty, though, are the brand new utility belt looped around the costume's waist, no Bat symbol, only pure gold that matches the rest of my outfit. But above that, over where my heart will be, is a round black patch. A round black patch with a stylized R emblazoned bright and obvious.

R for Robin. R for Richard.

This is no Batsuit. This is no knock-off costume. This is my own, rich and colorful like the leotards I'd wear in the circus. Functional and

flexible like the suit I'm wearing now. Perfect for my job, which is to be the loud, obnoxious distraction.

I don't know if I can talk anymore. But when I do manage to speak, I want to die with embarrassment. "It looks like a traffic light." Oh, just kill me now. I wave my hands frantically at the raised eyebrow from under Batman's cowl and the amused and thankfully not offended look Lucius is giving me. "I mean, it does, but I love it! I love it!"

I gasp, moving forward towards the case. I can feel my eyes shining. I wonder if they're actually sparkling. Maybe they'll pop out of my head. Who knows? "Can I... can I touch it?" I look back at Batman, then at Lucius.

Lucius chuckles, pressing a button that slides the glass down, leaving the costume within reach. "Go for it. It's yours, after all."

Mine... this is mine. My costume. Made for me, special by Batman and Mr. Fox. I reach out to touch it, letting my gloved hands glide over the sleek vest, the Kevlar titanium mesh cape, the flexible boots, and the gloves. "Thank you... It's perfect." I turn back to them, my grin so wide, so huge that I might just split my face in half. "Thank you so much!"

"Well?" Batman still has that half smile on his face. **"Put it on."**

So I do. I slip out of my ninja suit, which I will miss— I mean, it is my first ever costume— and start pulling on my new and improved Robin suit. Of course, I don't care if people are watching me. I've changed in the Batcave, for crying out loud, and Lucius had to model this thing for me. Besides, it's not like I'm naked.

The suit fits like a glove. It breathes as I breathe. It shapes over my chest and my stomach, but still lets me move without any trouble. The cape feels good draped around my shoulders, pulled up to my throat. I flex my fingers in the gloves, tap the top, and pull up a small holo screen, just like my first suit.

By the time I strap the utility belt on, the costume feels like a second skin. I pull out my bō staff and twirl it around, feeling the flow of my cape as I spin, the movement of the cloth as I move. “Well?” I strike a pose for Batman and Lucius, grinning at them from behind my mask, which stays the same. “How do I look?”

Lucius nods quickly. “You wear that well, son.”

“You look good.” Most people would miss it, but I can see the smile, the shine of approval, the pride coming from Batman. It tickles me, fills up that hole in my heart, even more, that parent-sized hole that's been slowly being stitched up smaller and smaller. **“You're ready.”**

Ready. Ready to take Zucco down. Ready to show the world who Robin really is. Because Robin isn't a smaller version of Batman. Robin is Batman's partner.

All criminals tremble in fear because Batman and Robin are here! Here to go out and kick Tony Zucco's sorry butt!

I can't stand the ride to Amusement Mile, so I distract myself by pulling at my costume. I do and undo the clasps on my chest so much that Batman gives me a look, but he doesn't say anything. I know he knows. He's Batman, for goodness sake. He can read me like a children's book. You know, the one with the big words and colorful pictures.

By the time we get to the island, I'm practically peeing my pants. This is what I want. This right here. I want Batman and Robin to take Zucco down. I want Batman and Robin to interrogate him, find out if he's really working for the Penguin, and who's out to get me. But I'm Robin. I'm going to have to face Zucco myself.

And if I freeze, cry, or mess up— if Zucco finds out who I really am... what if I can't go through with this? What if I mess this up? What if he gets away again?

“Robin.” The Batmobile purrs when we near the fairgrounds, the noise sending a jolt down my back. You know, the kind that sends my

heart jumping out of my mouth? I turn to Batman, looking for all the world like a fish in a bowl. My mouth opens and closes, but I don't say anything. I can't. Not now. **“Robin— I need you to get control of your emotions. You aren't Dick Grayson to him. Don't let him get to you.”**

I can't answer him for once. For once, our roles are reversed, and I'm the one nodding. I'm not Dick Grayson. I'm Robin. I have the power in this, not Zucco. I've been training for this since I got to the Manor, and I'm not gonna chicken out now.

So when Bruce slides us silently behind a fence and pops open the doors, I leap out and land in the shadows. It's still daytime, so there's not a lot of sneaking around to do, but we still slip into the fairgrounds undetected.

In my mind's eye, I see us here, my circus troupe. I see Pidge hefting all the luggage, his face red as a tomato. I see the Vestris with their animals, rolling the cages into position. I see Old Scott and Vanessa polishing their knives. Over it all, C.C. Haly shouts, his jovial voice rolling over us, keeping us focused and laughing.

Then, I see us, my family, standing up on a stage, ready for the people to line up in front of us, asking for pictures and autographs.

Everything's so real; I can swear I hear their voices, their laughter. So I take a deep breath and hurry after Batman.

The fairground is deserted. Stalls stand empty, but rides and carnival booths are set up for a coming fair or festival. No one bothered to take down the big top, leaving the red and white striped canvas fluttering in the wind.

No one bothered to clean, either. Flyers, wrappers, and all other sorts of garbage blow across the grounds, making it seem more and more like a piece of Gotham, unlike the happy getaway it was that day.

The smells of fried food are gone. Instead, all I smell is garbage, filth, and stinky seawater. It's almost as if, since they died, gloom and doom have settled over this place. Like it's been abandoned for years, not months.

I know it's stupid, but I stop next to a ring toss booth, staring at where our trailer once parked, right by the streetlamp. I wonder if the Brussels sprouts I spat out are still in that bucket. But I don't have time to wonder, do I?

I follow behind Batman, keeping to the shadows, letting my cape fall around me, hiding the bright bits of my costume. What? Do you think I wear a cape just because it looks cool?

When we reach the front of the big top, there's still no sign of life. Not one peep or breath of air. Not even a rustle from the huge tent as the sea wind blows.

Batman holds up a hand, and I stop, crouching behind him. Two fingers point one way, and his whole hand points the other way. The meaning is simple if you're used to speaking silently. I'm going left; he's going right.

I don't want to split up, but I still slip off to the left, sliding behind a fortune teller game, working my way up and down the rows of games. If a butterfly flapped its wings, I'd hear it. That's how quiet it is. Maybe this place really is abandoned. Maybe Zucco tricked us, sent us on a wild goose chase.

Maybe I'm not giving the guy enough credit. I mean, now I really understand Batman and Gordon's frustrations. A street-level thug is giving us the slip, playing with us. It's so not fair.

I skulk around the big top, listening for anything out of place, anything unusual.

Then, I hear it. A small thump and a grunt. But it didn't come from anywhere near where I am. It came from across the big top, where Batman's supposed to be looking. I don't care about being sneaky

anymore. I rush around the huge tent, my footfalls silent in the grass, my breath barely making a puffing noise. Okay, so maybe I can be quiet even if I'm not sneaking.

I don't know what's worse. Finding no one lurking where Batman was searching or realizing that he's gone. Not hiding, not melting into the shadows. Gone.

I whip around, my eyes and HUD scanning everything for signs of life. Heat signatures, signs of movement, anything. It's not until I look back at the big top, my HUD still active, that I see them. The two bodies move around through the canvas. One being dragged towards something, then suddenly levitating in the air, the other, a warm red and orange blob in front of them.

I don't need to be told who that is. What I need to know, though, is what's going on. So I clench my fists and bite my tongue. I force myself to walk slowly towards the big top, measuring each step, taking deep, even breaths. If I rush in, I could get us both killed.

Stay calm... stay calm... stay— I drop onto my belly and peer under the edge of the tent. The center ring is still set up, and so are the trapeze swings. Why'd the circus leave them here in Gotham? I thought

they'd take them with them in hopes that they'd get new trapeze artists. Or maybe they just left them here because... well...

I shake my head and focus on what's happening in the tent. A round, human-sized bullseye board stands in one of the rings, you know, the one that the knife throwers strap their partners to so they can, you know, throw knives at them?

Well, now Batman's strapped there, his arms and legs spread out like he got caught mid-jumping jacks. His bat glare's so sharp and intense that I think Tony Zucco might spontaneously combust. Because, of course, Tony Zucco stands over him, his jacket of knives laid out neatly, his thin fingers perusing the selections. Of course, he's here.

Murderer, murderer! I close my eyes and take a deep breath, but it doesn't stop my pounding heart. He has Batman. How he even managed to get Batman is beyond me, but that doesn't matter right now, does it? What matters is that I have to get us out of this mess.

I have to turn the tables. So I listen. Zucco's talking, boasting, of course. And, of course, Batman isn't giving him the time of day, though I know he's taking and analyzing every detail. Tone, words, facial expressions, everything. All I hear, though, is Zucco.

“—cost me more than you realize, Bats.” Zucco’s voice sends shivers up and down my spine, but I clench my fists. I won’t be afraid of him. I can’t be afraid. I refuse. “That boy— well, he’s from the circus just like me. And you know us, circus folks.”

What? Tony’s from the circus? My stomach churns, but I ignore it. I won’t be sick. I won’t. “We’re skilled. My act? Well— I’m sure you can guess.” Zucco finally selects a knife, flipping it around in his hands, stalking around Batman in a half circle. “Good times, the circus. But of course— there are always—” He throws the knife. *Chunk!* It lands right next to one of Batman’s bound hands. I bite back a gasp. But I can’t do anything. *Not yet... Not yet...* “Accidents.”

Zucco grabs another knife, pointing it at Batman’s face. “You know, a stray knife, a feral tiger, or a missing bolt.” Zucco shrugs, and my blood boils. I let it. If I can’t be scared, I can be angry. “Not a big deal— of course, until they die.”

Chunk!

The knife quivers next to Batman’s cheek. I slowly rise to my feet and pull out my bō staff. Okay, it’s time. Batman has what he needs, and Zucco’s distracted. But even as I get ready to spring, I can’t help but hear Zucco’s voice still as he mocks Batman. I hear the snick of another knife.

“But then again, who cares if they die anyway? The circus moves on. So does the world. What do you say, Batman? How about a nice accident too—”

Rip! I crash through the canvas of the big top, my bō staff out. I land in a roll and pop up to my feet, twirling my bō staff, my cape billowing behind me. “No accidents today, thanks. I don’t know if we have Bat life insurance.”

Zucco stares at me, his eyes narrowing, but not in recognition, in irritation. Good. “So, the rumors are true.” He laughs, looking from Batman back to me. “You really do run around with a kid now. Wow, Bats.”

“A kid? Ouch, that stings.” I do the only logical thing. I dive in for a fight. Metal screeches against metal as my bō staff clangs against Zucco’s knife, my masked face shoving up into his. I grin, and he, to my satisfaction, raises an eyebrow and draws back. “Oh, and the name’s Robin, not Batboy.” I slide out of the hold, slamming a kick into his jaw, sending him tumbling back. “Yah know, just to get them out of the way.”

Zucco wipes his face, shaking his head. “What, he doesn’t talk at all, so you talk for the both of you?”

I launch forward into a string of flips, gaining height, leaping over Zucco, and coming down at him from above. I can't stop to think. I can't because if I do, my vision turns red, my heart speeds into a race, and my palms slick with sweat. I can't because in my head pounds the mantra of *'murderer.'*

I smack into Zucco's chest, trying to push him back and away, but he grabs my foot. I know what's happening even before I'm sent spinning around, flying into the cold metal pole of the trapeze set up. I grunt as my side smacks into the hard surface, pounding the air out of me. But I land in a crouch, letting my bō staff snap outwards, ready to strike. "Yeah, pretty much," I answer, leaping back up to my feet. "I mean, you know the Batman. Dark Knight? He should be called the Silent Knight, am I right?"

"Heh. I like you, kid." *Whoosh!* A knife zips right next to my cheek, too close for comfort. I look right at Zucco, which is a mistake. He's smiling, his dual eyes glittering. A smile that can only belong to a snake. Red bleeds into my vision. My grin flashes, more like baring teeth than smiling.

I launch forward, slamming into Zucco, my bō staff cracking against his ribs, my head ducking and dodging his knife slashes. "Aw,

you like me? That's nice." I whip around into a side kick, nailing the place where I hit him in the locker room and where I slammed into him with my bō staff. He grunts, but if he's in pain, he doesn't let it show.

"Sadly, liking you isn't enough." Zucco's doubling his efforts, pushing me back towards the pole, back to where I'll be pinned. Trapped. My mind whirls. I need a plan! I need to find a way to take him out! But all I hear are their screams. All I see is red. "You're in my way. Your Batman stuck his nose into my business. Sorry, kid."

"Sorry?" I laugh. I laugh in that way that manages to echo anywhere. I grab his fist mid-strike, tilting my head to the side, smiling up at Zucco. "Sorry means you'll never do it again. Sorry isn't an excuse." I flick my wrist, and Zucco grunts, his eyes widening. My blood's fire, burning, scorching, flaming. My head pounds as I take a step forward, pushing him back. "Sorry—" Zucco stumbles, looking at me as if I'm some sort of little devil. Which, at this point, I might be, "Doesn't make up for all the bad things you've done."

Wham! I land a kick, and he goes stumbling back. *Bam!* I slam a fist into his gut. He doubles over. But when I launch another punch at him, he catches it this time. His eyes glitter. Now he's smiling. Oh, how quickly the tables can turn.

“Sweet little kid.” I don’t hiss or protest at his words. My mind whirls as he backs me up again. I might be strong, but I’m still no match in strength to a full-grown man. I could free myself, but... but... “I hope you won’t miss him, Batman—” He pins me up against the pole, his other hand finding my throat, his fingers digging in, pressing down on my jugular veins, “When he’s gone.”

If I die like this, I’ll never live it down. But thankfully, I’m not here alone. My distraction worked. A dark shadow looms over us, and a hand slaps down on Zucco’s shoulder, just as black spots begin to swim in my eyes like little minnows. Zucco stiffens. He’s not smiling anymore. His eyes don’t glitter. Instead, they widen.

Batman pulls him off me, letting me gasp, letting the blood flow again. I lean against the pole, wheezing, but I still see Zucco slam a kick into Batman's crossed arms and make a run for it. Only, he doesn't run out of the big top. Instead, he dashes towards the pole and scrambles up the ladder, making his way onto the platform.

I pull out my grappling gun and swoop up onto a platform. I’m across the way from Zucco, but I can see him huffing and puffing, beads of sweat glittering in the spotlights. He glares at me, and if looks could kill, I’d be so done for.

Then it happens. It happens so fast, but it seems to go in slow motion. Batman steps around the pole jutting through the landing, standing right next to Zucco so suddenly that the man screams. But then, he steps back.

Then, he falls.

Part of me hisses with pleasure. Finally, the crook, the scum, the filth, is getting what he deserves. An eye for an eye. A death for a death. A beautiful irony. But the other part knows that this isn't what I want. I hate Zucco. But I don't want him to die.

No one deserves to die like they did.

Batman's reaching out for Zucco, but too late. So I leap off the platform. I know he's the man that killed them, but instead of seeing the dual-eyed snake as I shoot out my grappling hook and swing down in an arc, arm outstretched to catch him, all I see is Mom.

Mom, in her leotard and lovely makeup. Mom, with her sapphire eyes wide and terrified. Mom, with her arms outstretched, screaming my name. I don't miss this time. I don't freeze and do nothing.

My arm grabs something and wraps around it, then I'm swinging up, back to where Batman stands waiting for me. I throw Zucco against the pole, where he sits, shaking. He looks right at me, and though I wear

a mask, I know he knows. He realizes. Then, his eyes roll back so I can only see the whites, and his head slumps against his shoulder.

Batman doesn't let him stay out for long, though. I stand by, my job done, as Batman grabs Zucco by the lapels and slams him into the pole. Zucco wakes up, his eyes wide and roving, looking from Batman to me, then back to Batman. "Who do you work for?" Batman's growl would send a lion running, crying for mommy. Zucco trembles. He shakes.

He's no longer the terrifying man of my nightmares. He shivers, tears squeezing out of his eyes. What? He's crying? I don't know whether to laugh or take a step back. So... there was a human under that snake smile.

"D-Don't! H-he'll kill me!" Either Zucco's a really good actor, or he's actually afraid. But not even his own goons cried when Batman threatened them. So, what's wrong? "H-he'll kill me!"

"Who?" Batman slams him back into the pole. "Who do you work for?"

"The Penguin!" Zucco shakes his head. "The Penguin! Please, I'm just his extortionist! I don't know anything! I swear!"

“Why did you go after Richard Grayson?” *Bam!* Batman slams him back into the pole. I try not to wince. This is what he deserves, right? What I deserve? But... I’m not enjoying it.

“Th—the kid?” Zucco shakes his head. “Someone wants him. I don’t know anything else!” He holds up his hands as Batman pulls him forward, ready to slam him back again. “I don’t know anything else, I swear! I swear!”

Obviously, he does know more because over the next five minutes, you know, by the time the police show up, Zucco’s told us all about how the Penguin was hired out to get the Grayson kid and how he, Zucco, was told to do the job because of what he already did to my parents.

But no matter how much Batman presses, pushes, and threatens, Zucco won’t say who the interested party is— only that the Penguin threatened to kill him if he failed. Well, I guess he’s dead anyway, then. I don’t know how to feel about that.

But, as Batman and I turn him and his confession over to Yin, Bennett, and other officers, everything finally crashes into me. The only problem is it’s such a maelstrom of feelings that I can’t place any of it. Not, at least, until Batman and I stand over the scene from atop the Ferris

wheel, perched over the crowd to make sure there are no last rescues or escape attempts.

“You could’ve let him fall, Robin,” Batman speaks up first. He doesn’t look at me, but that doesn’t mean that he isn’t talking right to me. That he isn’t paying attention to the look on my face, the way I lean forward, watching the commotion down below.

He’s right. I could’ve let him fall. I could’ve let him die. But... that’s not what they would’ve wanted. That’s not what I want. “He got what he deserved,” I say finally, standing up, letting my cape drape around me, fluttering like a bird’s wings. “Justice.”

Batman looks down at me, and I grin up at him. Penguin’s still out there, and so are the people who want to get me, but honestly? Right now? I couldn’t care less. Zucco started all of this. He started it, and now he’s gone. Gone, gone, gone. But not escaped, oh no. He’s going to prison.

Batman smiles at me. Wow, twice in one day, that has to be some sort of record. He smiles, and he turns back to the scene, his own cape billowing in the wind. He nods. **“That’s what we do. Justice. Not vengeance.”**

Not vengeance. Yes. I remember my promise, my promise to Batman, to them. I won't be a killer. I refuse. Because a killer is what they are. Those monsters that stalk these dirty streets.

Now, I can move on to them, too. I don't have to worry about Zucco or his thugs anymore, so I can focus on fighting the other baddies of Gotham. Now, what about Penguin, you might ask? The problem with the Penguin is he's holed up in the Narrows, a place where Batman won't take me, where he won't go himself. So either he comes out to get me, or his 'interested party' finishes him off and reveal themselves. Or, they'll leave me alone.

Okay, so maybe not that last part. But the point is, as far as I'm concerned, at least, until the next kidnapping attempt by another, not important goon, this thing's dead and buried.

I nudge Batman, grinning like an imp, cracking my knuckles. It's time for some sort of normal in this crazy life. "Let's go home, Bats." I start balancing on the support of the Ferris wheel on one leg, teasing the toes of my boot over the edge. "I'm getting hungry for some good ol' stuffed crab and mushroom."

"Fine." Batman jumps off the Ferris wheel, and I follow, swinging away from the circus, away from Zucco.

Swinging towards home.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I MEET THE CLOWN

“Oh ho! Ivy! I didn’t know you loved me that much!” I duck under an attempted kiss, thrusting out my leg. The woman, Poison Ivy, trips over me and stumbles right into a punch from Batman. I know, I know, I’m so charming, but that kiss wouldn’t have been nice. It would’ve killed me. So yeah, never let pretty redheads kiss you. Oh... yeah, and never tell Babs I said that.

Old Town Gotham’s covered with plants right now, and when I say covered, I mean there are literally plants growing out of the street, the sidewalk, the buildings, the sewer grates— everywhere. This is a pretty typical Tuesday, though.

