Summary

Bruce doesn’t like to credit one thing for saving his life, but if he did, it would be Haly’s Circus that Friday night in September, just as summer was beginning to die.

(He’ll always be a sucker for kids with sad eyes, no parents, and more fight than the world knows what to do with.)

Or: in a universe where superheroes don't exist, Bruce Wayne finds his family.

Notes

Helloooo! I haven't written anything this long in, like, five years. What a world.

About the story: it's basically a lot of me crying about the batfam (and Clark? idk he snuck in)
and trying desperately to forge them into some semblance of a family in a world where none of them are superheroes. Each of the characters tagged are pretty major players, but some of them might not come into the story until towards the end, since each chapter will have a focus on specific characters.

I have learned from past mistakes, so this story is already completed, sans-editing. I want to post a chapter every Friday, but it's likely that I'll get excited and post before then.

Title from "Breathless" by Better Than Ezra (or Taylor Swift but it would look a little suspicious if I named two stories in a row after a Taylor Swift song huh).

That's all for now! Have fun! I love you!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Bruce doesn’t like to credit one thing for saving his life, but if he had to, it would probably be his attendance at Haly’s Circus that one Friday night in September, just as summer was beginning to die. It was a complete accident he even ended up there, or maybe not. Alfred won tickets in some radio contest, and gave the tickets to Bruce. Bruce told him that was silly, that he could buy out every night of the circus if he wanted, but Alfred insisted and so Bruce insisted Alfred accompany him and thus, Bruce and Alfred sat in the front row when John and Mary Grayson died.

The worst part was that Bruce could see it happening. It was this thing of his, this thing where time seemed to slow down and for one moment, he just noticed — everything. He saw the young boy flip onto a platform. He saw the high wire start to tear. He saw the alarm in Mary and John’s faces, carefully covered by performers’ smiles. He saw the snap. He saw the fall.

But time wasn’t really working in slow motion (at least, that’s what his therapist used to say when he was a boy) and there was barely any time for Bruce to vault over the low wall of the ring before Mary and John were laying in puddles of their own blood, bones cracked, bodies lifeless as rag dolls.

The boy was screaming. The audience didn’t make much noise at all, confused and alarmed. More circus performers ran out from backstage, yelling for paramedics.

All Bruce heard was the low echo of, not again not again not again, playing and rewinding in his mind.

“Sir.” Alfred’s calming voice, his firm hands, reached him through the haze. “Deep breaths now, sir.”

Bruce hadn’t realized how shallowly he was breathing. He wasn’t sure if his lungs could expand any further.

“Let’s get you out of here, sir,” Alfred said, and Bruce let himself be led away. Before he could completely turn his back, though, he looked once more at the boy on the platform, and found that the boy was looking at him. There were tear tracks on his round face and his mouth was still open but the scream was either silent or masked by the noise of the circus. Bruce thought he could have been looking in a mirror.

“Let’s go, sir,” Alfred said, and Bruce left the circus behind.

Outside the tent, cameras flashed. Bruce stumbled — ridiculously, since he had spent his entire life in the public eye and he knew how to handle a few paparazzi. He could see the headline now: Bruce Wayne leaves family circus completely plastered. Or something equally absurd. He supposed that was better than the truth though: Bruce Wayne leaves family circus suffering from panic attack after watching aerialists die, made worse by the fact that their young son watched it all happen, which hit a bit too close to home for Bruce’s comfort.

Alfred bodily helped Bruce into the car, all the while keeping the composure of the perfect butler, and slid into the driver’s seat himself.

“Keep breathing, Master Bruce.”

Bruce tried. He felt as though his lungs were sewn shut at the tops.
Alfred was well-adept at losing photographers and other unwanted guests. He took a long, winding way home. It allowed for Bruce to get some semblance of control over his breathing. The dark cloud in his head began to evaporate. But maybe that was worse. He kept seeing the aerialists fall. Hearing the boy scream. Smelling gunpowder in the air.

But that wasn't right. There had been no gun. That was a memory from another night, a long time ago.

“We’re here, Master Bruce.”

Bruce threw open the car door before Alfred could help him. He was a grown man, for Christ’s sake. He could get into his own damn house on his own.

Inside, Bruce headed straight for the TV. He clicked the power button on the remote.

“— Grayson proclaimed dead after a wire broke during their performance, leading them to fall from a height several stories in the air. While C. C. Haly, the owner of the circus, insists this was nothing more than a tragic accident, the deaths are currently being investigated. Mary and John leave behind their 12-year-old son, Richard, who was in fact performing with them tonight. Richard appears to be unharmed from the ordeal.

“Haly’s circus is, of course, a beloved event both in Gotham and the nation. Just tonight, the Gotham mayor was attending with his family, along with socialite Bruce Wayne. Wayne was reported to have ran into the ring moments before the Graysons fell. He left minutes afterward, appearing heavily inebriated —.”

Click.

“I was watching that,” Bruce said.

“Forgive me, Master Bruce,” said Alfred. “I don’t think public opinion is entirely in your best interests right now.”

Bruce ran a hand over his face and slumped back into a sofa. He felt tired, deep down in his bones. The exhaustion wasn’t as bad as it could have been — as it had been, this time last year — but he could still feel it, in his core. He hated it. He couldn’t do this again.

“What’ll happen to the boy?” he asked before the thought was fully formulated.

“I imagine he’ll be taken in by family, if he has any. If not, I suppose he will go into the custody of the state.”

“He should come live here.”

Bruce’s words surprised himself. It was impossible to tell if anything surprised Alfred, but there was a flicker of unease in his eyes.

“Listen —,” Bruce said, ideas springing to life like weeds between slabs of concrete. He was suddenly so sure. “I know this is — unconventional, but I looked at him and I saw — something.”

Myself. I saw myself. Not even a me when I was younger. Me right now. We’re the same.

“You’ll have to get the court’s approval,” Alfred said, slow and measured.

“That won’t be a problem. The court in this city answers to money, and I’ve got plenty of it.”
“Hmm.” Alfred was calculating. “I suppose I can make a few calls then.”

“No.” And Bruce didn’t know where this all was coming from, only that it was urgent. “First I need to . . . meet with him. I won’t force him to live here if it’s not what he wants.”

Something in Alfred’s expression clicked into place. “I suppose I’ll be making a few more calls then.”

Dick wasn’t sure what to feel. One week ago, his parents died. Four days ago, he got permanently placed in this shady Catholic orphanage where everyone judged him for not knowing the Bible verses they were quoting and threatened to smack him whenever he so much as fidgeted. Two hours ago, he got told that Bruce Wayne — the Bruce Wayne, because Dick might not have been from Gotham, and he might not have kept up with current events while he was touring with Haly’s, but he didn’t live under a rock — wanted to meet with him so he should comb his hair. And ten minutes ago, Bruce Wayne actually showed up and was now talking to some nuns while Dick hid at the top of the stairwell.

It was all going a bit fast. Luckily, Dick was used to fast.

“What the hell does Bruce Wayne want with you?” some kid Dick hadn’t learned the name of yet asked. He didn’t wait for an answer. “Gypsy freak.”

Dick rolled his eyes as the kid walked away. He was an idiot, sure, but it still stung. Dick was a performer — he wanted, needed people to like him. It came with the territory.

Maybe that was why he felt a little sick at the thought of talking to Bruce Wayne. Wayne was some rich, white guy in his twenties and there was no way he could see anything in Dick worth liking.

“Richard!” Sister Mary called. “Richard, you have company!”

Dick pretended this was rehearsal for some new routine he’d never done before. There was always a net during rehearsal. He didn’t need to be afraid.

“Richard!”

He took a deep breath and ran downstairs.

“I thought I told you to fix your hair,” hissed Sister Mary. Dick ignored her.

Bruce Wayne was similar to how Dick remembered him from that night a week ago, but not exactly the same. He was tall, strong beneath his suit. Dark-haired and blue-eyed — like Dick, but with fairer skin. Strong jaw. But he was much more composed today. Dick supposed they both were.

“Richard, I’m Bruce.” Bruce extended a hand for Dick to shake, and though Dick thought it was too formal and slightly silly, he complied.

“Nice to meet ya,” Dick said.

“I’ll get you boys a room to talk,” said Sister Mary.

Soon they were situated in a private room in the back of the orphanage with plates of cheese, fruits, and crackers and glasses of orange juice laid out before them. It was more food than he’d seen his entire stay so far. Dick wondered if all the guests got this kind of treatment, or if it came the territory
of being Bruce Wayne and having Bruce Wayne’s wallet.

Bruce cleared his throat. He looked like he was about to start a lecture on sustainable energy.

“Richard —,”

“Call me Dick.”

“Dick,” and Dick had to hand it to him, he didn’t even falter, “I don’t know if you know this, but I saw you perform in the circus recently, and —,”

“I remember.”

Bruce stopped talking. For the first time, Dick wondered if he was nervous too.

“Yes. Well. I saw, um — I saw your routine —,”

“I watched you on the news. I don’t think you were as drunk as they’re saying you were.”

“You were very good,” Bruce said.

Dick blinked. “Oh. Thanks.”

“And I wasn’t drunk. I . . .” Bruce looked over Dick’s shoulder, then down at the table, and finally met Dick’s eyes. Dick found himself leaning forward, still in a way he usually only was when swinging from a high wire. “I was having a panic attack. I’ve had them my whole life. Well. Since my parents died, when I was eight. They were — shot. In front of me. My therapist says it’s a form of post-traumatic stress disorder.”

Whoa. Dick felt pretty bad about playing the “drunk” card. He just wanted Bruce to feel bad about making him relive that night. He guessed they both had some pretty messed up memories.

“Sorry,” Dick said.

“Me too,” said Bruce. “I’m sure none of this has been easy for you.”