I flip away from Ivy, who’s recovered from her Bat smackdown and sent a bunch of killer weeds after me. I run, I jump, but I’m still not fast enough. Vines wrap around my ankles. But they couldn’t just be any normal vines, oh no.

Thorns bite through the thick leather of my boots, but I don’t make any noise. Okay, any noise except a grunt as my chin smacks onto

the asphalt. I pull a birdarang, my own signature batarang, and toss it, freeing myself to flip back up and charge back into the fray.

“Hey, Plant Lady!” I love the look on Ivy’s face as she turns to me just as I punch her. Yes, yes, I punched a lady. But then again, Ivy isn’t *really* a lady. She’s a super-villainess. That should be an exception, right?

I ignore the pain that shoots down my arm from the punch, my right pointer finger singing. You want to know what happened? Ask my good friend Killer Croc. He is very aware.

We clean up Ivy’s mess, which, thankfully, doesn’t need any oversized lawn mowers and hedge shears. When she’s knocked out cold, her plants run away back to their flower pots, quite literally in some cases. With the police roaring in, blue and red lights flashing, and the heavily armored van pulling up to take Ivy back to Arkham, you know, the most secure place for wackadoos in the world? Batman and I take our leave.

I try to cover it up, but Batman notices my unsteady feet. I mean, you can’t hide blood from Batman. “**Robin.**” Sometimes I love how he says my superhero name, other times? He sounds so much like Dad, I want to roll my eyes.

I stop and sit with a huff, letting him pull out bandages from his utility belt and wrap my boots. Thorny vines, whips, guns, the criminals of Gotham are very creative. If only I could show off my fading scars to Babs and the others at school for bragging rights, but Batman— Bruce makes me cover them with my school uniform or makeup until they're so thin you can't even tell.

There's no hiding my broken finger, though. But at least that one, I can tell the story that it was a misjudgment on the vault, much to Babs' chiding.

What? I enjoy this job. In fact, now that we aren't clearing out Zucco's sites every night, I think I might enjoy myself even more. Every night the Bat signal flashes in the sky for something different, and every night there's a new baddie, a new challenge.

I get hurt a lot. I mean, how can you not when there are flying projectiles everywhere, or a massive croc-human dude guy is pounding you into the concrete? Besides, a broken finger isn't that bad. I mean, if Batman can power through, why can't I?

"I'm fine, B." I wiggle my legs when he finishes clipping the bandages in place. The wounds sting like crazy, and I'll have to get my boots patched, but I can worry about that tomorrow. Right now, we're

still on patrol. So I flip onto my feet, refusing to wobble and punch my hand into my palm, refusing to wince. “What’s next?”

Batman taps his gauntlet, and a holo map pops up. Several locations flash red, which either means a crime or a robbery is underway. This is a system I helped set up, and yes, I will brag about it; thank you very much. I call it the Batwave, which’s literally a system connected to the city-wide police scanner as well as some sensors I put up myself. Someone trips an alarm? Boom, it shows up on the Batwave. Traffic cameras pick up a scuffle in an alley? Boom! It shows up on the Batwave. Obviously, we can’t be everywhere at once, and most of the time, when we go out on patrol, we do a city-wide sweep per Batman’s usual. But sometimes, we pick and choose.

“**Here.**” Batman scrolls in on a location, flashing bigger and brighter than the others. A higher priority target. “**A robbery at the Gotham Museum of Art.**”

“Again?” I complain as we jump off the building and plummet, getting our grappling hooks ready. While it’s really a thrilling ride, you’d think we were going for a stroll in the park from the way I chat it up. “Man, can’t criminals steal something worthwhile for once? Like ice cream or something? Who cares about art?”

We land on top of the Art Museum and instantly split up. Batman goes through the front, and I do the cool thing everyone should do. I slip into the ventilation system. Why? Because a) I'm small enough to fit, and b) it's fun jumping down on people unawares.

I crawl through the metal tube, keeping my breath quiet, my heart steady. Any noise in here will echo and give me away. I slip down drops and land on silent toes, ignoring the pain flowering in my boots. Instead, I put epic, suspenseful music to the whole thing, in my head, of course.

When I get to the section where all the valuable paintings are kept—is it weird I have these vents memorized by now?—I crouch right behind a grate... and roll my eyes.

A woman's expertly threading her way through the security defenses of a nice but honestly weird-looking cat painting. She's dressed in a skin-tight jumpsuit, a tail that's actually a whip tied around her waist, her cowl pulled up into pointed cat's ears. *Ugh. Not her. Not again.*

I don't wait for Bats. Not on this one. I slide wordlessly, soundlessly out of my vent and drop to the ground, my feet quiet as well, ugh, a cat's paws. I stand and lean against the wall, twirling my bō staff between my fingers. "Really, Catwoman? Paintings again?" The cat burglar whips around like a kid with their hand, caught in the cookie jar,

her eyes wide behind her sleek goggles. “I mean, wouldn’t an actual cat be nice every once in a while? Less, oh, I don’t know, boring?”

Her surprise disappears as soon as it appears, replaced by a sly smile. With the flick of her fingers on a small wall switch, the defenses turn off, leaving nothing but open floor between us. “Well, if it isn’t the little Birdie boy. How are you, my little catnip?”

“I’d be better if you weren’t so cliché.” I step away from the wall, my bō staff still twirling. “Step away from the painting, kitty. I already had to deal with one crazy woman tonight.”

“Where’s the Daddy Bat?” Catwoman doesn’t step away from the painting. In fact, she actually grabs it off the wall, tucking it under her arm. “He’s around, right? He’s never far away from his little Bird.”

“What is it with you two?” I move closer, not fast enough to scare her off, but fast enough to catch her if she runs. “I mean, are you two dating or something?” I lower my voice to a serious whisper. “Is there something I should know?”

Catwoman laughs, casually side-stepping away from the wall towards the open space of the museum. I can’t let her get away, so I step in time, keeping my eyes locked on her. “Oh, you really are such a Third

Wheel, aren't you? All of us had Bat's full attention until you came along."

"Just think of it as you have my full attention, too." She's getting ready to run; I can see it. Oh, I hope he's ready. "I mean, I'm way cuter than ol' Batman."

"Dream on, pintsized." She makes her break, only to slam into a huge, bulky chest. I catch the painting as it flies out from under her arm and dance away from the Bat and the Cat.

"Oh! Batman!" If she were an actual cat, Catwoman would be preening and purring right about now. "*Meow*. How've you been, Handsome?"

"You know there're more important things the two of us could be doing other than stopping you." Batman grabs Catwoman's wrists before she can bolt. I don't understand them. I don't understand them at all. As far as I can tell, the Cat has a crush on the Bat, but the Bat is mostly just annoyed that the Cat steals things to get his attention and to add to her collection. Make sense to you? Yeah, I don't get it either.

Girls. I won't ever understand them.

"Aw, so you came all this way just for me?" I gag, loud, as Catwoman traces her finger along Batman's chest. Ugh, I would've

decked her by now, but that would mean letting go of her, which would let her get away— *blurgh*. Gross. “I knew you cared.”

“We could be helping other people.” Batman’s glare and growl are the exact opposite of her large eyes and purr. In fact, he’s so intense that she actually steps back with a huff.

“Well, fine. And here I was hoping we could ditch the kid and go into an old-fashioned cat and mouse chase like before.” Catwoman glares at me, but I stick out my tongue. I don’t like her if you haven’t noticed that yet. “Oh well, ta—ta, my darlings.”

I don’t know how she does it, I mean, in theory, I know how, but one moment she’s in the grasp of Batman, and the next, she’s gone. My open vent door clangs shut, and I roll my eyes. “Well, good riddance.” I hang the picture of the sad, stupid cat on the wall and reactivate the alarm once I’m clear, coming back to stand next to Batman. “I mean, really, why can’t we take her in again, Batman?”

“Because,” We walk out of the Museum together, not stopped by the nighttime guards who, quite frankly, stink at their job and head out into the thick, cool Gotham air, **“She keeps other criminals away from the areas she hits. She’s a cat burglar, not a mugger. She protects the people she’s around.”**

“But she’s a thief.” I point out, not for the first time. I want to ask if it’s because, deep down, Bruce actually likes her, but I don’t want to know. For all I care, it can stay his personal business. As long as I don’t come home one day to find out he’s married to the crazy feline.

“**I know.**” That’s all I get, as usual. Honestly, why do I even bother? But still, I can’t help but enjoy myself even more as Batman, and I loop back around to the GCPD building. We come here at the beginning of the night for the big threats that the Commish informs us about, but Batman’s made it a habit of taking us back here after we’re done.

I don’t know why. I mean, the police usually show up on the scene to clean up after us anyway, so why do we even bother? Gordon’ll end up with the reports whether we show up or not.

I land next to Batman, tucking my grappling hook back into my belt and let my cape close around me, blocking out the chill. My feet ache as we stroll towards the Commissioner, who has his back turned to us, as usual. “What’s up, Commish?”

He still jumps, but not as bad as when Batman speaks up. Apparently, my lighter, less growly voice is better on the nerves. That’s good, I guess.

“Oh, Batman, Robin. Good to see you’re safe.” That’s what he always says. It makes me smile. Why wouldn’t we be safe? I mean, we’re the safest people on the planet! “I heard about Ivy and Catwoman. Well done.”

“Man, Ivy’s a thorn in our side.” I know, I know, but I can’t help myself. I mean, it’s just too much fun. “Did you see the size of those venus fly traps? I’ll never look at a salad the same way again.”

The Commish chuckles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. Something’s wrong. That’s when I notice it. It usually gets turned off after we visit the first time of the night, but the Bat-signal is still on, blazing bright.

So, that’s why Batman isn’t paying attention to us. **“What’s wrong, Commissioner?”** I can feel Batman tense next to me. It’s already late into the night. Obviously, we could stay out all night, but ol’ Bats tries to get me home at a decent hour, which is all Alfred’s fault.

“It’s the Joker.”

My stomach sinks as my heart patters faster. Wow, two big ones in one night? And yes, I don’t count Catwoman as a ‘big one.’ But then again, the Joker is the literal Crown Prince of Crime. Not only that, but he killed Babs’ mom. I’ve been fighting crime with Bats for weeks, but I still haven’t met Clowny.

Batman doesn't say a thing, so the Commissioner goes on. "He was spotted in his old prop warehouse. No lackeys, just him. Batman—" Commissioner Gordon looks at me, his eyes shining behind his glasses. I know that look. I hate the look, but it still sends the warm fuzzies up and down my legs, "I would leave Robin here. He's—"

"Robin is ready." Am I ready? No, probably not. But I will be. I have to be. That's the rule of this game, of this war that I fight. Still, I don't say anything to the Commish as we leave the GCPD behind. Not the typical goodbye, not even a cheeky comment. In fact, I stay quiet as I run across the rooftops, leaping the gaps, and shooting my grappling hook.

I do, however, wave to the people who look up and point. I hear, *'Look! It's Batman and the Boy Wonder!'* which is what the news has started to call me. Of course, they question the fact that I'm a kid, but they also look up in wonder. They look at me the same way the public did when I was a Flying Grayson. No, it's more than that. Because now, when I grin and wave at them, their eyes flash with light.

And a light in this cold, dark, grimy Gotham world is rare.

So I feel better, at least a little bit, when we land on a rooftop overlooking a run-down, junky warehouse with graffiti all over the walls

and trash piled up in the corners. A faded neon sign once said something, but now it's so broken, busted, and sad that you can't read it anymore.

Batman doesn't look at me. Instead, he focuses intently on the door, the windows, and the skylights, scanning for signs of life. His voice is a growling whisper. **"I need you to be careful, Robin. Don't take the Joker lightly just because he dresses like something you're familiar with."** He means a clown. And he's right. Honestly, if the Joker weren't a crazy psychopath, he'd fit right in at Haly's Circus. **"Keep your eyes up, ears open, but ignore him. Power through."** Batman sighs, straightening up. **"He probably just wants to meet you."**

Well, that's encouraging. A serial killer wants to meet me. I'm honored. I crack my knuckles, ignoring the sharp pain in my broken finger, and leap down with Batman. Instead of sneaking around, though, we walk right through the front doors.

Now, when Commissioner Gordon said 'prop warehouse,' I don't know what I thought it was going to be like, but I definitely wasn't expecting this. Everything from colossal clown-themed hot air balloons, to giant masks, to hourglasses filled with putty, to huge whoopee cushions are strewn everywhere and in no particular order or area. It's just... clutter.

“Wow...” I spin around, taking it all in. “This is more junk than my grandma’s basement. And she was a hoarder.”

Batman doesn’t answer me, but someone else does. Someone who steps out of the shadows of a huge clown face. Someone whose voice slides from deep to high like a teenage boy. Someone dressed in a purple suit with a flower on his lapel, a thin yellow and orange striped tie, and a silver chain dangling at his waist. Someone with chalk—white skin, ruby—red lips, and a head of bright green hair.

Someone with a permanent smile stretching his cheeks up to his eyes, his teeth yellow and bared. “Why, thank you, Birdie Boy.” His voice is so bizarre that I smile, even though I know he’s not someone to be taken lightly. But still, even though those eyes bore into mine and that smile’s really, *really* creepy, you have to admit, he’s kind of funny looking. “Nice to finally meet you, by the way. What’s wrong, Bats?” The Joker strolls closer, his hands clasped behind his back. He could have anything back there. *Anything*. So I tense. “You didn’t want to introduce your new pet? Didn’t want to let him meet his dear Uncle Jay?”

“Uncle?” I squint at him, looking from him to Batman. Batman doesn’t move, though. He keeps his eyes on the Joker, watching for both

of us. “Hmm... actually, I think I see the resemblance. Maybe in the jaw—”

“AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” His laugh rakes my ears like Mom’s comb, but worse. Oh, boy. I can do better than that. “Well, well, Batsy! Who knew you loved me so much, you had to get a mini-me to tug around?”

“Mini you?” I point at the Joker, crinkling my nose. “Well, at least I don’t dress like a fake flower isle.”

“Hehe! I love this kid!” Joker’s too close now, but still, Batman doesn’t move, so I don’t either. I guess we’re waiting for the Joker to make his play. But as I look up at him, his eyebrows dip, and his eyes light up red, sending shivers up and down my spine. I don’t like him. Not one bit. “Only... Bats... I’ve missed you. How about we have some alone time?”

It’s too fast. How didn’t I see it? I’m tackled to the ground, hands digging into my neck, thumbs pressed against my windpipe. Oh, I’m definitely going to be bruised. I hold my breath and kick, but apparently, the Joker doesn’t feel pain, or at least he thinks it’s funny.

“AHAHAHAHA! Little Boy Blunder, aren’t you just the cutest!” His breath smells like everything at the circus gone wrong, like rotten

peanuts, stale cotton candy, burnt funnel cake— what, does he have garbage *à la* circus deodorant? “But you need to take a nappy wappy because Daddy Bats and Unca Jay need to have a talky walkie.”

“Uh-huh.” I grab onto his wrists and yank his thumbs back. He might like pain, but the body still has involuntary reactions. So I’m free, kicking him off me and into Batman’s waiting arms, flipping out of reach, wheezing, grasping my throat. What? Am I just the super villain public punching bag now?

“Oh hooo! Batsy! Look at the cute little Birdy-by!” Joker laughs like he’s three years old, but Batman doesn’t even bother with him. There’s a click, and Joker’s secured in handcuffs. There’s the whirl of sirens, and my problems are over.

“Ya know, you’re not really that funny,” I say, leaning as close to the Joker as I dare, you know, with Batman holding him. “I can do better.”

“Oh yeah?” I hate that glint in his eyes, that extra curl of his smile, but I don’t budge. I can’t. He can’t know the truth. That I’m actually afraid of him. Because Batman was right. He just wanted to introduce himself. There was no elaborate plan, no setup. Just an introduction. Because let’s be real, that’s all he needs. “Challenge

accepted, Boy Blunder.” Joker keeps his eyes on me, even as he’s forced into a straitjacket, strapped to a crazy chair, and wheeled off to Arkham.

I rub my neck as Batman, and I walk out, ignoring the looks the police give us. Only now do I realize just how tired I am, how beat up I am. But hey, tonight was a good night. At least, until Batman leans over to me. **“You shouldn’t have done that, Robin.”** I only look up at Batman for a second. And for a split second, it’s Bruce talking, not the Bat. Bruce, with his softer face, the more concerned downturn of his mouth. **“The Joker won’t take it lightly. This is no laughing matter.”**

No laughing matter. Kinda funny when he goes by the Joker.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

SOMEONE CALL CHILD SERVICES

The next few days were wonderful. I wake up, train, go to school, come home, do schoolwork, train with Bruce, work on strategies and stuff, then we go out on patrol. Sometimes we go to parties, where I regale the crowd with how fortunate I am as a poor little orphan to be with Bruce, drinking my orange juice in my crystal glass. But secretly, at those parties, Bruce and I laugh. We laugh about how silly everyone is, except for some of them. I really like Oliver Queen, or Uncle Ollie, as he's encouraged me to call him. Apparently, he's a business partner of Bruce, which is also apparently code for him being a hero. I don't know if he knows that Batman is Bruce Wayne, but Bruce sure knows that he's the hero going by Green Arrow.

Apparently, Batman is in with all the superheroes, which isn't something I thought he'd be for, but then again, he has me as his partner, a twelve-year-old boy. I think other professional heroes make more sense.

Sometimes, but not often enough, Bruce and I go out for ordinary things. Like ice cream or burgers. Never to the movies, though. Bruce

refuses to take me to the theater. I don't know why, but Alfred says not to push him about it.

Speaking of Alfred, every day we train, he asks me about patrol, which is great because I can't tell Babs about it. Babs, who keeps on giving me 'the look' whenever I come to school trying to hide a new injury. Babs, who keeps on chiding me about looking like the walking dead. What? I'm not that tired.

"Look at this, Chum." Bruce sits next to me on the couch. I can't believe he's started to join me in my free time, but there it is. He's around more and more as Batman and as Bruce. Finally, I know for sure that we're settling in. That he's getting used to having me around, to trusting me. I mean, with watching his back and his personal life.

I lift my face from my game and peer at the paper in his hand. Yes, yes, Bruce still reads the paper. Old-fashioned, I know, but hey, who am I to judge? I mean, Raya read magazines; how's a newspaper any different?

I lean over and look at Bruce's page, scanning the title. *'Batman and Robin, the Boy Wonder, Gotham's Shining Hope.'* "Ooh, they like us." I nudge Bruce, and he smiles, clearing his throat and beginning to read. I snuggle in closer and lean over his shoulder, reading along.

“Our city has been forever grateful to the Batman, our Dark Knight, and protector.” Bruce begins, his smile tugging at his lips. “He kept us safe, fighting crime and corruption, protecting our fair city of Gotham. But now, a new face has appeared above the streets. What was first thought to be a second shadow of the Bat quickly became a whispered rumor among the gangs of Gotham. The Bat’s Shadow, they called him, but witnesses who saw this elusive shadow quickly began to proclaim that this was Robin, the child crime fighter.”

I grin at my description. At least the crooks called me ‘the Bat’s Shadow’ and not Batboy. Bruce continues. “Over the past weeks, Batman and his newly appointed squire, Robin, cleared out the smaller crimes in the city, which some criminals thought was beneath their notice, proving once more that the Batman cares about not only stopping the big names of crime but those who threaten the daily citizens of Gotham. And right alongside him was his partner. *‘He was kind and sweet,’* eighteen-year-old Claire Bogen said after being interviewed about her encounter with the child crime fighter, *‘But he knew what he was doing too. He cared about us, even after the thugs were stopped. He took care of us and made sure we were okay. I’ve never met anyone like him. He’s like, a Boy Wonder!’*”

I snicker. Well, now I know where the name came from. Bruce nudges me and keeps reading, snapping the paper importantly. “More reports similar to this have come in. While some were cautious about Batman bringing a child into this world, our worries were soothed by the boy’s quick wit and confidence. Police Commissioner James Gordon had this to say: *‘I trust Batman’s judgment, but more than that, my trust has been earned by our Robin. The boy is a capable partner to the Bat and fills a role we did not know we needed here in Gotham. While Batman is our Dark Knight, Robin is our night light.’*”

“Aw, he shouldn’t have.” I shove Bruce’s shoulder as he holds back a laugh. “The only thing he could’ve said better was I’m Gotham’s traffic light.”