“You’re not kidding. I feel like I haven’t slept in a year. They almost put me in juvie, ya know? Just because the state system was nearly full. But then they found this place.”

Bruce glanced around at the stained wallpaper, and Dick knew he was smelling the faint scent of mildew.

“Sounds like you’ve had one hell of a week.”

Dick smiled. “No one here says ‘hell.’”

Bruce didn’t smile, but Dick thought maybe his eyes smiled, and that was close. “My apologies. Please don’t tell Sister Mary.”

“Did you really watch your parents die?” Dick blurted. Which was beyond rude. He could hear his mom scolding him in his head. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to —,”

“No, it’s — it’s fine. I did. We were seeing a play together, and after we left, a masked mugger shot them. Right in front of me. He stole their things and ran.”

“Did they ever catch the guy?” Dick’s voice was a whisper.
Bruce swallowed. “No.”

Something heavy settled in the pit of Dick’s stomach. That was not the answer he wanted to hear.

“My parents — they’ve done that routine a thousand times — it wasn’t an accident.” Dick’s words tumbled over each other. He hadn’t said this since he talked to the police that night at Haly’s when he was in shock and couldn’t feel a thing, and felt more than he’d ever felt before. “I overheard — there was this guy, and I heard him threatening Mr. Haly, it was about money, and I didn’t — I didn’t tell them. I didn’t tell anyone.”

Tears stung Dick’s eyes. He hadn’t cried since that night, but he felt like he might start sobbing in front of one of Gotham’s most powerful men. How embarrassing.

“It wasn’t your fault, Dick,” Bruce said, strangely tender. “It was that man’s. They’ll get him, especially if they have you. You might need to testify in court, but —,"

“I’ll do it! I’ll do anything.”

“I know,” Bruce said, and there it was, the slight twitch of his lips. It felt like a victory. Dick didn’t know why. The guy never seemed so serious on TV.

“Mr. Wayne —,”

“Bruce.”

“Okay. Bruce.” And Dick totally couldn’t believe he was on a first-name basis with Bruce Wayne. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, but — why are you here?”

Bruce cleared his throat. “I know this is sudden. But. I’ve had run-ins with the foster care system before, and I know how rough it can be. I wondered if I could — that is, if you want —,”

“Bruce.”

“I promise I’m usually much better at communicating.”

“Bruce.”

Bruce stopped. Dick didn’t want to hurt his feelings. That was the last thing he wanted right now. But he figured he owed the guy some honesty.

“I think I know what you’re saying. And I’m really, really grateful. But . . .” He tapped a single finger on the table for focus. “My dad died a week ago.” The words scraped his throat. “I don’t think I’m ready for a new one.”

He expected Bruce to look dejected, to say “I understand” and leave, and Dick would forever regret having said no to Bruce Wayne. But Bruce was nodding, almost like he expected it.

“That’s perfectly understandable. Which is why I’d like to take you on as my ward. There would still need to be some court meetings, but, well, money does have its advantages, so those shouldn’t take long. You could come live with me, and I’d supervise all your schooling, but you wouldn’t be a Wayne. That is . . . if you want.”

Bruce coughed, looking down at the table. He reached for a glass of orange juice, but didn’t drink any.

“You . . . really want me to come live with you?” Dick asked. “I mean, you’d — you’d do all that
for me?”

He breathed in and counted to ten. It was something his father used to tell him to do whenever he got angry and was considering acting without thinking things through first. But Dick could be pretty impulsive sometimes, so he started counting even when he wasn’t angry. This past week, he had done it a lot.

*One . . . two . . . three . . .*

Bruce met his eyes.

*Six . . . seven . . .*

“Yes.”

*Ten,* Dick thought, and his breath came out in a *whoosh.*

Just like Bruce predicted, it didn’t take long for the court to appoint Bruce as Dick’s legal guardian. And then Dick was living in Wayne Manor and that was . . . different.

He ran *everywhere.* Up the stairs. Down the stairs. Out of the car. To the kitchen. To the bathroom. When Bruce was trying to *sleep,* the kid had boundless energy, and both Alfred and Bruce would shake their heads at him every time he went barreling into a room, and then they’d try to hide their smiles when he sprinted back out again, shouting, “This place is freaking *huge!*”

Bruce was considering having him tested for ADHD. *He* certainly had never been so hyperactive as a child. Then again, there was a lot about twelve-year-old Bruce that didn’t fall in line with the behavior of other twelve-year-olds.

It didn’t take long for the media to find out about Bruce Wayne’s new pseudo-son. Bruce was worried about how Dick would react, but he needn’t have been — or perhaps he should have been *more* worried — because Dick took to fame like he took to the sky: with skill, grace, and too much excitement that could probably get him killed.

“You gotta let me do an interview,” Dick begged over breakfast. “Please, Bruce. *Please.*”

“You are not doing an interview,” Bruce said. “We’re not celebrities.”

“We’re the closest thing this city has!”

“You’re not making a very good case for yourself.”

“Look, Vicki Vale emailed me —,”

“No. Vicki Vale would tear you apart.”

Dick pouted. “She seemed nice.”

“Being nice isn’t the issue. How did she get your email address anyway?”

It was *rockinrobitweetweetweet* at gmail. Dick was wholly unashamed of it.
“That’s not the point. The point is you could use some good publicity! And what better way to get some than by the handsome orphan from the circus telling the world how you selflessly took him in?” Dick batted his eyelashes.

“The answer’s no.”

Dick went back to pouting.

“I’m worried about Dick,” Bruce told Alfred later that day, as Dick was getting ready for bed. “He seems — obsessed. With the whole fame aspect of my job.”

“Master Dick is, as he so often points out, a performer,” Alfred said, meticulously wiping dishes. “He went from living in the circus to living in a big house with two men who are not, perhaps, the most lively of company. It is possible he is simply striving to retain some normalcy in his life.”

Bruce sighed, putting down his pen. He wasn’t going to get anything done tonight, so he might as well stop pretending. “You’re much smarter than I am, Alfred.”

“Obviously, sir.”

Although Bruce had no doubt Dick could handle himself, he still felt some responsibility and a general distaste for reporters, so he began emailing around, asking for genuinely kind and honest journalists (and if they weren’t, he would know) to interview his young ward. Lois Lane from the Daily Planet was the first to respond, saying she had “just the guy.”

Clark’s first impression of Wayne Manor was BIG. His second was that he had no idea how anyone could feel at home in a house like this, let alone a little boy.

Clark grew up in Smallville, Kansas. On a farm. And he wasn’t exactly a people person, but he did hang out with kids his age sometimes. He went to school and to the diner and to the lake. He went to baseball games. Sure, he never played in baseball games, but watching was almost as fun.

This kid — this Dick Grayson? There was no way to live in Wayne Manor and be normal.

Not that Clark was exactly the expert.

He knocked on a big, mahogany door and, almost immediately, an older gentleman appeared.

“Welcome, Master Kent,” the man said. “May I take your coat?”

“Uh, Clark’ll do.” He handed over his “coat,” which was just a threadbare bomber jacket. “Thank you.”

The man led Clark into an overlarge sitting room, told him he would let “Master Bruce” know he’d arrived, and left. Clark remained standing, worried he would somehow ruin one of the beautiful, antique-looking couches if he sat. He fiddled with his glasses.

He could barely believe he was actually about to interview Bruce Wayne. Well. Bruce Wayne’s son. Ward. Still. The guy kept mostly to himself, except when he showed up at parties, or galas, or circuses. Clark wasn’t even sure why he was famous — he just was. And everyone wanted an interview with the kid he up and adopted.
Clark, of course, never thought he could be the one to get the interview. He mostly reported on small, local stories. Really, Lois should be on this story instead — she certainly had all the qualities Wayne was looking for — but she insisted it had to be him.

He owed a lot to Lois.

“Hello, Mr. Kent,” Bruce Wayne said. Clark jumped, but quickly extended his hand. “Thank you for doing this. I really hope this can bring an end to my ward being harangued by the media.”

“I’m fine,” another voice said, and a boy peered around the massive form of Wayne. “Whoa. You’re even more ripped than Bruce.”

“Um. Thank you.”

“Behave,” Wayne said, but the boy just grinned.

“Well, it’s an honor,” Clark said. “I’m excited to get to know you, Richard.”

“It’s Dick,” Bruce and Dick chorused.

“Then call me Clark.”

Clark and Dick sat down on one of the ridiculously expensive, hundred-year-old couches, and Bruce sat on another one, and the butler hovered by the doorway. Clark thought it was sweet that Bruce was obviously so protective of the boy. Then he remembered that if he noticed something, he should probably write it down. He did.

“Aren’t pen and paper kinda old-fashioned these days?” Dick asked.

Clark flashed him a smile. “I like old-fashioned.”

“So does Bruce. This house is so big that you can’t tell, but he’s sort of a hoarder.”

Clark looked up just in time to see the tail end of Bruce’s eye roll.

“Nothing wrong with appreciating things,” Clark said. Bruce didn’t smile, but the lines around his mouth seemed to loosen. Maybe.

“Yeah, right,” Dick said. “So I know Bruce thinks I’m fragile, but don’t pull any punches, okay? I want to tell you everything.”

Clark grinned. He liked this kid. Pa would have said he had guts.

As it turned out, Dick did not want to tell Clark everything. He didn’t want to tell Clark about the night his parents died. He didn’t want to tell Clark about the ongoing police investigation, and about how he would likely have to testify in court against Anthony Zucco. He did tell Clark about how his mother used to call him Robin, but then he quietly asked if he could not print that part. Clark promised.

Dick talked about being a trapeze artist. He talked about his favorite places to go when he was with the circus (Gotham was definitely not one of them, but it was growing on him). Mostly, he talked about Bruce.