“Well, in that costume, you might just be, Chum.” Bruce’s more like this. Lighter, more comfortable. I’d say so is Batman, but gosh, who would ever call Batman ‘light’? We laugh together, relaxing back onto the couch, me playing my game, Bruce reading through the paper. At least, until he leans over. “Dick... how’s your neck?”

I touch the finger-shaped bruises around my throat, wincing. I’ve been shoved around a lot, beaten up, and choked, but the Joker’s fingers must be made of iron or something. At first, it was just a bright red mark

around my neck; now, it's a dark blotchy purple. I'm just glad my school uniform and suit collars are tall enough to hide them. That would be a very awkward conversation starter.

"Well... It's a bruise." I shrug, turning back to my game. "I mean, I broke my finger, Bruce. This isn't the worst that's happened."

"Yes, well, it could've done some permanent damage." Bruce's eyes are steely again, serious. This is how I know he cares. Not just the fun moments, but the moments that really count. The moments when he's here for me.

I know it could've done permanent damage. But I don't want to think about it. Who wants to think about what would've happened? What could've happened? Well, except Bruce, that is. "I know." I pull my knees up to my chest and look right at him. "I know. And... I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault." Bruce sighs, putting his paper down and folding it neatly on the coffee table. "I know you can handle yourself, Dick, but the Joker—"

"I'm fine!" Am I fine? Well, I actually don't know. I've made myself forget that creepy smile, that haunting laugh. That underhanded promise he made to me. So I guess as long as I ignore it, I'll be fine.

"Bruce, you worry too much! You're going to give yourself gray hair!"

What? He does! Honestly, I wonder if those tiny wrinkles, you know, barely noticeable because his face is just that perfect, are from worrying all the time.

Bruce laughs, though, speeding past the subject I'm sure he doesn't want to talk about as much as I do. Instead, he pulls out his phone and wiggles it at me. "I know we haven't done this yet, but Alfred told me you have a favorite song, so—"

I leap off the couch and catapult over the coffee table, the Joker, my neck, and the article all forgotten. I bounce on my toes, unable to stop the wide grin that splits my face. "Dance Party?" I don't think I can see Bruce dancing, other than slow dancing at galas or balls, but there it is. I can still dance. Plus, did he say my favorite song?

"Alright, then." Bruce's thumb taps play, and *Rockin' Robin* begins to thrum out of the TV speakers. His smile reveals that he now knows where my superhero name came from. That he understands.

But honestly? Right now? I don't care. I jam, bopping to the beat, belting out the song. I want to stop and push record on my phone when Bruce joins in, and surprisingly, he actually has some good moves. But then, I never thought I'd ever see him dance. So I forget singing. I laugh

as we dance. For once, we aren't Batman and Robin or Dick and Bruce.

We're—

“Yeah! Awesome moves, Dad—” I freeze, and the music seems to stop too. Bruce stares at me. *I just... I just called him...* I can't help the heat that explodes on my cheeks. I want to hide, oh, just kill me now. *I'm just his ward... just his ward...*

“What did you call me?” His voice isn't stern. In fact, I don't know what to call it.

I swallow hard. “Um... Dad?” Then, I fumble. “I'm sorry, B, I didn't mean to! I just—” Then he does something I wasn't expecting. Something I never thought I'd see him do. He comes up and hugs me. *He hugs me*. The roles are reversed. Now I am standing still as a plank of wood, not knowing what to do as his arms enfold me.

But my hesitation doesn't last long. I wrap my arms around him and sigh, and that hole in my heart is finally, *finally* filled. Will I ever forget them? No. But they're gone. And Bruce is here. “You can call me ‘Dad’ if you want.” Bruce's voice rumbles against my ear. It feels good. “I don't mind. Bruce, B, Dad. Whatever you need, Dick, that's what I'll be.”

I want this moment to last forever, this perfect, wonderful moment. With Bruce hugging me and *Rockin' Robin* finishing in the background, everything seems right in this world. But then, Alfred speaks up from the hallway.

“Master Bruce, there is a Ms. Corvi from Child Services in the entrance room to inspect Master Dick’s living conditions.” Alfred’s voice is its usual, clipped drone, but I can’t miss the warning in his eyes. He’s looking right at my neck. You know where the bruises are?

Bruce pulls away from me quickly, straightening his T-shirt and nodding. “I will be down in a moment. Dick? I would... change your shirt.”

I don’t have to be told twice. As I race to my room, my heart pounds like a tribal drum in my chest. After all this time, I’d forgotten that Ms. Corvi said she would check on me. She’s in charge of the Home, the GCHB, but she’s also something else that I can’t remember. All I know is that if she sees this bruise... well—

I pull on a clean polo, wrestling it over my head, pulling the collar up and over the bruise. It’s not perfect, but it’ll have to work. It has to because I can already hear voices in the hall. I dash over to my basketball hoop and start shooting, glad I took the time to clean my room this

morning. Yes, I clean my room. Of course, I don't make Alfred do everything.

"And this," Bruce opens the door behind me, just as I slam dunk a basket, "Is Dick's room."

"My goodness!" I almost forgot that voice that woke me up from the nightmare at the GCPD, the voice that told me someone had claimed me, that I was going to be taken in by Bruce Wayne. I turn to see Ms. Corvi, still in a nice, school teacher-esque outfit with that name tag lanyard around her neck, still saying, 'Sophia Corvi Gotham City Home for Boys.' "Isn't this incredible!" When she turns to me, she smiles, but my heart races. I beg that she doesn't notice my banged-up finger, the scratches and deeper cuts on my arms, and the dark purple bruises peeking out from my collar. "Well, hello, Dick!"

I force a smile. I never thought I'd have to force a smile again, but there it is. I'm not happy to see her. I want that part of my life to be over, the memory of the Home... I like Ms. Corvi, but she's forever attached to that time. "Hi, Ms. Corvi!" I give her a cheerful wave. I need to show her that I'm happy and healthy and have everything I need. "Hey, B—" I turn to Bruce. I don't want to be rude, but this isn't supposed to be my

business, is it? This is between Bruce and Ms. Corvi: “I was going to go swimming.”

“Go for it, Chum!” Bruce gives me a knowing look, but his smile could’ve charmed a mule. He turns to Ms. Corvi. “He’s always bopping around. It’s wonderful to have someone so full of life here.”

“Oh, I am sure.” Ms. Corvi’s smile is gentle as I try to move past her. But then, I see it. Her eyes lock on my arm. Her hand reaches out and stops me before I can leave. Bruce stiffens, and I freeze. “Dick...” She turns my arm over, taking in the cuts, the bruises, the broken finger.

“What are these?”

“Oh,” I can’t mess this up. None of this can seem forced, seem like a lie. Because I definitely can’t tell her the truth. But if she sees me nervous, she could assume the worst, “I like to run through the hedges and climb the trees in the backyard.” I shrug. “It’s no big deal.”

She taps my broken finger. “And this?”

“Gymnastics accident,” I note how Bruce isn’t stepping in. Of course, he isn’t. Any excuse he makes will seem just like that. An excuse. So I shrug again. “Alfred and Bruce encourage me to keep up my acrobatics, but I’m not perfect.” I flash Ms. Corvi a smile. “But they make sure to patch me up real good.”

“Only the best for my Chum.” Bruce smiles at me. I know Ms. Corvi doesn’t see it as she looks back and forth between us, but Bruce gives me that slight nod. That ‘good job, keep going’ sign.

I think I’m finally in the clear...until Ms. Corvi lets out a small gasp. I freeze again, and so does my smile. Her hands are on my collar, pulling it back, revealing the ugly bruises. *Oh no... no, no, no!*

“Dick.” Her voice is suddenly cold, demanding. Protective.

“What is this?”

“I...” I make the first mistake. I stutter. I shrug her away, trying to cover it back up. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* “We- we do self-defense training... I got kidnapped and—”

“This is not from that incident.” Ms. Corvi’s gaze is stern as she looks right at Bruce. You can just feel the accusation hanging in the air.

“This is recent. Dick... did Bruce hurt you?”

Bruce and I react at the same time. His shock is rare but genuine. I mean, yeah, he trains me to resist torture and drugs and stuff, but he’d never hurt me. He makes sure I’m prepared and that I’m safe at all times. That we never go too far. My mouth hits the floor, my head shaking so much I think it might fly off. “No, no, no! He didn’t hurt—”

“Dick—” Ms. Corvi doesn’t listen. It’s almost as if she knows. Not what’s actually going on, but that something is. That I’m not as safe as I say I am. Which, I’m not, but she can’t know why. So she’ll assume the worst, “Take off your shirt.”

“Ms. Corvi, that is enough.” Bruce is angry now. “Do not violate the boy’s—”

“Dick, take off your shirt.” She gives me such a comforting, pitying look that I don’t know what to do. I open and close my mouth like a fish. What is she going to do when she sees... when she sees...

I take off my shirt. Bruce takes in a sharp breath like he’s seeing the wounds, the cuts, gashes, and bruises for the first time. Ms. Corvi gasps, but her shock is replaced by a resolute look. I have to stop this. I have to explain this. “We... we train and... and I—”

“We like to rough house, Dick and I.” Bruce’s voice is smooth, challenging. “I teach him self-defense so he can protect himself the next time—”

I’ve never seen someone interrupt Bruce so many times before. “This is not roughhousing or self-defense.” Ms. Corvi puts her hands on my shoulders, her fingers cold on my bare skin. I shiver. “Dick, this is important. You can tell me. Did Bruce hurt you?”

I shake my head again. I can't help the burning in my eyes, the sniffles I try to stop. "No, no! No, he didn't!" I can't let this happen. I can't let them blame Bruce for all of this! None of it's his fault!

Ms. Corvi's eyes lock with mine, which is when, I guess, she sees the bags under them. She gasps again and whips around to Alfred.

"Where is this schedule I've heard so much about?" She's curt and cold towards Bruce and Alfred. I hate it. They haven't done anything wrong!

Alfred produces the schedule, and Ms. Corvi snatches it, looking it over. Her hands are shaking. "Mr. Wayne." Her voice is so clipped, so scathing, she could give Alfred a run for his money. "What is the meaning of this? This... training, this studying—" Her black eyes snap, and I shrink back. I want to get out of here. This has to be a dream! "He is twelve years old! He needs at least, at *least* eight hours of sleep— and all these extracurriculars, Mr. Wayne." Ms. Corvi straightens. "Your ward has been found harmed and sleep-deprived. While his living conditions are incredible, I do not believe he is safe here."

There's the dial of a number, the ringing of a phone, and before Bruce or I can protest, Ms. Corvi is talking on the line to someone about something I don't want to hear. A report about Bruce, a report to the police, to the court about 'our case.' I don't know how these things work,

I mean, I should, but I don't want to. All I know is they are going to take me away.

Away from Bruce, away from this life that I want, that I need.

Away from... from them.

I'm numb. Numb to Ms. Corvi's hands on my bare shoulders.

Numb to the draft blowing through the room. Numb to the look of shock and fury on Bruce's face. "I will be taking him back to the Home. You will be charged with child endangerment and abuse, Mr. Wayne. I suggest you get a better defense for the court if you want him back."

No... this can't be happening. This isn't real. But it is. She'll take me back to the Home... away from Bruce.

"Pack his things, only the essentials." Ms. Corvi's voice is far away. "He won't need much at the Home. No, Mr. Wayne. You may not come to visit. No—"

I drown out their conversation. I can't do this. I won't do this.

They can't make me! They can't make me leave him! I break away from Ms. Corvi's grasp and try to run, try to get away, but she won't let me. She's pulling my shirt back on, rubbing my back, shushing me, keeping me away from Bruce. But no! I want him! I need him! She can't do this!

But she is. And there's nothing that Bruce or I can do about it.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

I DRIVE TO MY DOOM

The Penguin sits at his desk, rubbing his misshapen hands together. Before him sits his computer, the screen flashing with an article. *‘Tony Zucco Caught by Batman and Robin: Boy Dick Grayson Finally Safe.’*

Crash! The Penguin swipes his desk clean, sending everything flying across the room. The person on his screen does not flinch, though, because that masked caller is back. Back and threatening. Who said bedtime stories couldn’t be terrifying?

“So Zucco failed you. Your plan is flawed, Oswald.” The voice mocks him; it cuts at him like a talon of one of his many pets, but he lets it. He lets it because there is no arguing with Them. The Shadows of Gotham. “We are not pleased with your performance. Perhaps we should hire Black Mask instead.”

“You came to me.” The Penguin settles back in his chair; his black eye glints behind his monocle. “And the boy was almost yours. It is no fault of mine that your agents could not arrive before the police.”

“Perhaps,” There is no consideration in the voice. Only threat. Only a promise of pain. “But perhaps it was your servant’s incompetence, Oswald. Or was it your own?”

“There is another way.” The Penguin steeples his fingers. For once, he dares. He dares to look his caller right in his masked face. All the good it does him. For no one can read through the glinting white of a faceless mask. “Another way that I have put in motion. In fact, I do believe that you will have the boy within the next day or so.”

“And what is this... way you speak of?” It is not a question. It is a demand. A demand that the Penguin cannot refuse, but he does anyway.

“This contingency has been put in place and is being executed, but I will not reveal my plans to you.” The Penguin smiles, or rather, the corners of his face turn up. If you could call it a smile. “I know that you do not dare cross Wayne. None of us do. But you, least of all. You and your precious secrets. Still, I don’t trust you or your little foot soldiers.”

“You say that you do not trust us to not interfere?” The Masked Man sneers, cold, commanding. He will not be denied.

“No, I say that I do not want to go through with this and not get the promised payment.” The Penguin leans back in his chair, his eyes

glittering, his smile broadening. “You will have your prize, and I will have my money. That was the deal.”

The Penguin clicks off the call and sits back in his seat. For he does not know that you should never hang up on a bedtime story.

You should never turn your back on a man with a dagger or a gun.

I sit on the stairs as Alfred bustles up and down, fussing over the bag of belongings that I have to bring. I ignore him when he asks what pair of pants I want to bring. I don't even bother telling him that it won't matter. It won't matter because soon, I'll be stuck in those ugly GCHB uniforms again.

I watch as Bruce has a heated argument with Ms. Corvi. He doesn't even pretend to be nice. He's not Bruce now. He's Batman. Fighting for me. He questions her authority and whether she has the proper papers and licenses to take me away to make this call. He wants a second opinion. He wants his lawyer.

Ms. Corvi remains calm, cool, and collected, which surprises me. She was so flustered about Bruce Wayne all that time ago, and now she stands up to him like he's nothing, shooting him down, showing her papers, letting him examine them, telling him that this is only until the

court can look into our case. Until he can fight for me, I have to go with her.

But... It's not fair. Bruce never hurt me. But I can't march up to her and tell her that all of these wounds are from going out in the middle of the night to fight crime with Batman. Then she would definitely take me away.

So I sit. Do I cry? Yes, I do. I'm not proud of it. I don't want to cry. I want to stay strong, to hold on to the promise that Bruce will keep fighting for me. But... they're taking me away. Away from him, away from this life that I've come to love. Back to the Home. It hits me like a ten-ton weight. I'm not going back to school. I'm not going to see Babs again. Will they take away my phone? Will the boys take it even if they let me keep it? Can I still go to some sort of school?

What about being Robin? I don't want to stop, not now, not ever. I want to keep going out at night with Batman, feeling the freedom of flying through the city. Feeling alive. Because, if I can't be with Bruce, can't I sneak out to be with Batman?

I keep my eyes on Bruce, even as he stalks away and leaves me. Leaves me to go back into the manor. Will Ms. Corvi take me away now? Will I not get to say goodbye? The door is opened as Alfred helps Ms.

Corvi's chauffeur, a worker I recognize from the Home, load my stuff into the car. The car that took me from the GCPD to the Home. The car that doomed me to that prison. I don't want to go back. The door's open. The fence is off, and Ace won't stop me. I can see him there, sitting at the edge of the gravel drive, watching, growling at the people intruding on our property.

I've made it to Gotham before; what's stopping me now? If I run away, they can't blame Bruce, can they? If I disappear and just show up as Robin, will they come looking for me? I'm so tempted to get up, to make a run for it, to escape this... this nightmare— until it hits me. They *would* blame Bruce. They *would* search his house— my house. They could find the entrances to the Batcave. No... I'll go to the Home. I'll survive until Bruce wins. Until he wins me back. Because he will. I know he will. He has to.

“All of his things are in the car, Ms. Corvi.” I don't miss the sharp bite to Alfred's voice that doesn't belong there. He gives her a curt nod and doesn't wait for her to say anything. He moves to me, not sitting next to me on the stairs, but resting a hand on my shoulder. His eyes soften, his lips turn up into a smile, and his voice softens. “Be brave, Master Dick.” It's a whisper, but it fills me up, making the water leaking from

my eyes run faster. “Master Bruce will not let this stand. Chin up. Come on, there’s a good lad.”

I jump to my feet and lunge forward. He’s my butler, yeah, but he’s so much more. I love Bruce, but Alfred’s the first person after my parents... after the accident, who took care of me. Who took the time to make sure I had everything I needed... a father in Bruce, a life in this cold Manor that’s become so warm. That’s become home.

And yeah, I’m sure Alfred doesn’t like hugs as much as Bruce. But gosh, is he good at them. His arms aren’t as big or strong as Bruce’s, but they still wrap around me, pull me close, and rub my back in soothing circles. He doesn’t cry. Of course, he doesn’t. He’s Alfred. But he pats my back and pushes me away at arm’s length, brushing my shoulders free of invisible lint. “Right then, chop, chop, Master Dick. Mustn’t keep them waiting.”

“Thank you, Alfred.” I don’t know what else to say. I love you wouldn’t fit. It wouldn’t seem right. But thank you will never, ever cut it.

Alfred freezes. The look on his face stabs. It bites. The sadness there... he really does care about Bruce and me. Where would I be without him? “It was, and is, my pleasure, Master Dick.”

Then, he's gone. I turn back to the bottom of the stairs, where Ms. Corvi's trying to give me an encouraging smile. I want to be grateful that she cares so much. I don't want to not like her. But I find that I hate her. I hate that soft smile, that pitied look. I don't want to, but I frown at her; no, I scowl at her through my blotchy cheeks and runny nose. But that scowl doesn't last long. I can't let it last long because, really, she's only doing her job. But...

I hug myself as I come to stand next to her, as I look up at her. Her hand is gentle on my shoulder, her voice kind and understanding. "I know this is hard, Dick." Her touch is so soft, so calm, that I don't even notice that she's guided me out towards the car. "But we just need to make sure that you are safe. Understand? We need to get you out of this situation so you and Bruce can both... well, process and help us understand."

"But... he never hurt me." It's a weak whimper, a sad, pathetic plea. But it's all I have. All I have to give. All I can say.

"I'm sure... I'm sure that's... well, Dick. Come on." She can't even say it. Say that she doesn't believe me. Say that she does think Bruce did all those terrible things that stupid super villains did to me. It's not fair! Bruce would never hurt me like that! He wouldn't.

But I don't fight back as she leads me to the car. I do look back, though. Back at the Manor. Back to where Alfred disappeared. Back to where Bruce isn't. Will he not come? Will he not say goodbye? No! I can't leave without—

“Wait!” Bruce leaps down the steps, taking them two at a time, which I never thought I'd see him do, especially in front of another person. “Wait!”

My heart lifts for a moment when I think he might make everything alright. He'll have the solution to all of this right now, something to stop them, to keep me here. Instead, he only carries a black duffel bag. “You can't—” Ms. Corvi tries to stop him, but for once, he stops her. And I live for it.

“I would like to say goodbye to my boy, Ms. Corvi.” His words are commanding and cold, and every inch Batman. I choke down a laugh and pull away from her. Bruce drops the duffel as I jump up into his arms like a baby monkey. I don't care how small I seem. I don't care about the nervous looks Ms. Corvi is giving us. I hug him, my arms around his neck, my legs around his waist. “Even if they take you away from me,” Bruce's whisper fills my ears and buries my sobs. So what if I cry? Wouldn't you? “You are still my little bird.”