Clark wasn’t sure if Dick loved Bruce yet, or if Bruce loved Dick, but he was sure they were on their way.
By the end of interview, Dick and Clark were both sipping Shirley Temples that Alfred, the butler, made them and they were laughing and Clark knew, 100%, that even without Bruce and Dick’s shared history, it would be impossible to know Dick Grayson didn’t have a home and not try to give him one.

“Thank you for talking with me, Dick,” Clark said, shaking his hand. Dick wasn’t very tall, but he held himself like he was, and Clark admired that.

He shook Bruce Wayne’s hand too, and had another moment in which he pondered how he ever ended up here, in Wayne Manor, shaking Bruce Wayne’s hand.

“Thank you for doing this,” Wayne said. “He thinks he’s a Kardashian now.”

“I knew you knew who they were!” Dick yelled, already in another room with some new project.

“It was an honor,” Clark said. “He’s a great kid.”

“I know.” And he thought that that time, Bruce smiled. Maybe. Probably not. Clark would remember it as a smile.

The interview’s run in the Daily Planet changed things. Dick got more famous, but calmed down about the fame a bit. Alfred was right, it seemed, and he just needed to put on a show. Bruce’s public image got better — suddenly, people seemed to stop seeing him as aloof, and more as reserved, though Bruce hadn’t changed the way he behaved. He didn’t care much either way, but it made Dick happy. And Clark Kent got a promotion, which Lois Lane personally emailed him about. Bruce sent flowers, and received a long, rambling, ultimately grateful email from Clark in return.

Dick enrolled at a private school (not public, despite Dick’s protests, and not homeschooling, despite Bruce’s protests). He’d always have stories to tell about his new friends, and about girls. He loved people. People loved him.

But Bruce could hear him at night, sometimes. Screaming. Crying. Pleading. The shouts kept Bruce up, more from worry than the noise, and Alfred never said so, but he suspected from the dark circles under his eyes, that they kept him up too.

One night, Bruce waited until the screams died down before creeping to Dick’s room. Light seeped out from beneath the door, so Bruce knocked.

“Come in,” called Dick, voice soft. Bruce stepped into the room to find him sitting upright in his too large bed, reading. He didn’t look away from the his page. “Sorry if I woke you.”

“I was awake.”

Dick stared at the book. Bruce watched Dick. It was quiet.

“I still have nightmares a lot,” Dick confessed. “They don’t always get so bad but — sometimes. I hate it. When I’m awake — well, things get hard sometimes, but mostly I feel okay. But then at night . . . I can’t escape it. I don’t think I’ll ever be okay again.”

Dick threw the book suddenly, and it landed at Bruce’s feet. It was *The Hobbit*. 
Bruce looked at Dick and saw him with his face buried in hands. In the months they’d been living together, Bruce couldn’t remember seeing Dick angry once. He thought that, along with the lack of visible panic attacks, meant Dick was adjusting far better than Bruce had. But maybe he was just tamping all that pain down inside of himself, until it had no choice but to come out when he was asleep and couldn’t fight it.

“Dick . . . maybe I should set up an appointment for you with Dr. Quinzel. My psychiatrist.”

“I’m not crazy,” Dick mumbled into his hands.

“Therapy isn’t for crazy people. It’s for people who need help, and it seems like you do. That’s okay. I needed help, too.”

“I don’t know, Bruce.”

“That’s fine. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

Dick nodded. His shoulders began to slump.

“You should try to go back to sleep.”

“I’m fine.”

“Would you like me to stay with you?”

Dick glared at him. “I’m not a little kid.”

“Just until you fall asleep. I’ll read to you, if you’d like.”

After much deliberating and picking at the seam of his blanket, Dick scooted over on the bed, even though there would have been enough room if stayed where he was. Bruce grabbed *The Hobbit* from the floor and settled next to Dick.

Five minutes, and Dick rested his head on Bruce’s shoulder.

Fifteen minutes, and Dick whispered, “I don’t need a new dad, Bruce.”

Bruce stopped reading. “I know.”

“But if I did? I could probably do worse than you.”

Twenty-seven minutes and they were both asleep.

When the jury found Anthony Zucco guilty on all counts, Harvey Dent started crying in relief and Zucco swore at the judge and Dick jumped into Bruce’s arms. As dozens of cameras erupted into light, Bruce hugged Dick for all he was worth. He knew they shouldn’t look so happy, that the media would tear them apart for celebrating, that Dick’s parents were still dead and a man in prison couldn’t change that. But Bruce had never known the pure joy of the people you loved most in the world finally receiving justice, and he imagined it felt something like this, so he gripped Dick tight and let Dick grip him back.

The hug got on the cover of the next week’s *People*. Bruce carefully saved the magazine in a
wooden box under his bed, but he’d be damned if Dick ever found out.
Come to think of it, Bruce may have jumped the gun with Jason.