His little bird? I twist my neck, looking down at the duffel. The duffel that's just big enough to hold— I gasp, and Bruce rubs my back, helping me down, his hands on my shoulders, even though Ms. Corvi still protests. His voice is so low she won't hear it. But I do. "No matter where they take you or what happens, you can find me when the signal hits the sky. Understand?"

Then, he's gone. She's pulling me away from him. My duffel, my precious Robin suit, is shoved in my hands. The world blurs. Bruce's face twists, bleeding with watercolors. Someone screams his name; it might be me, but I don't know. I'm too busy trying to get back to him to get out of the car. But no, I'm shut in the back, strapped into the seat, and the door slams.

But I turn, sit up, and bang on the back window. It's not fair! *No! No! Not again! They can't take them away again! I can't lose... I can't lose them again!*

But the iron gate swings shut, and the stylized W locks me out. Ace howls at the gate, that blob on the path disappears— and they're gone. *Gone, gone, gone. Again!*

I fall back into my seat. I don't look out the window. I can't. I should be driving this road with Alfred in the limo, going to school, or

going out with Bruce. I ignore Ms. Corvi as she tries to talk to me, as she assures me that everything is going to be okay.

I accept the bottle of chocolate milk she passes back, but I don't drink it. I can't. I ignore the snacks, the whizzing of cars, the winding countryside roads, and even the roar of the sea as we barrel along the cliffs.

I don't care about the Gotham traffic, the dirty filth, or the graffiti. I don't ask questions. I can't be bothered to. But I finally take a sip of my chocolate milk as we get on the main highway, barreling towards the Home. Towards my doom. The milk is sweeter than it should be, especially at a time like this. I shouldn't enjoy it. I shouldn't get to. So I stop after one sip, screwing on the cap and tossing it away. Am I a baby? Yes, maybe I am. But I don't care. I want to be back at the Manor with Bruce and Alfred. Back home.

I didn't want to fall asleep. I wasn't even tired. I don't even know when I shut my eyes, but suddenly, I'm rubbing them, yawning, wiping the drool off my face. My body feels weird and numb, but that's probably because I've been sitting in a car for so long.

I'm tempted to go right back to wishing for Bruce, but I can't help but wonder. Why aren't we at the Home yet? It's not that far away, is it? I

peer out the window, searching for something familiar. All I get are run-down streets, and not the normal ones you would see in Gotham; oh no. These have broken windows, tattered curtains, dead trees, and plants. Everything's cast in smog, like we're near a plant or something, and the filth clings to every surface, every person. Screams echo in the streets. I can even hear them from in the car.

None of the street signs look familiar and aren't even visible in this horrible lighting. I sit up straighter, pressing my hands against the window, peering out. This is no part of Gotham I've ever been in, and I've been in them all except... except... "The Narrows." The whisper slips out with a warning.

I clap a hand over my mouth quickly as Ms. Corvi turns to me, her voice still sweet, still kind, but was there always that glitter in her black eyes? "What was that, Dick, sweetie?"

I swallow hard and force a smile. "Oh, nothing. I was just thinking... this is a backway to the Home, right? I don't remember this way—"

"Oh yes, I have to pick up some paperwork before we get back to the Home." Smooth as ice. If I didn't know the city as well as I do, if Bruce hadn't trained me to notice the tiniest barbs in people's words, I

would've believed her. "Why don't you drink more of your chocolate milk, Dick?"

Drugged. It has to be drugged. But why? Why Ms. Corvi? What's going on here? What— that's when I notice it. When I look at the chauffeur closely for the first time. Now I know. I know why the Home was so terrible, why the boys would leave to join gangs. Because on the chauffeur's neck is a bright, colorful tattoo. A tattoo of a bird.

Now it all makes sense. Why Ms. Corvi was so worried about Bruce Wayne, why Zucco didn't bother to come and get me while I was at the Home. Why she came to check on me now after Zucco failed. I'm not being taken back to the Home. We aren't going to pick up papers. I'm being kidnapped. The smoothest, most innocent kidnapping ever.

I want to hit myself. How could I have dismissed the Penguin after Zucco was caught? Why didn't I push for Batman and me to go to the Narrows to investigate and take him down? But now it's too late.

I force myself to breathe normally and nod at Ms. Corvi, grab the 'chocolate milk,' and unscrew the cap. To pretend to drink. But I don't. I have to think of a plan, a way to get out of here. A way to get back to Bruce, or even better, to get into my Robin suit and contact Batman.

So I do the most logical thing ever. “Ms. Corvi?” I don’t overdo the sweetness or the innocence. Overdoing it is suspicious. So I keep my normal voice, my usual, if not sheepish, smile. I even toss in a bit of a slur to my words. Maybe if they think I’m getting drowsy from the drugs, they’ll be more willing to grant my request.

I can tell that Ms. Corvi’s trying not to sound annoyed. I’m supposed to be knocked out cold for this, having drunk all my chocolate milk at the beginning of the drive like a good little boy. But I’m not an ordinary boy. I’m too smart for her. She doesn’t have to know that, though. “What is it, Dick, honey?”

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I whisper, leaning forward in my seat as if this is a regular car trip. “I mean, really bad.”

“Well, why didn’t you go at the Manor?” Ms. Corvi’s smile is so forced I wonder how I ever thought it was real, how I ever liked this woman.

“Everything was happening so fast... and Bruce...” I duck my head. “Please? It’s an emergency.”

Ms. Corvi sighs and motions to her chauffeur, or the Penguin Goon, as I’m going to start calling him. “Of course, Dick. Don’t worry, there’s a gas station right there.”

Perfect.

I bounce in my seat, hold my crotch, and explode out of the car as soon as it comes to a stop. Ms. Corvi shouts for me to wait, but I don't. I run into the gas station's store. I can't get away yet. I have to loop around to get the duffel with my gear. So I go into the store, but don't go to the bathroom.

Ms. Corvi bustles inside as I hide behind the aisles of snacks and drinks, watching her make her way to the back hallway, standing right outside the boys' bathroom, tapping her foot, checking her watch, then answering her phone.

I don't wait to see who she's talking to because I'm pretty sure I already have a good idea. Instead, I wait until a group of rowdy teenagers with too many tattoos and bottles of beer walks out of the store. I don't fit with them, but I'm small enough to blend in with the group, at least until I'm sneaking back to the car.

The Penguin Goon stands there, filling up the tank with gas. I open the car door, wincing at the tiny click, but slip my hand in and pull out my duffel. My heart pounds as I yank my bag out and shut the door, my palms slick with sweat as I stroll away like I own the place, ducking around cars.

I'm about to round the corner and break into a run when Ms. Corvi bursts out of the gas station store, her face no longer friendly. Her lips turn into a snarl, her black eyes glitter, and her features, which I thought were soft and kind, are now hard and sharp, like a bird of prey.

I try to slip around the corner before she notices, but too late. I hear her screech. It grates against my ears. But I'm gone, gone, gone. I run for all I'm worth, barreling into the filthy streets, my heart racing like a rabbit's, sweat slicking my forehead. Cold surrounds me, but heat fills me. It burns. It freezes.

Because I just escaped my captors but ran into the Narrows, where not even Batman dares to go alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

THE NARROWS ESCAPE

The smog wraps around me, but I don't feel safe. I don't feel unseen. The tree's bare branches claw at me. Even the people walking down the street seem to stare at me with a hungry look. I clutch my duffel. If someone steals it, that could be the end. They'd find my suit, remember who had it, and tell all their criminal buddies who Robin is.

I don't stop. I can't. I keep running, keep going. I have to. I can't stop and ask for directions. I can't slide into a shop. I can't even run over to a police officer.

Because this place isn't like the rest of Gotham. This is a place I was never supposed to go, especially without Batman, as Robin or Dick Grayson. Because the criminals that wander these streets in broad daylight don't just work here. They operate in other parts of Gotham, where Batman and Robin swoop in, take them down... and send them to jail. So they hate Robin. But what about Dick Grayson?

Well, billionaire's kid over here. My face is plastered all over TV all the time. I've even seen myself in the newspaper and on the covers of

magazines. If they take a good look at my face, if they see me for who I am, I'm done.

So I stumble forward. My legs burn. My lungs ache. My head spins. Apparently, the drug they slipped in that chocolate milk likes to linger. One sip, one measly sip, and I run like I'm a clown, my feet tripping over my own shoes.

My breaths hitch as my legs pound against the sidewalk. I lower my head as I pass pedestrians, the windows of shops and stores glaring down at me like eyes. Whenever a car honks, I jump. I don't hear anyone running behind me, but that doesn't mean they aren't following me.

I know they're following me. My hair prickles on the back of my neck. My eyes dart to each street sign searching for anything that would point me back. Back to 'safe' Gotham. Back to Bruce.

But the signs might as well be written in a foreign language. So I take turns, I rush down alleys, but all I do is get myself more and more lost.

"Wh—where am I?" I mumble, finally stumbling to a stop, leaning against a brick wall, the grime and filth rubbing off on my polo. I want to go home. I want to go back to Bruce. I don't want to be here anymore.

I sink down against the wall, folding in on myself. I shouldn't be stopping. I should keep going, keep running, but my heart pounds, jumping like a rabbit in my chest. Sweat runs cold against my hands. Hands that feel like I've been in the pool all morning. I bury my head into my duffel. I need to find a safe place to slip into my costume. But there isn't any safe place here in the Narrows. *Nowhere safe... nowhere safe...*

Voices come down the path towards me. I shrink down against my bag and scoot further into the alley. Maybe they'll think I'm a piece of trash. Maybe they'll pass me by. Leave me alone.

I try to stop my heart from doing its dance. I try to stop my hands from shaking like this place is twenty below. But I can't. I can't.

Bruce! Where are you? Coward, coward, coward!

When the voices draw closer, I don't recognize them. I don't know them. They aren't Ms. Corvi or the Penguin Goon, but that doesn't make it better. That doesn't make me safe. When the voices get closer, I want to close my ears. They laugh in roaring waves, their words dirty, filthy, like most of the criminals in Gotham. They say words I'll never say, words that Mom would disapprove of. When they get closer, I can't

help myself. I tilt my head to the side, one eye squinting through the heavy, smoky air.

It's a group of men and a woman, their faces flushed red. They're dressed like normal people, T-shirts, jeans, they don't even have tattoos or anything. But I can see the gun strapped to a guy's hip. The knife hanging from the woman's necklace, which is honestly a terrible place for a knife.

It hits me then. This city... these people... they're ordinary people. But this place... It's sick. There's something wrong here, whether poverty, homelessness, orphans, or drugs— something about Gotham drives people crazy. Drives people to this. Because this is all, they know. And that's what has to change.

That's when I realize that while Batman is important, there's a reason why he's Bruce Wayne too. Why he makes me stand and smile during those charity benefits. Why he puts up with the snobby rich crowd. Because he's using his money to fight the war as well.

But that war isn't won. And Bruce isn't here... but these people are.

“Hey, what's that?” I don't need to look right at them to know they've spotted me. So I do the only logical thing. I scramble to my feet,

sending trash clattering and rolling, and make a break for it. I run right past them, scampering like a cat out of the alley, trying to push back the wall of water that wants to burst out of my eyes.

I hear their laughter. I hear their feet clambering on the concrete after me. I shouldn't be afraid. I'm Robin! The Boy Wonder! But no, right now, I'm Dick Grayson, the terrified orphan. Sad, I know. Call me a baby. But you get chased around by people in a place you don't know, come back, and then try to call me a baby.

A hand grabs my arm. I know it's stupid, but I scream. I scream, and I hit, swinging the duffel bag with all I have, which is quite a lot, actually. The woman stumbles back, but the men swarm me. "See if he has anything!" Their breath smells like weed and booze and all things gross. Things I get to smell when I'm out on the Gotham streets. But here? In the Narrows? The smell permeates the air. Those smells, and blood and filth, and death. They smell like death.

Their hands claw at me, touch me. They slip into my pockets and pull out my phone. They pat down my chest, and my legs. I scream again. I fight back. I can't show them I'm Robin, but I can definitely show them what a cornered animal's like. I bite, I kick, I lunge at them.

My nails scratch a guy's face, and my knee finds his crotch. The woman comes at me, her perfume trying to cover up the horrible smell, only making my eyes water as she snatches my face, her fake nails biting. I ignore what she says. Instead, I punch her in the face.

When I drop to the ground, I scramble for my phone. I need to call Bruce, but it's a conversation that I can't have here, in the open where someone could overhear us and find out our secret. When I pick it up, I wince. They cracked the screen. But I can't worry about that now, can I?

I snatch my bag and make a run for it again. I'm fast, faster than a lot of athletes at the school, but for some reason, my feet are lead. My mind races, and my vision blurs. I shouldn't be scared. These aren't supervillains. They aren't even robbers. They're just... normal muggers. So why does my heart pound in my ears? Why do I scream when I'm grabbed again, slapped, punched, when a knife is pressed against my throat?

Because I'm in the Narrows. And Bruce isn't coming. He isn't coming, because he thinks I'm going to the Home. He isn't coming because he won't come here unless he knows. And he doesn't.

“Get off me!” We do the dance again. I don’t care about the knife. My face burns, hot and pounding. My fists pound into faces, my legs kick. But I’m punched too. Punched and kicked and slammed into the ground.

“Rotten kid.” Something wet lands on my cheek, sliding down the side, but I don’t wipe it off. I curl around my duffel, my Robin suit, my hope, and don’t move. They kick me some more. They call me names. But they don’t take my phone or my duffel. They leave me lying on the pavement, my eyes clenched shut.

I hear their footsteps as they walk away, their rowdy voices echoing down the street. I still feel their hands all over me, crawling like ants in my pants. I groan when I clamber to my feet. My ribs ache. They burn. My cheek bulges, but not from food. I touch it carefully and wince. It’s swollen. I spit something red onto the sidewalk and stand, refusing to wobble as I slide my phone back into my pocket and pull the strap of my duffel back over my shoulder.

Behind me, I hear the sound of cars coming my way, so I dart back into an alley. But instead of hiding with the trash, rats, and cats, I leap the fence and find myself in some sort of neighborhood.

I can tell these homes were nice once. They have that Victorian style, but to be honest, they look more like haunted houses, strung with cobwebs, boarded-up shutters, peeling paint, and creaking, banging doors.

I walk along the deserted street, wondering at the fact that here in the Narrows, the smog's so dense that they keep the streetlamps going all day. They flicker, casting sick light across the road, dead trees, and overgrown weeds and grass. I have to stop myself from kicking the bottles and papers strewn on the road.

Instead, I search the houses for signs of life. If I can find one that's abandoned and not being used as a hideout or something, I can change in it and contact Bruce.

The houses seem to stare at me, watching. They watch me as I stumble along, watch me as I inspect them. People shuffle around in some. One house actually looks lived in, clean. I stop in front of that one, peering up at it. The boards still peel with paint, sagging with termites and centuries, but they're dusted clean. The lawn's well kept, mowed, and trimmed. In the flower beds are nice little roses that seem so out of place here. Alien among the weeds and overgrown grass.

I walk up to the window and peer inside. There're metal bars over the panes, like a prison, but maybe that's why they're the only ones on this street that aren't broken or dirty. Inside the house, a light's on in the living room. The inside looks just like the outside. Old, worn, but well kept. The floor's clean, everything neat and tidy, if not spare, and a father, mother, and daughter sit on the couch, watching something on their old TV.

Then they do something unthinkable. Something unheard of in the Narrows. They laugh. The people inside, they aren't like the people who attacked me, the people you'd expect to see on these streets. Especially not in this neighborhood. They match their house.

The thread on their clothes is worn, fraying, and I can tell that the little girl is wearing hand-me-downs, but they're clean. They all have clean skin, well-brushed hair, sparkling eyes, and faces. They don't fit in this world. They shouldn't be here, like me. But here they are.

And here I am.

I wipe my face, dragging my nose over my mucky arm. These are the people I swore to protect. This is why I fight the war, why I will fight as Robin... and as Dick Grayson.

If they can sit there in this place knowing what lurks right outside their door without fear, so can I.

I go to move away, but the father turns to the window and sees me. I jump back, getting ready to run. I look horrible. I'm carrying a duffel with who-knows-what inside. And I was spying on his family. For all I know, he could greet me with a gun. And why shouldn't he? I'm trespassing on his property.

I'm expecting to get yelled at. What I'm not expecting is for the door to open all the way, flooding the street with light. A light that seems to chase away the smog. I don't know why the man dares to do it, exposing himself like that. If I had a gun, I could've easily killed him. But then he looks at me. His eyes remind me of Bruce's, stern but kind.

"You alright, son?" His voice doesn't belong out here in this world full of screams. It doesn't belong on this street. But then, why shouldn't it? Why shouldn't there be people in Gotham unafraid, unwavering? People, who know the right way?

I step into the light, letting him see my face. My beat-up, swollen face. He looks at me calmly, though, as if analyzing an abandoned puppy. And maybe that's what I am.

“I’m fine.” I don’t know what else to do, so I give him a smile. What else can I say? How can I explain why I was spying on him? “Sorry about... looking through your window. It’s just, your house... it’s... nice.”

Now I sound like someone looking to crash in and take the place. But apparently, the man doesn’t think so. He just gives me a measured look. “Thank you. Son... do you need to make a phone call?”

He must’ve seen my face. That longing look I try to hide. I do need to make a phone call. I could call Bruce or even Commissioner Gordon and let them know I’m here. But this house is occupied. This looks like a house a little boy would run to for help.

I don’t know about Ms. Corvi, but I know for sure the Penguin Goon wouldn’t mind shooting up the place. And I won’t do that to anyone. So I have to push down that surge of hope, that warm fuzziness in the middle of this cold world. I have to smile and shake my head and say: “No. But thank you.”

I don’t let the man insist. I don’t let myself give into the temptation to run in there and find a safe, warm corner to hide in. I don’t let myself envision sitting with this family, telling them everything that’s happened to me.

So I turn and run away. I run, but the man doesn't chase me. He lets me go. I'm sure he sees this a lot. A kid all by themselves, beaten to a pulp on the street. Kids just like me who refuse help. I wonder if they think the same thing about not wanting to take advantage or put the family in danger. I wonder if the man thinks I'm running away because I'm too good to accept help. I hope not. I hope he knows.

I finally find a house I think will work. The door hangs open like most of them, the windows boarded up haphazardly with plywood and mismatched boards. When I step onto the stairs leading to the porch, they groan and squeal. I grimace but keep going.

Inside's got to be covered in a foot of dust. The stuff hangs in the air like a wall, tickling my lungs. I cough but still walk through the front room, searching everything for any sign of life, even though think I'd know if someone came through here. I mean, I'm leaving footprints, even when I'm walking on tiptoes.

Next, I creep upstairs, searching each bedroom, closet, and bathroom. It's like playing hide and seek with a ghost. When I'm satisfied that everywhere's clear, I walk back down to the main room.

My stomach growls at me, but I ignore it, instead crouching behind the kitchen counter and zipping open my duffel. Sure enough,

inside the black folds sits my Robin costume. Utility belt, cape, everything's here and waiting for me. But I pull out my phone first. The cracks scratch my skin as I quick dial Bruce, my fingers shaking so much I have to punch in the number five times to get it right.

When Bruce's "*Dick?*" calls to me over the line, I have to choke back a sob. It's him! I have him! He'll come for me! It's over! But then—

Creak! Something steps on the porch outside. A shadow's cast on the open door. I freeze, my mouth open. Bruce speaks into my ear.

"Dick? Dick, are you there? Dick?"

I don't answer. I hold my breath. *Too late. Too late!* I sneak back into the corner, quickly zipping the duffel bag and pulling it with me. It's no good. Whoever it is will see my footprints.

"Dick!" It's Ms. Corvi. I whimper, and Bruce hears it. Something bangs on the other end of the line. Bruce demands that I answer, asking if I'm alright, if I'm here. But I can't... I can't... "Dick! I know you're scared, sweetie, but you have to come with us." Her voice is so fasley sweet I want to throwup in my mouth. It sure is churning in my stomach.

Thump! Creak! Two shadows block the door. One small and lithe, the other tall and bulky. I try to measure my breaths to keep calm. But I

can't, oh gosh, I can't! I know they hear me because heads turn in my direction.

"Dick! Answer me—" Bruce is shaking the line, demanding to know if I'm okay, but I don't answer. I don't even make a noise.

Ms. Corvi rounds the corner, flanked by the huge Penguin Goon. Her black eyes glitter as she looks down at me, that smile not matching her thundering eyebrows. "There you are, darling." I know she sees the phone in my hand. I know she hears Bruce.

I open my mouth to scream. I have to find my voice. I have to let him know! He has to— The phone's gone from my hand. It's in hers. It's against her ear. "Oh, Bruce, I am so sorry! No, no, he's alright. Yes, I know. The poor thing was having a nightmare and accidentally butt-dialed you. No, he's alright. Yes, we are at the Home now."

"N—" I start to scream, but the goon is on top of me now. His meaty hand slams around my face, blocking my mouth and nose, pressing in, squishing, biting my cheeks.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we will have a court date soon." Ms. Corvi gives me such a look I think she might actually be a demon. That glee, that smirk— I hate her. I can't believe I ever liked her. I struggle against the thug's grasp, my hands clawing at his. My cheeks bulge red. I

can hold my breath for a long time, but I didn't have time to take in a breath. My lungs burn.

But more than that, Bruce is hanging up. "Of course, I will. Have a wonderful day, Mr. Wayne." *Click.* He's gone. *Clunk!* Ms. Corvi drops my phone. *Smash!* She grinds it to dust under the heel of her stilettos. "Well, well." She stalks towards me. No more illusions of niceness. No more feigns of kindness. She's a hawk, and I'm a mouse. "Someone has been very naughty."

I do the only thing I know how to do, the only thing I've been doing for the past few weeks. I fight. I slam my elbows in the Penguin Goon's stomach and slip out of his grasp. I try to make a break for it, but something sharp and quick snaps into my side. I slam into the rickety old counter, smashing through the cabinets, and roll across the floor on the other side.

I groan, grabbing my ribs. Ms. Corvi clicks over to me, rolling up the sleeves on her uniform, showing what I haven't seen before. What I should have suspected. The tattoo of an emperor penguin the size of my thumb. "Well, well, well, Richard. So, Wayne did teach you something."

“You’re not a nice lady.” I spit, clambering to my feet, ignoring the way I wobble. I hold my fists in front of me. I can’t go all Robin on them, but I can fight back. They can’t take me. They won’t.

“Oh, I thought you liked me, sweetie.” She lunges forward in a perfect roundhouse kick, her high heels lethal weapons. I dodge, slipping and sliding on the dust, not grabbing her leg like I could if I was Robin, but landing a punch on her vulnerable side.

It doesn't even phase her. So I do the next logical thing. I tackle her. I throw my entire weight forward as I wrap my arms around her waist, driving me forward and her backward, sending us both crashing to the ground.

“You’re not nice!” I don’t know what else to say. It’s like my tongue’s failed me. So I let my fist do the talking. I don’t like punching girls. But crazy ladies who prey on little boys and kidnap them for their boss? I have no problem hitting them. “Not nice!” I scream in her face, yanking her hair, snapping her lanyard. “Bruce’ll figure out where I am! He’ll come and get me! You’ll get sent to prison, you horrible woman!”

“Get over here and shut him up!” At first, for some reason, I think she’s talking to me. But that can’t be right. It’s not until I feel the massive, meaty hands grabbing me that I remember the Goon. I thrash

and kick. I headbutt into his chest. I scream. But I'm not Robin. I'm Dick Grayson. Dick Grayson, the boy who only knows a little self-defense. Dick Grayson, who can't beat a full-grown man in a fight.

Ms. Corvi stands up. Her outfit's rumbled, her hair frizzy and tangled, her nose bleeding, and her makeup smeared. I'm satisfied, but only for a moment. Then, she's close, too close. Ironically, she's the only one that smells nice in this place. Like vanilla and mint.

But her hand is on my face. Her nails are talons biting into my cheek. Her smile's cold, not at all nice. Her black eyes bore into mine. "I can see why someone is interested in you, brat." No more 'sweeties' for me, I guess. "You *are* feisty."

I want to spit in her face or even ask why someone would want a feisty little boy, but something pinches my neck. A needle slides in. Fire burns through my veins. The world spins like a top, blurring into blobs of dark, dreary color. My head floats up, up, up, but I can still hear Ms. Corvi's voice close to me. "Load him up. And tie him up this time. The Penguin wants no more delays."

"Bruce..." My voice slurs as I float away from everything, even as something rotten is stuffed into my slack mouth. I barely feel it between my teeth as the color fades to black. "Bruce.. wer'you?"

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

I MEET THE STUBBY BIRD

I remember this feeling. This strange sensation, like my head's detached from my body. This feeling of my arms and legs strapped down, unable to move. But it's also like the closer my head gets to my body, the closer my eyes get to opening, the more my head pounds like a clown's hitting it over and over with a glass bottle.

My stomach churns, but as my head gets reattached, not literally, we're talking in figuratives here, I finally feel it. The pain. The dull ache of my body. My ribs yell at me as if it's my fault they got kicked in. My cheek slaps me for getting it slapped. So this is what old people mean by your own body turning against you. Wow, this stinks.

At first, I don't remember where I am or what happened. Everything's cast in fog, like someone took me and dumped me into a swamp. But then it comes back. Bruce losing me, them taking me away, kidnapping me. The Narrows— Ms. Corvi. The needle—

Oh, I'm in so much trouble. Maybe Babs is right. Maybe I am the poster boy for kidnapping. Either that or I'm well on my way. Wow, what

a thing to be known for. Dick Grayson, the boy who got kidnapped... repeatedly.

Even as my mind wakes up, I don't stir. I refuse. It worked well when Zucco got me, knowing what my surroundings were. But now it's even more important. Because even if Bruce suspects something's off unless he has a tracker activated in my Robin suit, he won't be able to find me.

So it really *is* up to me now.

So I sit, and I drool. But I don't have a rag stuffed in my mouth this time, oh no. Whoever took me, Ms. Corvi, *cough*, decided it'd be a fantastic idea to shut the little boy's mouth with ducttape. I can feel it, stretching over my lips and cheeks, the sticky stuff pulling.

I didn't really think about it last time, you know, because Zucco was there, but I really don't like being gagged. My mouth is my deadliest weapon. Well, okay, not, but still, it's fun to think about it that way.

Why am I being so upbeat, you might ask? Because I can't let myself crack now. I can't let myself be scared. At least, not yet. If I want to get back to Bruce, I need to stay calm. At least, until I wake up. I can let myself cry when I wake up. I might be a good actor, but it always

helps to actually have all those emotions stirring and roiling in my stomach like a pot of spaghetti.

So I play possum and listen closely. I'm in a closed space, an average room size. From how the air circulates, there're vents in the regular placings, small like in a house or an apartment building or something.

In front of me is a desk, I think, from the shadow over my knees. The door is behind me, and a window, no, a wall of windows is in front of me. There's light, but it's not warm or bright. I must still be in the Narrows, which makes sense because I'm pretty sure I know exactly where I am, or sort of where I am.

Someone else, no, three someones are in the room with me. Two stand behind me by the door. Their breaths are deep, high up. Two goons guarding my escape, most likely.

Another person is in front of me, on the other side of a desk. But their breath is closer to me, in height, that is. And it's not deep; it's nasally, wheezing, like the person's breathing through a snotty nose.

The AC whirls overhead, the desk creaks, and footsteps thump towards me. So I think it's about time I discover what my position is in all of this. I'm tied to a chair, but not with zip ties this time. Someone

decided to be very creative and lock me down with metal cuffs. But not handcuffs, oh no, they're attached to the chair. And, as far as I can tell, the lock is right on top. So I guess 'tied to a chair' is a generic term cause' I'm bolted to a chair. I suppose they heard about my escape from the trunk of the first kidnapping, or more like, my attempted escape, and made adjustments.

Apparently, I'm a celebrity. Fancy that.

"Wake him up." The voice isn't like any I've ever heard, not even the Joker's. The Joker's sounded like a teenage boy going through puberty, okay, a very creepy teenage boy, but still human. This voice sounds like someone threw dust, snot, mud, and all things gross on this guy's vocal cords.

There's the creak of a chair as something, or someone heavy sits across from me, then the thump of heavy boots as one of the two goons walks up to me. I have to fight not to stiffen or flinch when arms bend around me from behind.

A small snap sounds below my nose, the overwhelming smell of ammonia billowing into my nostrils. I can't help it, even if I wanted to. I breathe in suddenly, my eyes snapping open. I jerk in the chair, accidentally hitting my head against the hard chest of the guy behind me.

He pulls the small cracked stick of smelling salts away. My heart begins to pound, my brain whirling back to life.

Well, alright then. Apparently, they want me awake and alert for this. I don't know how to feel about that. But I can work with this. I do what I want to do, what any scared little boy would do. I whip my head around wildly, frantically, and though I let my eyes finally leak the burning tears I tried to keep walled up, I memorize the room.

It's like a typical office, but dark, you know, like the offices in those noir films? The lights are off, casting the room in shadow. The furnishing is spare, but there's a fish tank set along one wall, and when I say fish tank, I mean a massive tank with giant fish lounging around, swimming in lazy circles. That's the only light in the room. The rest of the room has a huge cabinet, a couple chairs, and a desk. I have to force myself to look at the desk, at the man sitting across from me.

I already know who he is. I've read his case files and seen pictures. Oswald Chesterfield Cobblepot, heir to the dying Cobblepot fortune. Most people don't really talk about it other than in hushed whispered gossip, but his face is scarred. In fact, when I finally look at him, taking in that beak of a nose, those dark beady eyes, and that mauled

face, all I can think of is a man who's been mutilated by a lion. But what really happened to him? I don't think anyone really knows.

Not even Batman.

If it wasn't for the scars, he'd be a nice-looking man, I think. His hair isn't greasy or unkempt. It's tidy under his top hat, a distinguished salt and pepper. Just looking at it makes me want to sneeze. He's dressed in a three-piece velvet suit and a flawless white button-up collared shirt pressed to perfection. The purple vest just purrs checks with tons of zeros, and the blazer and crossover tie just screams something that Alfred would wear. Add the gloves, the polished cuff links, and the smart monocle perched under one eye, and the Penguin would fit right in at a Wayne gala. He's potbellied, posh, and if it wasn't for the scars twisting his smile, I think I'd actually like him.

"Young Grayson." Then he speaks. I don't like to judge people on appearances; I mean, that's not fair at all. But the way he says my name is enough to shatter the image of a potential gentleman. It's not just the croaking voice or the glint in his hungry little eyes. It's the way his voice drips with honey, just like Ms. Corvi's.

I wonder where she is.

I don't bother to hold back my small whimper. Now is the time to let it all out. This is the time to vent. After this, I have to be sane and ready. After this, I won't have time to feel sorry, scared, mad, or angry.

"Let the boy speak." He's too nice. He chortles at me, picking up what looks suspiciously like a slimy, limp sardine, and pops it in his mouth. *Crunch!* I think I finally threw up in my mouth. When the man still standing behind me reaches for the piece of tape stuck over my mouth, I shake my head, my protests muffled. I don't want to lose my lips! I need those!

Riiip! I gasp, wanting nothing more than to cover my mouth, to feel just how much skin I lost. Good thing I can't grow a mustache yet. I think I would've just lost it.

"Y-you're the Penguin." Just because now is the time to vent doesn't mean I'm not ashamed of how my voice shakes, how my lips tremble.

The Penguin smiles; does he even have lips? And leans forward, steepling his hands. I would say fingers, but when I look at them, all I see are misshapen mitts. Really, what happened to this guy? "Excellent, Richard." Something cold slips down my spine. He shouldn't know my name. It doesn't sound right, hacking out of his mouth like a furball.

“And do you know—” He takes another sardine and tosses it into his mouth. *Crunch!* I can’t stop myself this time. I have to let it all out right now, right? So I gag. He ignores me, picking up a small white napkin and dabbing at his mouth like this is the most normal thing in the world, “Why you are here?”

I know why I’m here. I’m here because Penguin was hired to get me for some ‘interested party,’ but Dick Grayson doesn’t know that. All Dick Grayson knows is that he was kidnapped. That I was taken from Bruce and just ran through the Narrows. All I know is how much I’m shaking, biting my lip to try and look brave. “N-no.” I stutter, trying to shrink away from him and his fishy breath. But he’s leaning forward, his nose inches from mine.

“Well, now, any ideas?” The Penguin dangles a sad little anchovie in front of my nose. I look at it cross-eyed. I’ve decided something. I hate fish. I really, really do.

“I... I’m the ward of Bruce Wayne?” That’s all Dick Grayson would think of because Dick Grayson doesn’t know anything. And even if he suspected, that would be the most obvious conclusion.

“While I must admit that Daddy Money Bags would pay a handsome ransom.” *Toss, crunch.* I gag again, trying, *trying.* May I stress

this here, not to throw up. The Penguin sees, and his eyes glitter. He thinks it's funny. "That's not why you're here, Chickie."

His hand is on my face. I don't care if it's gloved or not. I don't care what horrible things happened to him. My skin crawls. Because I finally know why his hand looks so weird. There are only two fingers, two giant fingers, and a thumb attached to his palm. Still, he grabs my chin and turns me this way and that. Inspecting. I don't say anything. I just bite my lip and get it out. My shoulders shake, and my eyes burn. I need a plan. I need to get out of here.

"There are some people interested in you, Chickie." I don't like that nickname, but it's not the worst I've been called. Maybe if I keep quiet, he'll keep talking. Maybe he'll give something away. "And not just my original buyers, oh no." His voice is too close. His breath smells like the warehouse Zucco took me to, you know, like the sea and a rotten fish market. If my eyes weren't leaking already, they would be now.

His hands run along my swollen cheek. It hurts, and I let him know. I flinch; I try to get away, but he's walking around the desk. No, waddling is more like it. Wow, he's really set himself up as a penguin, hasn't he?

My chair is pushed away from the desk. The Penguin's standing right over me, short, squat, funny looking, but— His hand strokes my neck. It's nothing sharp, nothing dangerous, but I know better. He is in control now. "Apparently, you are quite the prize, Chickie. Looks, charm, wit, I don't know how you and Wayne have it all." He was feigning niceness before; no, niceness isn't the word. It was more like he was trying to be pleasant. But when he says 'Wayne,' his voice grows dark, bitter. His smile isn't a smile. It's a sneer.

I want to get away even though I know I can't right now. But I'm Dick Grayson. I can be scared of him. *Just let it all out now. It's not acting. It's the truth.* Well, mostly the truth anyway. I mean, I'm pretty sure I can kick his sorry butt, but he doesn't know that. So I jerk at the bonds and try to scoot the chair back, but his hands are on mine, pushing me down. His nose is right in my face, and as I look at it crosseyed, it looks like a knife.

"What do you say, Chickie?" Oh boy, his breath smells bad. I mean, fish? Really? "Should we start the bidding at... one million?"

I freeze. The bidding? What? Is there more than one interested party? *But... but...* My stomach churns. I mean, sure, I'm popular. Most people would love that. But... why would they even want me? I don't

actually want to know. I don't, so I don't ask. "Do you have... a breath mint?" I can't help myself. Sure, my face is red and puffy. Sure, my nose is leaking snot and boogers. Sure, I look sad and pathetic. But really, can't the guy get a breath mint?

The Penguin cocks his head to the side. His tongue clicks like a chicken. He makes a noise that I can only think of as 'Gollum' from The Lord of the Rings. "I'm going to ignore that, Chicke." He pats my face and steps back. I'll need a serious shower after this. My skin crawls like ants running up and down, their tiny feet tickling me. "And because I'm such a nice man, I'll even leave you to watch the bidding. How does that sound?"

Snap! A bright light blinds me for a second. Only after the spots clear from my eyes do I realize that his monocle just took a picture of me. He's over by the computer, muttering to himself, though it sounds more like mud squelching. I rub my cheek on my shoulder where he touched, trying to rub off the feeling of his fingers. Apparently, he thinks that's funny too.

"Wha wha wha!" His laugh sounds more like a baby crying than a real laugh. But I don't laugh at him. I can't. Not with that hard, beady

look in his eyes. He smiles at me, but instead of just twisting his scarred lips, he pulls them apart.

My blood's ice. Now I understand the crunching. His teeth are all filed into points, like a shark's. Why would he do that to himself? Then, I notice what he's doing on his computer. It looks like an eBay auction site, but not. I've never seen the logo before, probably because this is a dark website. My arms and legs go numb when I see the page. It's the picture of me and more pictures of me doing my acrobatics, or photos from the magazines.

That alone is creepy enough, but under it, I can just barely read the caption. *'Richard Grayson, Last of the Flying Graysons. Bidding starts at one million.'* My heart stops when the Penguin hits post and steps aside, pulling the screen closer to me. I can't take my eyes off it. The numbers are already pulling up, and every time something *dings* on the Penguin's waistcoat.

Comments are dropping too. One of them, the first one, doesn't seem interested in the bidding. In fact, it seems to be calling Penguin out, saying that they had a deal and that they'll settle this. That can only be the original interested party.

I scan the comment for a user name or any useful information, but somehow everything is blank. *Blank, blank, blank.*

The other comments do have helpful information, though. I want to puke, but I read them anyway. These aren't some dirty traffickers, at least, not how I'd thought they'd be. All of these people are interested in my background as a gymnast. Things like *'Let's see him with a pair of daggers'* or *'Just think how much he'd add to my act'* pop up.

I archive the comments in my mind. One is obviously a dirty circus owner, not C.C. Haly, because he'd never do anything like this, but he's a gem in the rough. The others sound like professional mercenaries or assassins. But Dick Grayson shouldn't know that. Dick Grayson shouldn't be paying attention to that.

So I let my eyes burn. I let a whimper slide out of my gunk-filled throat. "B-but Bruce can pay you more!" Sad, I know, but hey, it's worth a shot.

"I'm sure he could." The Penguin's voice is in my ear. His breath is on my neck. I squirm again, my wrists banging against the restraints. It tears, it hurts, but I don't care. Dick Grayson may be scared, but he can still put up a fight. "But that would be bad for business, Chickie.

Disappointing to my clients. Especially after all I had to do to get you to me.”

Time to go fishing. I have to play this right. I’m smart, but he can’t know that. “Y-you mean Zucco?”

“Why do you think he showed up at the circus?” He’s circling me now, like I’m a mouse and he’s a hawk, not a Penguin. “Why do you think he bothered to come back?”

Tink! Something heavy and metal drops into my lap. I look down and bite back a scream. The bolts. The bolts to the trapeze. *But... but...* “Why? What did they ever do to you?” I gasp, my voice catching on the lump in my throat. Why? Why did the Penguin target my parents? Why would someone want me that much?

“I don’t ask questions, Chickie.” The Penguin’s in front of me. His hand grips my chin, forcing me to look right at him, right at those shark-like teeth. “I just get paid.”

“There are other ways—” *Smack!* I can’t stop myself. But should I even try? My head whips as he backhands me, my cheek screaming at me, a cry ripping from my lips. Why can’t he just leave already? Why can’t I just slip free?

“Don’t talk to me about wealth, Chickie.” I can’t look at him. I can’t show him that I’m a threat, that I’m understanding more of this than he thinks. *But... but... Murderer! Murderer!* “You had everything handed to you.” I get ready for a speech, a villain monologuing session, but he’s walking away. Leaving me, leaving me with the computer with those numbers racking up, *dinging* in his waistcoat. “I have to regain my fortune. Honor to the Cobblepots.”

Slam! The door shakes on its hinges, and I’m left alone with a computer and two goons. I’d love to get my hands on this PC, on all the files that’d put him away for good, but I don’t have time.

I let my breathing slow, calm. Then, I let something drop out of my closed hand. Something that I slipped into my bracelet. Not a lockpick, which would be better, but one of Ms. Corvi’s bobby pins that I nicked when I pulled her hair earlier. What? There’s a rhyme to my insane actions. I’m not that crazy. I think.