He was leaving a gala late at night, somehow roped into conversation with Oliver Queen, who was a bit too Californian for Bruce’s tastes, even with his mountain-man mustache and beard. Alfred had the night off to catch up on his soap operas and do whatever else Alfred liked, so Bruce had driven here in his Lamborghini (which he didn’t use as often as he should, as Dick frequently reminded). And when he approached the dark vehicle, shining beneath the parking lot fluorescent lamps and the barely visible stars, he saw that his tires were gone.

Bruce stopped. Oliver stopped.

“What the hell, man?” Oliver asked.

Something was very off. Not just because of the tires. A charge hung in the air, like the promise of rain as black clouds roll across the sky. Oliver looked to Bruce, already creeping to the car. He peeked over the hood and there, huddled on the asphalt surrounded by four expensive tires, was a young boy.

For a moment, Bruce just stared at his disheveled head. Then the boy lifted his face and met his eyes.

“Crap,” he said, and took off running.

Bruce had to hand it him — the kid was fast for his size, and he had even managed to grab one of the tires, too.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” Oliver said. He snatched a particularly large piece of gravel from the ground. He tossed it up and down a couple times, testing its weight, before pulling his arm back, and throwing it like a baseball. The stone sliced through the air and pelted the boy right behind his knee. He crumpled. The tire rolled away from him.

Bruce sighed. “Was that necessary?”

“I’ve got good aim,” said Oliver. “Might as well use it.”

They walked to the boy. A few security guards who finally seemed to notice something was amiss looked on in confusion. The boy didn’t try to run again, hurt or just resigned to being caught, but that didn’t stop him from glaring at them with venom in his gaze.

“Why the fuck did you have to do that?” the boy shouted, not waiting for them to reach him.
“Watch your fucking language,” Oliver said. “You’re, what, nine years old?”

“I’m thirteen,” the boy spat.

Bruce realized he was about to have a conversation with a couple of angry preteens.

“How did you get past the guards?” Bruce asked, an attempt at civility.

“I’m good at sneakin’ around,” the boy said. He massaged his leg. “You gonna help me up or what? I think your buddy busted my kneecap.”

Bruce wasn’t sure how he knew Oliver had thrown the stone, but he wasn’t surprised. Even at thirteen, the boy talked like he’d seen more than some sheltered, rich guys like Bruce and Oliver could ever imagine.

“What’s your name?” Bruce asked, helping him to his feet.

“Jason.”

“Do you have a last name, Jason?”

“Not until you let me go.”

Oliver scoffed. “Sure. We’ll let you go. Go on, take the tires. While we’re at it, take my wallet, too!”

“How about this,” Bruce cut in before Jason could retort. “You put my tires back on and I give you a ride. And no one gets turned into security.”

Jason arched an eyebrow. “And then what? You drop me off at a group home?”

So he didn’t have a family. Probably living on the streets or squatting in someone’s abandoned house.

Something tugged at Bruce’s gut, something old and familiar. He knew that if Alfred or Dr. Quinzel, or even Dick, saw his face right now, they would demand he consider the possible consequences of his actions and discuss his thoughts before following through. Their voices were too soft in his head.

“I’ll take you wherever you want,” Bruce said.

Even Oliver looked dubious at this point, but Jason must have realized he didn’t have many options.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll put your damn tires back and then you can kidnap me and drop my body in a ditch somewhere.” He strode back to Bruce’s car with the tire under his arm, his bravado admirable, even if it was all for show.

“You know what you’re doing, Bruce?” Oliver asked.

“Not one bit,” Bruce said, and watched Jason get to work.

Inside the car and away from the dude with the beard, Jason found he didn’t have much to say. He was tired from stealing the tires, running away, and giving the tires back. He could feel the beginnings of a pretty nasty bruise on his knee. And there was Bruce Wayne — at least, he was
pretty sure it was Bruce Wayne — who wasn’t exactly the chattiest guy ever. Maybe because he was driving around a kid who just vandalized his property.

Jason hadn’t been in a car this nice in his entire life. Stealing its tires would probably get him more jail time than murder. He wanted desperately to ask Bruce Wayne about it, wanted to examine every last feature until he hated it so much he could happily go back to his beat up bike.

Instead, he stared out the window.

The city at night was a sight he knew too well, but one he consistently tried to forget. He only went out when he absolutely had to or when there was an opportunity he couldn’t refuse. Like tonight, when he heard about the gala. A bunch of rich people, a bunch of rich cars — he did the math. Still, he didn’t time it right. Took too much time sneaking past the guards. And now here he was.

_There are worse places to be, I guess_, he thought, running a hand over the Lamborghini’s soft leather seat.

“You like cars, Jason?” Bruce asked. Jason glanced at him. He was staring straight out the windshield.

“I like ‘em enough,” Jason said. He weighed how much to tell him. Fuck it. He already knew. “I pawn off parts sometimes. You get to know a lot about cars doin’ that, whether you mean to or not.”

“Hmm. And where are your parents while you’re doing this?”