I let the pin drop on my foot, grabbing it with my toes before it can slide away. Why do I not open the restraints on my hands first, you might ask? Well, the locks are on the top, out of reach from even my fingers. But no one thought a person could undo a lock with their feet.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch the guards. They aren't very good at their job. They stand at the door, whispering to each other, laughing over something on one of their phones. So I work the bobby pin into the locking mechanism, sticking out my tongue with effort. *Click!*

I wince at the sound, but the guards don't notice. I pull my leg free, rotating my ankle before unlocking my other foot. Now, for the tricky part. If they so much as glance up, they'll catch me. So I slowly lift my leg and curl it over, so the bobby pin hovers over the lock on my wrists. My heart pounds a million miles a minute as my leg strains and stretches. Okay, and can I just say that, even for a trapeze artist, bending in such an unnatural way is not comfortable. Then again, it has to be done. Besides, what's more pain?

Click! One hand's free. I snatch the pin with my fingers, quickly letting my legs drop into a normal position. I stop myself from a breath of relief. I know they won't notice anything unnatural now, but still, I don't want their attention, not yet.

Click! My other hand's free. I rub at my raw wrists, accidentally smearing the blood. Oh well. Now I do take a deep, steady breath. I have to be quick, quiet, and efficient. They can't know what hit 'em.

I slide out of the chair, my sneaker-free feet not making any noise on the carpeted hardwood. Two moves. That's all I get. So I take them. I leap up and forward, launching myself at the first goon. *Whap!* My fist hits his temple, and his eyes roll back into his head. *Smack!* My foot slams into the back of the other guy's head just as he tries to whip around.

They crash to the ground, but I don't wait for anyone to hear the noise. I slip out of the door, wiping my face with a hand, immediately heading into the shadows. It's time to show them all what Dick Grayson, no, what *Robin* is made of.

But first things first, I need to find a bathroom. No, I don't need to go, but the bathroom usually has bigger vent access. I'm not about to try and figure out how to find my duffel while trying to sneak past goons and security cameras.

So I find the nearest restroom and slip into the men's side, even though it doesn't really matter... okay, so it does matter. I don't want to go into no stinkn' girly bathroom. I search all the stalls for signs of anyone, you know, like the total creeper I am, then find a lovely little grated panel over the sinks.

Who knew that it hurts to try to unscrew things with your fingernails? But I still manage it, pulling the panel back, crawling into my happy place. I crawl along the metal drafts, peering through each grate, looking, searching.

I find Penguin before I find my suit. He's talking to two other people, both women. One I recognize. It's Ms. Corvi, but she's dressed in a sleek business suit, looking more like a girl spy than anything else, her hair smoothed back, her makeup immaculate, her eyes cold, like a bird's. The other woman's dressed similarly, but she's skinnier, sharper, and honestly reminds me more of Zucco than anything else.

“Chickadee, Sparrow, I want you two to handle the tradeoff.” Penguin's a lot shorter than they are, but I can tell that they aren't about to deck him. Now he's carrying a smart-looking black umbrella, but don't let that fool you. It's not an ordinary umbrella. “I will be watching from behind. No funny business.”

I can't listen to the rest of the conversation, as much fun as it sounds. Time's ticking. So I move on, searching until I find it: a room filled with weapons, immaculately organized, just waiting for someone to come in and select their poison. But on top of a table, still unopened, sits my duffel.

I press my face against the grate, scanning for signs of life, for any guard that might sound the alarm. But no one breathes. No one watches. So I kick out the grate and fall into a crouch. The room's huge, its tables and cases black, the lights glowing an eerie purple. Apparently, Batman's not the only one who likes that kind of thing.

I find the security cameras and sneak through their blind spots, mostly, anyway. I'm not perfect, especially without my gear. Speaking of which—I snatch my duffel and slide away, making it seem to anyone watching the feed that I've left the room. What I really do, though, is slide under the table.

I've learned to change quickly, which is important in an emergency. A hero can't take forever to get into his costume, especially with lives on the line, so I slip into my Robin suit, feeling better as soon as I press the mask over my face.

But here's the problem. I'm still injured. Penguin will notice, figure it out. So I grab a small patch from my utility belt. I only have one of these for emergencies, but then again, this is kinda an emergency.

I press the patch over my cheek, letting the cool liquid seep onto my swollen skin. Batman hasn't told me what it is, only that his adult superhero team has been working on it for a while. You know, those big

names like Flash and Green Lantern and Martin Manhunter, honestly, why would a hero call himself the Manhunter? Anyway, the patch does its job.

The swelling goes down, leaving only a tiny scratch, still red and aching, but not something that the Penguin would recognize other than it just being a battle wound.

My gloves and boots will cover my wrists and, with a little mussing of my hair, Dick Grayson is gone. Robin is in the house.

I zip out from under the table, a black and gold blur to the cameras, and leap back to the vents. I'd love to leave, you know, make a break for it, but I don't have transportation or even know where in the Narrows I am.

So priority one, contact Batman.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

MY DAD, THE BAT

I stop at an intersection of the vents, pulling up my holo screen from my gloves. I never knew I could ever miss the comforting blue glow so much, but there it is. My heart slows as I type on the holo pad, pulling up my lists of contacts. There are so many ways to communicate, so why use this way, you might ask? Well, you never know if someone could pick up the signal and trace it back to you, and my holo feed runs through our own satellite, so... you do the math.

Bruce, or Batman, picks up instantly. It's nighttime, so he's probably stalking Gotham, probably around the GCHB, hoping I'll come out to meet him.

“Robin.” I've never been so happy to hear that growl, but I don't have any more tears to cry. Besides, I've decided that Robin doesn't cry.

“Where are you? That phone call—”

“Listen carefully,” I hate the way my voice echoes through the vents, but there's nothing I can do about it. Nothing, except getting straight to the point. “Dick Grayson was kidnapped. Those GCHB workers were the Penguin's agents.” I can tell Batman wants to say

something, but he doesn't. He knows. "I was able to free him and infiltrate their base, but I need a pick-up. Penguin in the immediate facility."

"Just got a lock on your location." Batman's voice doesn't give anything away, but even by just his voice, I can see his eyes soften, then harden. And that's enough. It has to be, 'cause that's all I'm going to get, at least for now. **"On my way. I need you to disable their security. Keep the Grayson kid safe. Batman out."**

Now, you may be wondering why I'm talking about myself in the third person. Well, echoing, remember? No one wants to get caught tonight. Still, it's everything I can do to keep myself from calling Batman again and telling him everything that happened about the Penguin and his creepy bidders.

But I can't. I have a job to do. I tap a few icons on my holo and narrow my eyes. As far as I can tell, I'm in a skyscraper called the Aviary, Penguin's base of operations. This thing has fifty-five stories and, from the pictures, a helipad on the top.

Perfect.

I crawl through the vents again, my cape dragging behind me. This is the one thing I don't like about my cape. It can get caught on everything and anything, be grabbed and stuff, but it's still useful.

When I reach a four-way intersection, I look at the blueprints I snatched of the Aviary off the web. Okay, snatched isn't the right word. What? Don't look at me like that; this is part of my job! Anyway, as far as I can tell, the security room is on the forty-first floor.

I lean out into the vertical tunnel, looking down first. The tube falls stories, the smallest bits of light coming from the fans and vents that lead out into the open. Along the sides are huge painted numbers. I follow them until I'm craning my neck up. Up to the letter marked thirty. Not even close.

What kind of villain has his office on the tenth level? If it were me, I'd have my office on the top floor. Oh, and a penthouse too. But I'm not a crime boss, am I?

I pull myself back into my tunnel and start rummaging through my utility belt. My grappling hook could work, but even that could run out of line. But Batman thinks of everything so— "Ah ha!" I can't help myself, okay? And I don't care if a small '*ah ha!*' scares some goon in the bathroom.

I fish out an extra length of thin monofilament wire, then pull out my grappling gun. I pull the thing apart, careful not to lose any parts because that would be a disaster, and detach the original coil of wire. This thing can shoot up to a normal-sized apartment building or the GCPD building, but a skyscraper like this baby? Yeah, no, I'd be at the end of my rope... quite literally.

I take out a small welding tool and get to work. It doesn't take long. Soon, I'm putting my gun back together, clicking the pieces back in place, leaning dangerously out of my tunnel, and pointing my gun up. Now, to see if this thing has enough power to— *whomp!* The line zips up, snaking out of sight, until the noise echoes back to me. The noise of success.

I tease my weight on the line, pulling down until it goes tight. I don't hesitate to jump out over the drop. I swing around, my feet dangling over what seems like nothing, my hand gripping the handle of my gun. Now, to see how far up I got this baby.

I click the button, and I'm zooming up, my cape billowing behind me, my hair swept back. I narrow my masked eyes, blinking to enhance the readings on my HUD. I bang to a stop at level forty. Almost perfect, but not quite.

Oh well.

I detach the hook from its support and slide into the horizontal tunnel, leading me into level forty. What? Did you think I really wanted to clamber up to the next level over that drop? Would you want to?

I only have to go a few feet until there's another vent intersection. I climb up, bracing my hands on the sides and letting my boots stand on the smallest holds, which are the tiny seams where the bolts hold the panels in place.

By the time my head pops up into the tunnel system going over level forty-one, I think I've had enough of vents for at least a day. Okay, at least for tonight.

I'm so tempted to say something, anything. It's so quiet here, crawling with the dust and the drafts, but then I look down and see the people bustling below me. You know, thugs going about their daily business. Did you know that crime bosses have the sweetest coffee bars? I mean, really!

The security room isn't so different from the one in the Manor. Except this one has, you know, actual *people* sitting in it, staring at the screens. They're horrible at their job because only now, when I'm right above them, do they notice.

“Hey, what’s that?” It’s a woman. She leans forward, tapping a monitor. “Are they sleeping on the job?”

“No, Tye and Marty wouldn’t—” The man stops in his tracks, looking up from his Daily Gotham Sports magazine to stare at the monitor. The monitor of the Penguin’s office, where two guards are still passed out on the ground, and I’m not restrained in a chair, “Sound the alarm!”

You know those movies where the main lights turn off, and all the alarms flash red? Did you know that that’s actually a thing when alarms go off? I mean, I never knew!

From up here, I can see the guards and goons rushing along the halls. I can see the Penguin look up and snarl right at the cameras, almost as if he knows that I’m watching him.

I can see Ms. Corvi, or Chickadee, love the name, by the way, and her Sparrow companion stalks towards the Penguin’s office. The guy security guard— should he even be called that? I mean, he stinks at his job— pulls out a small mike and speaks, sending his voice rolling over a PA system. “The Asset has escaped. I repeat, the Asset has escaped. We have a code nine six six. I repeat, a nine six six.”

I wait until the PA clicks off. Until the two guards who stink at their job turn to each other, the girl whispers. “How did the kid get out?”

“I don’t know. Did you see anything?” The guy’s looking around nervously as if this little Dick Grayson kid, *hah*, will pop out of the walls to scare him.

“You don’t think....” The woman’s eyes might as well be rolling around on the floor for how big and round they are. “You don’t think it’s the Bat and the Robin, do you?”

“Here?” The man laughs, but it hitches. Please, I could do so much better. “The Bat knows he can’t come here. He—”

I drop a small, round pellet the size of a marble through the grates. The guards look down at it as if it's some sort of strange anomaly. Then, *hiss*, the room fills with green smoke, or at least what looks like green smoke.

I pull my small gas mask out of my belt and put it on as I leap down through the vents, landing in a crouch, my cape spreading out around me. Why is no one ever watching when I do my coolest landings? Oh well.

I stroll forward to their setup and pull a USB cable out of my gloves, slotting it into a port and popping up my holo display. “And, I’m

in.” I type fast, breaking through firewall after firewall. You know, to get the good stuff. “Motion sensors, cameras, fire doors, please.” I type faster, the screens flickering as I reset them. You know, to a loop? What? It’s a classic! “Give me a challenge, Pengy.” I scan my holo for any systems left, squinting at one that says ‘Aviary doors.’ Well, that doesn’t make sense because I already deactivated all the doors. So I leave it alone.

I leave it alone as I leap back up into the vent, leaving the two guards passed out on the ground. Honestly, they need to find another profession. You know, something they're actually good at?

“How did he get past the guards?” I frown at the Penguin’s voice. Of course, he’s coming here, to the security room. I slide away from the vent, which I’m now regretting popping open like a soda can. “He’s an acrobat, not Houdini.”

“Sir, we believe he had help.” I hate that voice. Ms. Corvi. How could she do this? I mean, is money even worth hurting kids? *Kids?*

“Maybe one of the clients?”

“None of them have the gall to—” They step into the security room. I freeze, lying flat on the vent floor, would it be called a floor? And keep my breath quiet. If I crawl away now, they’ll definitely hear me.

“What is this?” His voice croaks, but it’s quiet, the question simple. I can just imagine him looking at his two sucky guards rather than at the tiny pellet on the ground. I hope there’re some traces of gas there too. I’d love to knock all of them out. But no. “Replay the tapes from all the cameras within the last ten minutes.” His voice rakes at my ears, his deep-throated chortle sending ice sliding down my back.

I can’t see, but I can just imagine them scanning through all the footage. This is the moment of truth. The moment when I find out if my ploy worked. Because if they find out that Dick Grayson is Robin—

“Look at that.” I hear the click of his oxfords, the extra tap of his umbrella as he paces, no, prowls around. “Look at him go. The flexible little Chickie.” They’re watching my escape from my chair. I can’t hold back a grin. “Curse Wayne for teaching him.”

“But look at that!” That’s a new voice, the Sparrow’s voice. Really, why do they have to have bird names, too? Unfair. “He took his belongings and ran for it. Then there! Right there! That blur—”

“He had help.” *Tap, tap, click.* The Penguin’s right below me, picking up my tiny gas pellet. I hear a squelching noise. What’s he doing? Sticking it in his mouth? Gosh, dude! “Knock out gas... and this pelt is of Bat design.”

“The Batman? Here?” Ms. Corvi— Chickadee’s— voice is laced with hate. “He wouldn’t dare. Not for a boy.”

“No.” The squelching noise stops. I hold my breath. “Look at the shape, the color of the blur. The Bat sent his little bird.”

“To the Narrows?” Sparrow’s laughter is high, giggling. Chirping. Oh boy. “He’s a fool. Why would he send the little brat and not come himself?”

“A boy for a boy.” *Click, click, tap.* The Penguin’s squinting at the monitors, I can tell. Trying to predict me, my next move, my rescue of, well, myself. “He knows that Grayson will relax more around a kid than a dark shadow.”

“Where is he?” *Smash!* Apparently, Ms. Corvi has anger issues I was not aware of. “Let us handle him, Ossie. I’ll break the Birdy’s wings!”

Wow. How did she ever get approved to work with children? I start to scoot back. If they’re on to me, I have to get to the roof. I have to be ready for Batman. I can’t get trapped, especially not here, with them. Honestly, why did ol’ Pengy not send out this terrible duo in the first place? I mean, what, are they his prized pets or something?

“Our top priority is Grayson. That’s my multi-million dollar investment. We have a buyer, ladies, but we need something to sell.” I freeze as Penguin’s voice shouts. Oh boy, it sounds like he’s gargling seawater. Really, what happened to this guy? “Do you hear that, Boy Wonder? That Grayson kid is mine!”

Oh, I heard him, alright. Yuck. I start crawling away faster, wincing every time there’s the slightest squeak from my palms against the metal. I get pretty far, but not far enough to miss: “He gassed our men. Let’s return the favor.”

Oh no.

I touch my mask, making sure it’s secure on my face. The Penguin isn’t known for his toxins like the Joker or the Scarecrow, but gas doesn’t have to have a deadly or weird effect to be a bother or trouble. If I lose my mask or get knocked out right over a vent, I’m done. Or at least Batman will have to come in to get me, which is a violation of rule one I’ve made up for myself. Never have Batman save you. He has more important things to do. What about me being kidnapped now or by Zucco? Well, that was Dick Grayson. And he’s not coming to rescue me. He’s coming to give me a ride. Big difference.

The gas begins to flow through the vents. I can't see it, but I can hear it. I can feel it. The cool air is suddenly colder, sending my arm hair prickling like a hedgehog. Besides, who can mistake that hiss coming from the fans? I breathe normally, working my way through the vents, safe behind my mask. I'll be fine as long as it stays on and doesn't sprout a leak or something.

I keep on going up, up, and up. Honestly, who invented skyscrapers? I mean, they're cool, don't get me wrong, but that's when you get to go up in the elevators and look out over the city.

Clambering through the ventilation or up the stairs just stinks.

When I finally reach the top floor, I pop open the vent and leap out. You'd think that I'd race for the roof access door and get it over with, but no. I stand, my back to the wall, and take off my breathing mask because, let's be real, I'm wearing a regular mask too, and just breathe.

I never thought I wouldn't like vents, but there it is. Climbing up thirty-one stories worth of vents? It's horrible. What? You try it sometime, then come back and tell me how you like it.

I know I can't take long, but I manage a couple of minutes of just breathing. I don't know if he'll be there when I walk out that door. I don't know what the plan's going to be. A quick escape... or an attack? I mean,

if we're here already, might as well, right? But then, I don't know where Batman will be, I mean, emotionally and mentally speaking.

I don't even know where I am. Part of me just wants to go home. And not to the Home, oh no. I want to go home to the Manor. To my room. I want to curl up in my blankets and sleep. But then, being a superhero doesn't mean you always get what you want, does it?

With a sigh, I shove off the wall and run the rest of the way to the roof access. No one guards it, which I find funny. What is Penguin so confident in his empire and safety here in the Narrows that he's not prepared for this? Or did Batman already take out the goons?

I get my answer when I shove open the door and leap into the thick Gotham air. The smog lies even heavier up here, even blacker now that it's night. It blocks out the moon and the stars, leaving the dingy lights below as the only sign that I'm not walking in a cave or something.

When I get out, I notice two things. One, there's a pile of goons next to the door, all out cold and pathetic, their suits rumpled, their guns tossed aside like nothing. Two, he's standing there, his back to me, draped in a cape that billows in the wind. He's a shadow, not a man. He's not someone you could just walk up to. But I do. No, I don't walk; I sprint toward him. He turns around, of course, he does, and looks right at

me. And for once, for the only time ever, I think, Batman looks at me with relief. And affection. It's the briefest flash, gone so quickly I might've imagined it. But I know I didn't. Because that wasn't Batman, who looked at me just then.

It was Bruce.

I don't hug him. My arms tremble with the effort, fighting against me when I stop short, just a few feet away, looking up at him. But I still smile. "Did you miss me, Bats?"

Now it's my turn. My turn to say such a simple phrase that means so much more. My turn to show him, with just my smile, everything. I know he knows. I can see it in the way his face softens just the tiniest bit.

"Well done, Robin."

Again, so simple. But so much more. I know he knows what I did, what I managed to do. I know he knows that I followed what he taught me, that I escaped this place all by myself, that I figured it out, even though it was too late anyway.

"You're a little late." I can't help it. What? He is a little late. I mean, if he'd gotten here hours ago, you know when Ms. Corvi talked to him over the phone? Things would've been a lot easier. I mean, he would've saved me, which violates the rule, but still, a whole lot easier.

“I’m never late.” His mouth twitches, but his masked eyes are hard. He tilts his head but doesn’t turn around. I peer around him, though, when I hear it.

We have company.

“The nerve you have, coming here.” The Penguin stomps, or waddles, out of the entrance, flanked not only by Sparrow and Chickadee but also a goon squad, as I now dub them. “The Narrows is my territory, Batman.” He points his umbrella at us, and I stiffen, but I don’t move. Because Batman doesn’t move.

“Gotham is my city, Oswald,” Batman growls, every inch in command, in control. **“I’m sure you remember that.”**

“Where is he?” It’s not a question; it’s a demand. And it’s made straight to me. The Penguin looks right at me and, for a moment, despite all he said in the security room, you know, about me rescuing Dick Grayson, I’m worried he’ll recognize me.

I point to myself, look at Bruce, then back at Penguin. “Where’s who— oh!” I grin, shaking my finger. “You mean that Grayson kid? Heh. He’s gone.”

“You lie.” Penguin takes a few steps closer, Chickadee and Sparrow flanking him, the goon squad fanning out. They’re trying to surround us. “You had no time to get him away, boy.”

“You have no idea what I can do.” I crack my knuckles. “But you can find out.”

“Stand down, Oswald. It’s over.” It’s so strange how Batman can be perfectly calm in these situations, demanding so much even when he’s surrounded.

“Oh, I don’t believe it is, Bats.” The Penguin lowers his umbrella with a smack, the tip cracking the concrete. What’s that thing made of? The Penguin nods at his goon squad. “Take them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

I TAKE EVERYONE OUT

Across Gotham, the Shadows wait. The bedtime stories. They gather in their halls, waiting for their prize to come. For yes, there is more than one. More than one face behind a mask. More than one cold voice.

They won the bidding. Of course, they did. They, with their infinite wealth. They, with their unquestioned control. But they have paid more than they agreed. And now, as their agents go out into the streets, they wonder. Why do they have to pay any money at all for their coveted prize?

Why do they have to suffer fools?

“We should kill him.” The masked man stands before others, his voice cold. But even he trembles before this bedtime story. Before this force, all of Gotham fears. “His usefulness has come to an end.”

“Oswald Cobblepot is a fool.” The voice that speaks next comes from a high place. He does not wear a mask of white. For he is above the rest. No. His mask is of gold, the piercing eyes catching the worm before him. “But he is a useful fool. He has procured the boy.”

“The boy that could have been ours easily.” It is a risky thing to question a bedtime story. Standing up to a nightmare. “Wayne is a fool. If our agents simply—”

“Do you remember what happened the last time we crossed the Waynes?” The interruption is smooth, slick as ice. It bites. “What happened the last time we stood against them in public?”

Behind the man in the golden mask, a crowd murmurs. For never do bedtime stories walk alone. “We lost valuable assets that night. And gained an enemy, though he knows it not.”

“But if we simply—”

“Wayne cannot know of our existence. For he is not one of us. He will never be.” The man in the golden mask flicks a finger. Shadows emerge from the walls. Shadows with glinting claws, glittering eyes. “But the child—the boy. He will be one of us. Should Cobblepot not be rewarded for his... competence?”

“And what of his betrayal?” Another voice speaks. A shadow speaks. A shadow that is so bold. That does dare to brave the golden mask. Because he knows he cannot die. “He would give the boy to the highest bidder. They *know*.”

“They do not. Nor will they ever.” The golden mask stands, and he raises his arm. “Oswald is off limits— until we decide otherwise... until he fails us.”

For the Shadows of Gotham do not suffer fools.

Or failures.

I don't wait for a signal. I mean, isn't a dozen goons plus two crazy bird ladies charging at you, guns blazing, signal enough? I leap into the air, clearing their heads by feet, pulling out six birdarangs, and tossing them. Unlike previous nights on patrol, all of them hit their mark, leaving only six combatants on the field. For now, at least.

I don't waste my descent. I pull out my bō staff mid-fall and thrust out a leg, letting the brunt of my weight slam into a goon's head, leaving him knocked out cold and me with a springboard to leap off of. Batman's lunging in for a shot at the Penguin, leaving me to deal with everything else. I don't know what job I'd rather have, honestly. I land a kick on a goon's temple, thrust my bō staff between the legs of another, and flip through the gunfire, springing off my hands into split kicks, double punches, and thrusts with my bō staff.

I land in a slide as the last of them fall, only to thrust my staff up. *Clang!* Above me stands the woman who was once Ms. Corvi, her stilettos still on, one heel on top of my staff, her smile so feral I wonder how in the world I ever thought she was nice. “Oh, look at the cute little Robin, Sparrow!” Was her voice always this cruel?

Clang, clang! I step back as she lays on the attacks. She’s not holding back, not like she did with Dick Grayson. But then again, neither am I.

“He’s adorable, Chickadee.” The voice is cold behind me. I sweep under the punch that would’ve knocked me out cold if it had landed and flip between the two women. They look at me as if I’m a worm. You know, the early bird gets the worm? Man, I hate that saying.

“You know, I appreciate the compliments, ladies—” I dodge more of their attacks, trying to get in a few of my own. But they aren’t goons. They aren’t even normal super villainesses like Catwoman or Poison Ivy. These two are trained. “But I’d prefer if you gave them over hot chocolate or something?”

“Birdie likes to sing.” Chickadee’s nails swipe close. I don’t block them in time. I might’ve taken down the swelling on my cheek, but now I have three new scratches to add to the collection.

Sparrow kicks at me from behind again, this time almost grazing my side with her own deadly high heels. Honestly, how can they fight in those things? “I wonder what happens when we pull off the Birdie’s wings?”

Are they twins or something? *Wham!* Sparrow almost lands a punch. *Bam!* That kick would’ve taken my eye out. *Smack!*

Ouch.

I slam to the ground, my feet knocked out from under me. My side aches already, but I can’t let it show. I leap up, refusing to stagger, refusing to slow down. “I like my wings where they are, thank you! I’m not like a chicken— oh, now you made me hungry!”

I lay in on the offensive, driving the women back, forward, around, but they keep circling me like buzzards! The only difference is now they’re screeching with laughter, like parrots or something.

“You fight with Batman—” A punch lands on my side. Right, where I was kicked on the streets of the Narrows. I gasp but refuse to grimace. Only, I still stumble back. Long, clawed hands catch me, gripping my arms. I look up and see the grinning, too—red lips of Sparrow, “But you aren’t even out of the nest yet!”

I turn forward just in time to see Ms. Corivi coming at me. But not with a punch or a kick. Oh no. Someone thought it was a good idea to give these crazy women knives. So I do the most logical thing in the world. I launch myself over Sparrow's head, my hands landing on her shoulders. Pivoting my body, I swing back, driving my feet into her back, launching off again, and pushing her right into her terrible twin.

I wince and the *squelch* of a knife. When I land, I rush back over to them. Sparrow's on the ground, not prone or anything, but clutching her stomach. Chickadee stands above her, but she isn't sad or frightened or shocked. She looks at me and smiles. "Clever little bird." Has her head always twisted to the side like that? "But that won't work!"

Sparrow's up. I didn't even see her move. She's up and lunging at me. So is Chickadee. But they're lunging right towards the edge of the helipad. Right towards the edge— I slide to the side. I hope against hope that they might just keep going and fall off the building, screaming. What? I would've caught them with my grappling hook!

But no such luck.

Nope. They pivot and are onto me again. So I guess it's back to the races. I don't really think about it. It's like how Alfred and I train now, with a blindfold tied around my face. I duck, I dodge, I dance, my

body a flurry of movement. Aching movement, you know, painful movement that gets me cut and bruised, but it still works.

My vision tunnels. My focus narrows. It's just the crazy bird girls and me. Them, and my insults. "What, you like tiny little birds so much you decided to change your names?" I laugh as I kick them and flip away, taunting them. "Did you know that Chickadees don't migrate? Is that why you're stuck here in this cesspool?"

Bam! Sparrow slams a blow into my shoulder, but I don't even feel it. I land a double kick to her face, you know, my signature? The one that knocks out goons? Well, she just stumbles back a little. Man, are these girls related to Batman? "So, do you speak normally all the time, or is your snore 'chick-a-dee-dee-dee?'"

"Keep singing, little bird!" Chickadee grabs my arm. *Pop!* Pain flowers as my arm snaps out of the socket, but I keep going. Who cares if one of my wings flaps uselessly? By my count, I still have three working ones.

"And are you called Sparrow because you like to eat out of bird feeders, or am I reading the room wrong because that's totally possible." *Smack!* I land a blow on Sparrow's temple with my bō staff. Finally, *finally*, she stumbles, falling to the ground.

“Come here, sweetie.” It’s just Ms. Corvi and me. Me and the snake. The cuckoo bird, as it were. The parasite.

“You know,” I twirl my bō staff with my left hand. Yes, my left. What, did you think they wouldn’t want to dislocate my dominant side? “I do like chickadees. At least, I did.”

“Look at that, boy.” I look. I look to where Batman is fighting the Penguin. The Penguin fights like a pro, martial arts and stuff. Who knew the guy had it in him? But then again, he looks like a beach ball. And if it wasn’t for the rips in Batman’s cape and the small cut on his chin, I wouldn’t have taken him seriously.

I turn back to find Chickadee has moved closer. The oldest trick in the book, but hey, I’m no fool. “All I see is a fat Penguin fighting a bat.” I rest my bō staff against my shoulder, grinning through the pain. “Is that supposed to be funny or something? ‘Cause I’ll laugh.”

“I’ve worked with brats long enough to know you are in pain.” I don’t take a step back, even as she steps forward, black eyes glittering, her smile suddenly so kind that I think I just puked in my mouth. Her voice has changed again. She’s not Chickadee; she’s Ms. Corvi. “You don’t want to be here, do you? You don’t want to be with the Bat. You

deserve a better life, Robin. A life where you are free. Not locked in a cage.”

She’s coming closer now, her hand reaching out, her voice soothing, like I’m an actual Robin she’s trying to coax onto her finger. My arm goes limp, my bō staff hanging at my side. I stare at her. Does she know? Does she suspect? Did she look into my duffel bag?

“You want to fly untethered.” She’s touching my cheek, soothing, cooing. So different from the monster she just was. “I can help you, Robin. I can—”

I grab her hand, catching the small needle before it slides into my skin, before the drug inside knocks me out cold or even kills me. I cock my head at her, smiling as she tries to tug her hand away, dodging the punch she aims at my face. “You should be called Cobra instead of Chickadee.” I twist my fingers around her wrist, pulling it back so far that her eyes widen. “Because that’s what you are. A snake.”

I move so quickly; I’m a blur. Two pops on the temple, and she’s out, collapsed next to the other terrible house bird. I sigh, grabbing the wrist of my right arm and pulling it straight in front of me, quick and easy. *Pop!*

Now I feel it.

I wince, shaking my head, rotating my shoulder to check if it's back in place. I should put it in a sling now, but whoever worries about that? So instead, I do the most logical thing. I leap into the fight between Batman and the Penguin.

I slip between them, my kick meeting the jiggly flesh of Penguin's belly, sending him sliding back, leaving him to twirl his umbrella. **“What kept you?”** Batman doesn't even spare me a glance, but I grin at him, shrugging, ignoring the pain.

“I had to cage a few crazy birds. No biggie. But now I'm here.” I turn back to the Penguin, who stands, swiping at his mishappen face, his beady little eyes looking from Batman to me with such loathing that I want to duck and hide behind Batman's cape. Instead, I lean forward, resting on my bō staff like it's a cane. “How's it goin', Pengy? Enjoying playtime with ol' Bats?”

“You are a rude, uncouth child.” The Penguin straightens, brushing himself off as if we're at a party and I just insulted his mother or something. “Why can you not be silent and straightforward, like your mentor?”

“Hey, now!” I wrinkle my nose at him. “I don’t even know what ‘uncouth’ means, but I’m pretty sure that was rude. What, am I not good enough for you, Pengy?”

“You stole my prize.” The Penguin slowly waddles towards the edge of the building, teasing at the side. No way. Is he actually going to do it? “We shall see if you are good enough, Boy Blunder.”

He does it.

Penguin jumps over the side of the building like it’s nothing, or like he’s just stepping down some stairs. I run over to the edge, Batman next to me. But when I look over, Penguin’s not plummeting to his death or even swinging from a rope. Oh no, of course not. Because some people get all the fun toys. I stare at the small helicopter blades roaring above his head, at the end of what once was his umbrella.

“Why can’t I have that?” I look right at Bats. But we’re jumping over the side ourselves, our capes billowing out into the night air. “I mean, really, why do the villains get all the cool stuff?” What? Wouldn’t you complain? I mean, how else do you pass the time of a thirty-story drop?

Why only thirty stories, you might ask? Well, funny thing about this building. There's actually a smaller building attached to it that I didn't notice before. A building whose roof is all skylights.

How do I know this? Well, we crash through them, of course, the glass shattering at our feet. Does it hurt? Well, yeah. But what hurts even more is the jerk on my arm sockets as our grappling lines finally pull tight, sending us swinging into the dark, humid building.

We land on a metal walkway, the kind you'd find in a factory. But this is definitely not a factory. I hold my breath. This seems more like something out of Poison Ivy's book because this whole thing is like a jungle. A jungle of trees, vines, and other plants. I lean over the railing, looking down at the floor. It's covered in mulch, dead leaves, and branches, with a single pathway wrapping through it.

"What is this place?" My voice is a hushed whisper that falls on listening leaves. Above us, there's a creak. I whip my head up to look where Batman's already staring. Metal plates slide over the skylights like the cover of a convertible.

"It's a death trap." Plain and simple. All I'm going to get.
Hooray for the encouraging Batman!

“Oh.” I shrug and follow the Bat as he leaps over the side of the railing and down to the ground. My boots land in mulch with a thump. Nothing moves down here. Nothing. I turn around, scanning the trees for any sign of life. A trap, sure, but what is this place?

I notice the smell. It’s a strangely familiar, musky, hot kind of smell. Then I see the droppings. “Oooh... okay.” Makes sense.

“Have you ever wondered, Batman, what ruined me?” The Penguin’s voice echoes around us from a PA system, shaking the leaves of the trees. I tense, but Batman stands stock still, waiting. “What cast me out from among the high and mighty?”

Batman doesn’t answer. Why would he? But Neither do I. Note, he didn’t include ‘Robin’ in the question. Typical. “Did you ever wonder what could’ve mutilated my skin, my body?”

Well, I have. And I have a strong feeling I won’t like the answer. I slide my bō staff out, letting it extend slowly. I need to be ready for anything. “Do you know what it’s like to be picked apart, piece by piece, Batman?” The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. *Oh no... no, no, no. He can’t seriously mean—* “Well, you are about to find out.”

There’s an unholy noise. Imagine a thousand nails screeching on chalkboards. Then add to that a million dying cats, the thunder of a

couple Republic XF-84H "Thunderscreechs," ya know, the military aircraft? And you get the sound that almost bursts my eardrums. The sound of a thousand wings flapping, a thousand beaks screeching.

The sound of a thousand birds racing into this aviary. Now I know what that button was in the security room. It was not for the 'Aviary Tower' doors. It was for the actual Aviary doors.

This aviary.

"Welcome to my Aviary of Death, Batman, and Robin." Well, at least he includes me on this one. "I hope you don't mind looking like me for the rest of your lives!"

Yipee.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

DÉJÀ VU

Have I ever said the people in Gotham are crazy? I mean, really, really off their rockers? Don't believe me? Well, forget the Jokers and the crazy treehuggin' ladies. Take this Oswald Cobblepot for an example. This guy, who's obsessed with the things that apparently pecked him to shreds some time in his life.

Oh, and did I mention that he has an entire army of the things? And not just chickadees or sparrows. Oh no. When I sprint through the brush, I'm not running from pigeons. No. I'm running from magpies, which I'm convinced are devil spawn, harpy eagles, who look nice from afar but not up close, lammergeiers—also known as lamb vultures, also known as child killers, you know, evil buzzards?— pitohui, which sounds like a sneeze and actually they're adorable, but they have that ol' poisonous frog trick. You know, if you touch them, you'll go numb and probably die in about ten minutes?

But that's only the tip of the iceberg, folks, penguin pun intended. There're crowned eagles, child killers, crows, who are just plain annoying, and hundreds more flying birds. But let's not stop in the air, oh

no! Because we're also being stampeded by ostriches, emus, and oh, joyous day. Several, to my dismay, Southern Cassowary run after us. You know, the deadliest bird in the world? Can gut a human with one slash? No?

Wow, do I regret learning so much.

"This guy's crazy!" I have to yell over the noise that rakes at my ears as I crash through the underbrush with Batman. "I don't want to go like this!"

And I don't. Would you?

I duck and scramble underneath talons and beaks. They swoop at us, dive bombing us like we're mice or something. I roll out of the way as a tiny, innocent pitohui almost brushes my cheek, only to get slammed by a racing ostrich. Three hundred pounds of pure birdy force crashes into me, sending me stumbling right to my doom.

I flail to catch my balance, but I'm swarmed. You'd think I was covered with birdseed or something. Claws gouge at my face, my eyes. Talons dig into my shoulder, trying to pierce through my cape. *My cape!*

I duck to the ground, whisking my cape so it covers my entire body. It doesn't stop the attacks or blunt the blows, but it keeps everything sharp and poisonous away. I can hear Batman, which is a

surprise, over the roar of wings and the wheezing cackle of the Penguin over the speakers.

“That Grayson kid is as good as mine, Bats!” Now he gloats. It’s easy to brag when you’re safe, away from harm. “My men will find him! And you will be bird seed!”

“Hey! You stole that!” I call from under my cape. “I claim copyright on that one!” I fall over, tossing my cape up, just catching a lovely harpy eagle. Its hooked beak snaps inches from my face. It’s huge and strong, but I’m not going to lose my nose today. “Come on, bug breath!” I toss the bird off. What? I don’t want to hurt it. It’s just an animal, after all. “You wanna dance?”

I finally make it over to Batman, my back to his, my bō staff twirling, smacking animals away out of the sky, and shoving ostriches back. “Plan, plan!”

“**Plug your ears.**” Something drops to the ground, and instantly, I do as Batman says. Wouldn’t you, if a huge boom and a bright flash went off right at your feet?

There’s an unholy noise, you know, like a mass of birds all screeching at once? That even shakes through my fingers. I grimace, but my eyes are open. Not all the birds are flying away. In fact— “Move!” I

shove Batman out of the way, sending us tumbling out of the path of a charging Southern Cassowary that would've gutted us.

The bird keeps running, though, leaving us standing in a silent forest. I take a deep breath and let it out, so slowly that it comes out in a whistle. "Is it... over?" But I'm not done yet. I round on Batman. What? Can't I give him a hard time? "And what about saying, 'Oh, and cover your eyes, Robin?' Huh? I could've been blinded!"

"But you weren't." You know, never try to argue with Batman. It doesn't work well. **"And no. This isn't over."**

That's when I realize that the Penguin's gone quiet. Not a sound over the PA. No laughing or boasting. No noise at all. A shiver runs up and down my spine. I know you can't always be the one jumping out from the shadows, but I prefer my enemies out in the open, right where I can see them. You know, so I won't turn my back on them? But I don't get that luxury here. I turn on my thermal scanning in my HUD, scanning the trees around us. Only to find that the birds didn't really leave. They're sitting up in the branches, waiting in the bushes.

Watching.

But... where's the Penguin? I should've heard it. Maybe it's because my ears were still ringing from all the noise, maybe it's because I

was busy staring down the crows that left scratches on my arms and face— but I get kicked in the back.

It's embarrassing to stumble forward, whipping around mid-fall, smacking a portly Penguin away from me. But I can't bother with that. I dive in for a fight. I vault over Bat's shoulders, coming down from above when Batman hits low. My heel crashes into the Penguin's shoulder, a move that should break his collarbone. Instead, my leg bounces off. Apparently, being soft and squishy does have its advantages.

"I will not let you destroy what I've built!" The Penguin has a new umbrella, this one with the sharp point of a knife glinting out at me. The handle slides back, a chain slipping out. It's like a literal umbrella nunchuck.

"Why do they always get the cooler weapons?" I duck and dodge with Batman, jumping up and flashing my bright, colorful costume to draw attention, sliding and flipping and springing away from blow after blow.

"So, Pengy, do you keep the birds around as pets or—" I slam a kick into his jiggly stomach, messing up his now less-than-immaculate suit, "Do you just keep them around to talk to? Since you know, you can only croak?"

Bam, bam! Batman's fists find the Penguin's face, but the umbrella finds his chest, sending him sliding back. I leap forward, throwing a handful of birdarangas at the paunchy Pengy. You know, in this situation, being a bird-themed hero kind of stinks.

The deadly weapons explode on impact, sending my cape blowing back, but not doing any good. Penguin dances, no, waddles stinkn' waddles away, flames dancing in his eyes, his pointed teeth baring. "I keep them around—" He swings his umbrella. The knife whooshes right over my head, cutting off some hair. Bummer. I liked those. "Because it reminds me how cruel—" I flip away from another strike, this one an actual martial arts move, executed well, sadly enough, and skid over to Batman's side. "The world can be."