“If you think I’ve got parents, you’re stupider than you look.”

Bruce didn’t say anything. Jason sighed. Fuck it all.

“My mom’s dead,” he said. “Pop’s in prison. Hey, do you gotta cigarette?”

Wayne side-eyed him. Jason suddenly felt very small, but the feeling was quickly swallowed but rage. Where did _Bruce Wayne_ got off acting all hoity-toity anyhow? Jason thought lots of rich people smoked. It cost empty bucks and destroyed the environment and everyone around them, the kinda thing those types _loved_.

“It helps me relieve stress,” Jason muttered, and went back to glaring out the window.

They pulled up to ornate iron gates at the bottom of a hill. Jason sat straight.

“I thought you said you weren’t gonna take me to a home!” he yelled. He calculated how quickly he could dive out the window and make a run for it. He might even have enough time to sock Wayne on the chin for being a fucking liar.

“I said I wouldn’t take you to a group home.” Bruce rolled down his window to punch in a code in the side of a wall lined with ivy. “This is my home.”

Holy shit.

They drove through the gates and up a neatly paved dirt road. On the crest of the hill, Jason could see Wayne Manor in all it’s glory. The trim lawns, gray in the night, the expansive stone and brick walls, one moat short of being a castle . . . _Wayne Manor_.Fuck.

“I was only kidding about you killing me and leaving me in a ditch,” Jason said. “So don’t get any ideas.”
They drove into a garage — which seemed to magically open because, shit, being rich was wild. The garage was huge, but there were only three other cars, all of which were far more practical-looking than the Lamborghini. It was almost disappointing. Jason had imagined dozens of luxury sports cars in black and silver and fluorescent orange with built-in microwaves and shit like that. He bet that guy with the beard had a car with a built-in microwave.

“You coming?” Wayne asked after he had parked the car and gathered his things and Jason was still buckled, clutching his bag of supplies like a lifeline. Jason still didn’t want to die, but this might be the last opportunity he would ever get to step foot in Wayne fucking Manor before this Lamborghini turned back into a pumpkin and he want back to his cold, crappy apartment.

He unbuckled his seatbelt.

Wayne Manor was . . . well, it was fucking huge. And everything was so clean and shiny. Jason’s mere presence here must have dropped the place’s value by a couple million bucks.

“You live here?” Jason asked, awe coloring his voice when he forgot to be indignant. “Like, you actually live here? You sleep and eat and and shower and, I dunno, take a dump? Here?”

“Not all at the same time,” Bruce said. “But yes.”

“BRUCE,” a voice yelled. Startled, Jason ducked behind Bruce’s hulking form as some strange creature in a blue shirt hurdled into the entryway. “BRUCE, YOU’LL NEVER GUESS WHAT HAPPENED.”

“Slow down, dick,” Bruce said, which — well, Jason thought that was kind of a rude way to address someone you were clearly close with. He may not look it, but his mom raised him with manners.

“Okay, so Barbara Gordon called, and she needed to get in touch with you for her dad, and I told her you were out, and that I could take a message, and she said to have you call him, but then she asked how I’ve been, and we talked about our lives, and we were only minimally sarcastic to one another, which was new, but good new, you know?”

Wow. This dude was, like, the least chill person ever.

“Barbara Gordon is much too old for you,” Wayne said. “Have you taken your meds?”

“Yes, jeez. I’m just a naturally energetic person. I was in the circus. Stop trying to change me.” The guy gulped from a thermos that had Orlando Bloom with flowing hair and a bow and arrow on it.

Bruce raised an eyebrow, the movement scarily practiced. But the guy just grinned, all of his stained teeth showing.

“I also may have had some coffee. It was either this or cranberry juice, which is just gross, Bruce, stop buying it. Also, four years may seem like a lot now, but when Babs is 90 and I’m 86, it’ll be totally acceptable — wait, who are you?”

Jason had crept out from behind Wayne and now the boy was staring at him, suddenly sober. He must have been only a few years older than Jason, but he was unfairly handsome, far too much so for a gangly teenager. And he looked rich and clean and well-fed.

Jason kind of wanted to deck him.

“This is Jason,” Bruce said. He put a hand on Jason’s shoulder. He tried not to flinch. “Jason, this is Dick Grayson, my ward.”
Oh yeah, Jason remembered him now. It was big news a while back. He helped put some guy in jail.

“Do people ever make fun of your name?” Jason asked.

“Sometimes,” Dick said. “Do people ever make of your height?”

Jason glowered. “My dad’s real tall. I just haven’t hit my growth spurt yet.”

“Sure thing, kid.”

“Dick, behave,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, Dick.”

“Okay, I’ve obviously made a mistake. I was going to offer you a place to stay —,”

Wait, what?

“What, what?” Dick and Jason asked.

Bruce walked out of the entryway and down a long hallway. Dick and Jason followed. They entered a huge kitchen with stainless steel appliances where a man in black was laying out plates of chocolate cake on a marble island. He set four plates, Jason noticed.