"Give up, Oswald." I love how Batman uses his real name as if he couldn't care less about the huge persona of the Penguin. **"Grayson is gone by now. You have nothing to gain."**

"Nothing to gain, says you?" Ol' Pengy straightens his blazer, his mutilated hands still clutching his weapon. "You invaded my territory, Batman. Gotham is my city, too. Mine. I—" He rises to his full height, which is barely taller than I am. But I don't laugh. I don't laugh because of the way his mouth twists into that sick grin. I don't laugh because of

the glint in his beady little eyes, “Am the heir to the Cobblepots. One of the first great families of Gotham. This city is mine by birthright. And you—” He points right at Batman, not even flinching when Bats narrows his eyes. “You are the stranger here. The intruder. The cuckoo bird.”

“Batman is not a parasite!” I have to stand up for him because I know Batman won’t say anything. “It’s people like you that tear this city down, Pengy!” If he can intimidate with a grin, so can I. I bare my teeth and brandish my bō staff. I’m not afraid of him or his death birds. I’m not! “You’re sick and almost as loony as the Joker!”

“Don’t. Speak. That. Name. In. My. Presence.” His eyes begin to twitch, and not even the monocle can hide it. “People like Joker and Two-Face are a scam. A disgrace! We, the elite, own this city!”

I guess that includes me, doesn’t it? But he doesn’t know that. So I don’t say anything. Instead, I laugh. I laugh as I walk forward, as Batman stands behind me, a dark shadow watching my back. “You? Elite? Please, Pengy. Why would you want to be in with those fat cats? People like the Powers or the Elliots. Or the Waynes.”

That struck a nerve. “Wayne is a fool!” Penguin doesn’t move. Apparently, not everyone fears the Batman. “He sent his ward right into

my hands. And you fools— you fool, Batman! You came here with a weak link in your chain. A chink in your armor.”

I freeze, even before he turns his gaze right to me. Oh no—

I should’ve seen it coming. I should’ve closed my eyes. But his monocle flashes bright and blazing, and I see spots. Next thing I know, a meaty, two-fingered hand grabs my hair, yanking on me. And something sharp and long is shoved up against my neck, right under my chin, teasing my throat.

I blink hard, squinting to see something, anything, only to regret it. Penguin stands above me, his hand twisted into my hair, his umbrella’s knife rests against my skin, so close, so sharp, that something wet is already leaking onto the black of my cape. My arms go limp, and my eyes go wide, almost popping out of my mask. I stare right at Batman, who stands like a stone statue in front of me.

A scene flashes before my eyes of a similar moment. A moment where a madman’s hands dug into my shoulders. Where a knife teased my throat. Where a father stood in front of me, his eyes telling me one thing.

Wait.

I don't blink. I can't. I stare right at Batman, searching for a sign. Anything. Pain races up and down my head as Penguin tugs at my hair, jiggling my head around. I wince but don't whimper. I won't be afraid. Or at least, I refuse to show him that I am. I refuse to let my hands shake, to let sweat bead on my forehead.

I refuse to cry out when the knife digs into my neck or shiver when the blood trickles down my cape. I refuse.

"If I can't have Grayson, Batman, I'll have Robin." The Penguin's breath rushes into my ear, into my nose. But I refuse to shake my head, to move an inch. Calm. I'm calm, cool, and collected. At least, that's what I tell myself.

"Let him go, Oswald." Batman still doesn't move, but he doesn't take his eyes off me either. He's watching, waiting. I force my heart to slow, to calm. I command strength from my legs. Ready, I need to be ready.

"I'm not sure you heard me, Bats." The knife digs deeper, and Batman growls. But I still don't move. I'm a statue. A gargoyle of a boy. But then, that's not who Robin is, is it?

“Excuse me?” I don’t care how much it hurts; I open my mouth anyway. I know, I know, it’s stupid. But what do you expect from me by now? “You know I’m right here, Pengy.”

“I’m aware, little Chickie.” Wow. His breath really stinks. Like, really bad. “But the big birds are talking.”

“Um, he’s a bat.” I slowly move my hand, wiggling two fingers, then point down. Batman’s eyes flick to my hand, then back to the Penguin. “If there’re any birds here, it’s you and me, Pengy.”

“Not surprising since you never seem to shut that trap of yours.” The knife presses in closer. It stings. It bites. It teases. “Perhaps I should fix that for you. What do you say, Batman? Wouldn’t you like a silent bird that doesn’t chirp?”

He wants to cut out my vocal cords if I’m reading the room right. I fight down a shiver, ignoring the nausea that boils in my stomach. I try to block out the thoughts that smack me down over and over. The thoughts whispering in my ear that he’s the one who started all this. He’s the one who killed them.

He’s the one who took those bolts, even if Zucco’s hands actually slipped them out of place. This man who holds me, he’s the one.

He would kill me in a heartbeat. He killed them without batting an eye. He doesn't cry or sob like Zucco did. He doesn't shake in front of Batman. He doesn't care.

I ignore my boiling veins, the red that dances in my vision. Because I can't let that change this. It's personal, yes, but this isn't just about me—about them. Because I'm not the only one who this man has hurt.

Batman couldn't come at him because he lived like a coward in his tower with his killer birds, letting others get their hands dirty. But now Batman's here. Now I'm here. And he'll pay for what he's done.

Not vengeance, oh no, because that's what he wants. No.

Justice.

"I'll pass on that. I like talking, thank you very much." I don't even let Batman answer, even though I know he probably won't. Instead, I focus on his hands. His fist bobs two times. The signal. "Speaking of which, you're getting old, Pengy. Why don't you sit down?"

"Wha—"

I don't give him time. I can't give him the time to finish, and I really wish I could see his face. I snap my hands up and forward, smacking the umbrella away, sending it skidding into the underbrush.

Birds screech as I leap up, flip over, and slam into the Penguin from behind, my heels digging into his shoulder blades.

He goes spinning straight into Batman's fist. I've never heard such a satisfying cracking sound in my life. Down goes the Penguin, bouncing on his tummy, his top hat flying off and into my hand.

"Well done, Robin." Batman strides forward, pulling handcuffs out of his belt, his thin lips turning up into his own sort of smile.

I grin up at him, flipping the top hat around in my hand as I saw C.C. Haly do so many times, then put it on my head with a flourish. "All in a night's work, B-man."

With a click, the Penguin's secure. But this night's not over yet. I mean, aviary? Killer birds? Things of nightmares? But the birds seem to be retired, or just plain over it all, as we clamber up the metal steps to the walkway, Batman dragging the Penguin, me hefting his umbrella, which is surprisingly heavy. I wonder what else he keeps in here.

By the time we find our way into the main building, the whole thing's in an uproar. Narrows police try to protest as Commissioner Gordon himself takes charge, ordering waves of thugs to be loaded up into armored vans, sending his teams into the building to sweep for clues

and gather all the incriminating, juicy files that I really wanted to swipe off ol' Pengy's computer.

When we emerge out into the thick Gotham morning, the sun barely making its way through the smog and clouds, everything's blockaded with red and blue flashing lights. I stand alongside Batman as he tosses the Penguin at Gordon's feet, letting officers swarm and take the now squirming and screaming bird to the mad chair, strapping him down and sliding him into the back of a black vehicle marked Arkham Asylum.

"Ah, Batman." Gordon's eyes sag behind his glasses. His arms cross over his barrel chest, his mustache twitching. The man needs sleep. In fact, now that I see him, something like an anvil lands on my eyes. I bite back a yawn. "Robin. I'm glad you're safe."

I know he sees the scratches, the cut dripping under my chin. I can't help the tomatoes that squash on my cheeks as I take out a sterile bandage from my utility belt and wrap it around my neck, ignoring the fact that I look like I'm wearing a choker necklace.

"Did you find him? The boy?" I jump at the Commissioner's next question. Oh... Dick Grayson. I almost forgot about myself. I'm supposed to have rescued myself.

“We found him. Robin—” I turn to Batman, trying to keep the smile on my face. Robin and Dick can’t be seen in the same place, just like Bruce and Batman. So how are we going to do it without making the Commissioner suspicious? And what about my neck? The wounds he’s seen? They’ll know! **“Go fetch Dick Grayson. Once you get him out here, head back to the Batwing. It’s past your bedtime.”**

Well, that’s one problem solved. “Sure thing, Batman!” I give Gordon a salute. “See ya later, Commish!” Then, I’m off, squeezing through the crowd of officers and thugs, only stopping to watch them squeeze Penguin into the van.

He looks right at me, his eyes sparkling with something not nice. So I do the most logical thing. I stick my tongue out at him. What? Robin can insult the baddies. It might come back to bite him later, but when do I ever think ahead?

As soon as I slide out of sight from the crowd, I find a nice spot to slip out of my Robin suit. Now comes the tricky part. My wounds. Gordon doesn’t know what the Penguin did to Dick Grayson, but the crooks and the big boss man himself do. So I have to suck it up and do the unthinkable. I punch myself in my injured cheek. I know, I know, stupid, right?

What I do to maintain a secret. Like I've said a million times, sometimes secrets are great. But most of the time? They stink. Once my cheek is nice and swollen again, really enjoying myself over here, I tend to my neck wound. I undo the wrappings and press down on it, letting it sit for a while and clot. Then, I take a long, skin-textured bandage from my utility belt. I know, I know, it's creepy. But hey, when you need to go to school with scratches and bruises on your face and can't cover them up with makeup, this is how you do it.

So I slide and smooth the bandage over the wound, making sure it's tucked in under my neck, out of sight, out of mind. The gashes on my arms take more Band-Aids, but I do leave some of them, you know, for effect. After all, the goons don't know all that's happened to me.

But it's then that I realize there's something I'm missing. I mean, Dick Grayson wasn't kidnapped in his boxer shorts. And I'm sure I don't want people to question why Robin would steal polo shirts.

"Batman—" I whisper over the transmission, grimacing at what's about to happen. "I don't have any clothes!"

"What did you do with them?" His voice is a whisper, too, which is weird in his bat growl. Really, right now? He sounds more like Bruce.

“I left them in the duffel! In the weapons room!” I don’t add that if the SWAT team goes through the building and finds them, they might put two and two together.

“I thought you might leave them. Stand by.” So I do. I wait, even as the transmission cuts off, and I’m left standing below a skyscraper in my underwear. Not the weirdest thing that’s happened tonight, but whatcha gonna do about it?

Suddenly, out of nowhere, or at least I think out of nowhere, something drops onto my head. I scramble to get away, only to realize I’m fighting a pair of shorts and a polo shirt. Exactly as rumpled and dirty as you would expect from someone who ran through the Narrows. I don’t know how he does it, but then again, I’m just that predictable, I guess.

I wave at the silhouette of the Batwing, you know, Batman’s plane? As it zips away, its job done. Dancing on my bare feet, I slip into the clothes, which feel so weird after my Robin suit. The cotton rubs and itches my wounds, but I ignore it.

Instead, I run back around the building, back into the craziness of the circus that’s the police and criminals, back towards Batman, who waits with the Commissioner.

Back to my father.

EPILOGUE

I sit outside the courtroom, my feet kicking the chair. I don't listen to the muffled sounds from the thick oak door or even the whispers of the people who stand right outside, looking from me to the door, to each other. I rub my wrists, picking at the bandages. At least, until someone smacks my hand.

“Dick—you'll hurt yourself.” Babs sits next to me, dressed in something I never thought I'd see her wear. A dress. Her mac'n'cheese hair is done up in a sort of bun thing, her knobby knees sticking out from under the dress that really looks like a restaurant for bees. You know, with lots of flowers on it?

“It's fine, Babs. It's not like I'm scratching at it.” I wave my bandage in her face, pointing at how secure the wrapping is, how good I'm really being. “I'm fine.”

“I know, I know. Sorry.” She grabs her knees, doing a sort of wobbly dance, letting her head thump back onto the boards of the hall. “I'm just nervous, okay? I mean, I can handle a lot of things. I've been here dozens of times! This isn't different. Except it's you, right? I don't want you to have to go back to the Home.”

“I won’t.” I can’t tell her how much her words make my chest squeeze, but I can’t hide my smile. I don’t want to. I poke her in the side. “You will force your dad to adopt me first!”

She smacks me, but she laughs, her freckles popping. “I would, yeah. But really, Dick—kidnapped! Tell me again, what happened?”

We’ve gone over this a thousand times since her dad drove me back to the GCPD from the Narrows, where I sat waiting for Bruce, or rather, for Batman to slip into something more Bruce-like. I mean, Bruce came, and Gordon actually talked with the real people in charge of the kids, you know, who actually told me that I could stay with the Commish and Babs until Bruce could get a court date.

It was like an extended sleepover. Pizza every night and cereal every morning. It was weird not waking up early to train, driving to school in a regular car with Babs, and getting to laugh and chat with her all day.

I still snuck out at night, though. I mean, I couldn’t let Robin disappear just because Dick Grayson temporarily switched addresses. So I gave her the slip, taking long trips to the bathroom. Or, a restroom vacation, as she started to dub them after two days.

This morning I went to school like usual, but something put an even bigger skip in my step. I didn't even worry or care about the media. Because Bruce called me this morning, saying I had to be at the courthouse right after school.

That it was time.

So here I sit, out with Babs, twiddling my thumbs, waiting for the grown-ups to decide my fate. Again. But this time I don't mind so much. Because I know what I want, and I know what I'll get. At least, I think I know what I'll get. I hope I know.

“By the way, Dick.” Babs is still going on, even after I tell her for the hundredth time what I've told the media and the court a bajillion times. The tragic story of Dick Grayson, the poor little orphan. The orphan who was stolen from his guardian, who was falsely accused. The boy who was kidnapped by crazy people, nearly beaten to death in the Narrows, and rescued by Robin, the Boy Wonder.

“What is it, Babs?” I rest my head against my arms, leaning back against the wall. It tugs my suit weird, but I don't care. I'm not nervous. I'm the poster boy of calm.

“After all that, you really didn't get me anything from Batman?” Of all the things she could hold on to, all the things she literally wrote

down in her Batjournal, that's what she hangs onto? That's what she won't let me forget?

"I'm never going to live this down, huh?" I give her a side eye, wrinkling my nose. "Come on, Babs! I was kidnapped! I didn't have time to ask for souvenirs!"

"Priorities, Dick." She sniffs, and the people outside the courtroom doors look over at us and smile. They have that grown-up 'Aren't they just adorable' look.

"Priorities?" I let my arms flop back into my lap, trying my best to give her my version of 'the look.' It doesn't work. "Babs, I could've *died!*"

"Everyone dies eventually, Dick." She gives me the real look, and I throw up my hands. Honestly, how does she do it? "Again, priorities. You should've thought, 'Gosh, I'm sure Babs would really like something from all this,' since, oh, I don't know, you got rescued by the *Boy Wonder!*"

It's weird seeing her talk about Robin like that because, hello, I'm sitting right here. It's one of those times when I have to bite my tongue hard to keep from spilling the beans all over the place.

But I'm too good at my job, so I do the next best thing. I roll my eyes. "Babs, you know that—"

There's a roar of applause from the courtroom, and our tiff is forgotten. I jump up to my feet, Babs quickly following. The door bangs open, sending rolls of noise slamming into me. I don't even realize I'm grabbing Babs' hand until she scoots closer to me, peering over my shoulder. Sometimes I don't mind that she has a couple of inches on me.

Through the ruckus, through the farewells of the judge and the jury and the witnesses, the mad roar and snap of cameras from the reporters, Alfred peeks his head out of the courtroom. "Master Dick," He smiles at me, a smile meant only for me, "Master Bruce wishes to see you."

Babs cheers behind me, shaking my shoulders until I look like a bobblehead, but I don't even notice. I'm rushing past Alfred, barreling into the courtroom, leaping over the seats, even though I know this is a freshly pressed suit and it's not a very polite or proper thing to do.

But all I see is him, standing in his black blazer, his white button-up. He looks every bit as fine as the Penguin did from behind, but when he turns around, I see perfect, sculpted features, a smoothed back do of coal black hair, and steely grey eyes that smile at me.

I don't care that people are watching, snapping pictures, cheering, or gossiping. I don't care if this wasn't just the most heartwarming thing they've ever seen, a billionaire fighting for his little orphan boy.

All I see is Bruce Wayne.

"DAD!" I don't care if the women swoon, if the men clap and cheer, or if the Judge looks down at me with a smile of satisfaction. All I care about is that he's here. And he's mine. My dad, B, Bruce, Batman, whatever I need.

And I'm his. His son, his ward, his little bird. He might not get to say it much, but I can tell from the way his eyes shine, from the way his smile breaks his face, that he means it.

So I jump into his arms. I leap up like a baby monkey and cling. I will never forget them. Of course, I won't. But I know that this is what they wanted. They wanted me to have a family.

And Bruce—Alfred, they're my family.

So, it's a happy ending. At least, that's what I tell myself as I'm escorted down into the limo. As Babs nearly knocks me over with a hug like I gave Bruce, her laugh tickles my ears.

That's what I tell myself as we drive back to the Manor, back home. When I'm greeted by Ace, who also gives me the jumping treatment, and as I'm led back to my room. My room is just as I left it.

That's what I tell myself when Bruce informs me tonight we're having crab stuffed mushrooms, my favorite, and chocolate ice cream, which is also one of my favorites.

And for the night, even when we race out of the Batcave in the Batmobile, zooming onto the Gotham streets, I still believe it. Sure, I'm back with Bruce, out fighting the war. But Everything's alright, back to normal. Penguin and Zucco are behind bars.

So when I flip up onto the GCPD building, I can't wait. My grin splits my face. I twitter my normal greeting. "What's up, Commish?" And watch him start and turn around.

He smiles. He greets us with his usual: "Batman and Robin" greeting.

He tells us that Bane is on a rampage in New Gotham. "You need to see for yourself. He's quite the tank." Gordon runs a hand through his red and white hair, his mustache twitching. He gives me a small smile. "But you might want to leave Robin—"

“Robin’s ready.” I wonder how many times I’m going to hear that.

I’m leaping to get back to the Batmobile and drive. Drive towards a battle, a new adventure. And as we drive, I look over at the shadow sitting next to me.

There he is. With and without the mask. The man and the legend. My father and my guardian. Batman. The man who’s still a mystery. The man who’s cold yet caring. Hard and soft at the same time.

My partner. My team. My family. “Now,” Even though I turn my eyes back to the road, I wiggle my eyebrows, “If only I can talk Alfred into a Batsuit, we’d be set.” I look over at Batman, spreading out my arms for effect. “How does the ‘Bodacious Bat Butler sound?’”

“No.” Batman zooms forward, back into Gotham.

“The Duster King?” I try again, nudging Bats in the ribs. You know, something only I could get away with. “Agent A?”

“No and no.” Batman screeches us around the corner, sending us towards New Gotham, where smoke rises into the night sky. **“And don’t even tell him you said that.”**

“Okay, fine. But I still think it would be a great idea.” I settle back in my seat.

Will I forget them? Never. Will I forgive? Well, I guess I will.

Because not even he deserved to die. Like they did.

But will I move on? Yes.

Because I'm racing through the streets with my hero. Because I'm going to dive into the night to save people, just like them.

Because I'm Robin, the Boy Wonder.

In the shadows, a masked man lurks. Not those who dwell in bedtime stories. Not those who hide in the night's embrace. This man wears his mask for the world. He does not cower or snivel at the feet of others. But he will sell his talents to the highest bidder.

He sits in front of his own screen. But he talks to no one. Instead, he watches, watches intently. Not news footage or something to distract his sharp mind. No. He watches as the Bat and the Bird zip through the city. The Bat he knows. He hates. But he respects.

But it is the Bird that draws his eye, that captures his attention. Only days ago, the Grayson boy was all the fuss in the black market. But they were so focused on him that they failed to see the better prize.

As the masked man watches, the Bird flips through the air gracefully. He flies laughing, not a care in the world. So pure, so innocent. He does not fit in this world. This world of greys and blacks.

But more than that, he does not fit in with the Bat. The masked man knows. He knows more than others. What a waste. What a pity. If only someone could teach the boy. If only someone could show him a better way in this world.

For who gains anything by saving others? Who profits from lying down to let another use you as a stepping stone? Who benefits? But the boy is not ready. Not yet.

But someday, soon... He might be.

Hkcgxk Znk luaxz ul Ucry, zngz cgzinky grr znk zosk