“I thought I told you to take the night off, Alfred,” Bruce said.

“Baking is a greatly pleasurable hobby of mine, Master Bruce,” Alfred said. Jason realized he must be Wayne’s butler.

His fucking butler.

“Yeah, Bruce, stop trying to take away Alfred’s greatly pleasurable hobbies,” Dick said. Alfred handed him a fork. “Thanks a bunch, Alfie.”

Alfred did not give Jason a fork, but he set one beside the plate nearest him. Cautiously, Jason slid onto the stool. The cake looked delicious, but he was nervous to touch it. What if it was laced with something?

Still, Dick seemed to be enjoying his cake fine, and Bruce was starting to pick at his piece. Jason ate a tiny bite.

He almost swore, but something about the butler made him want to appear dignified.

“This is amazing,” Jason said. He took a bigger bite. “I haven’t eaten anything this good in — ever.”

“I’m glad you think so, sir,” said Alfred, laying a cloth napkin in his lap.

“So, Bruce, you were saying something? About Jason staying here?” Dick asked when he took two seconds to breathe.

“Jason needs a place to stay —,” Bruce began.

“No, I don’t!” said Jason. He didn’t know where this guy got off, in his fancy house, with his fancy butler, acting like Jason was some sort of charity case. He had no idea what kinds of things Jason was capable of. “I know you caught me stealing and all, but I’ve been handling myself just fine since my mom died. Since longer. I’m fine on my own.”
Bruce, Alfred, and Dick all looked at each other. He wanted to scream at them to just use their fucking words.

“Just for the night,” Bruce said. “I can’t, in good conscience, send you back out to the street when it’s still dark.”

“I’ve got a place,” Jason insisted, but the offer was starting to hold weight. He thought of his place and how cold it was tonight. He thought of the ghost of his mom, always in the corner with her dirty syringes and her broken bottles. He heard the faint gunshots from somewhere down below and he felt the weight of her hand in his hair when she whispered, *Don’t end up like those boys, Jay. Promise me you won’t end up like those boys.*

*I promise*, he said, but he thought, *if it could save you, I would.*

He imagined the same thing he had imagined every night since his mom died. Putting a bullet through her scumbag dealer’s brain. It used to be a scary thought and it still was, but now it felt like a part of him. How could he let that go?

“Just for the night,” Bruce repeated. “Eat. Sleep. I’ll give you some money to reimburse you for the tires. And after tomorrow morning, we’ll never have to see each other again.”

An actual bed was pretty tempting. And this cake was *really* good.

Fuck. It.

“I’ll stick around tonight,” Jason said.

Dick sighed and Alfred went to prepare a room and Bruce looked like he got a huge tax return or some shit.

That night, curled into a ball in a bed that felt as big as the whole manor, he imagined seeing his mom’s dealer. He imagined putting the barrel of a gun up to the douchebag’s skull. And then he imagined pocketing the gun and turning around and leaving him to his sorry, fucked up life.

He fell asleep on a tear-stained pillow with salt in his mouth.

Bruce waited for Jason to come to him. It took longer than expected, two whole weeks. The first few days, Jason kept looking at Bruce like he was waiting for him to just kick him out of his house. He grew calmer as the week carried on, but kept saving parts of his meals when he didn’t think Bruce, Alfred, or Dick were looking (and they always were). He’d tense up whenever engaged in conversation, but relaxed when he realized Bruce just wanted to know if he liked any sports. He talked to Alfred a lot, especially when Alfred was in the kitchen. He mostly avoided Dick, who got the message real soon that his weak attempts at friendship weren’t accepted. The elephant of his overstay welcome dangled on a wire between them.

Then, two Saturdays over, there was a knock on the door of Bruce’s study.

“Come on in, Jason,” Bruce called.

“How’d ya know it was me?” Jason asked, slipping into the room.
“Alfred and Dick don’t usually stop by while I’m working.”

“Oh. Sorry. I can leave —,”

“No, it’s fine.” Bruce set down his pen. “My hand was cramping. I’m glad for the distraction.”

Jason smiled a little. “Is that what’s behind the big, bad Bruce Wayne? Lots of paperwork?”

“Ha. You could definitely say that. Paperwork, and many hard-working people.”

Jason stared at the wood flooring, all semblance of joking drained from his posture.

“Would you like to sit down?” Bruce asked.

“Oh. Sure.” Jason sat on an empty swivel chair. He twisted one way, and then the next, and then, slowly, he spun himself. “You know, I don’t think Dick likes me very much.”

Huh. Bruce hadn’t expected that. But it wasn’t like he could argue. Jason would never accept a lie.

“When Dick was in the circus, he was an only child surrounded by adults. Here, it’s much of the same. He has friends his age, but he’s never had to live with them.” Bruce paused. “And you probably don’t make things better for yourself by making fun of his name so much.”

Jason grinned as his chair went around for another loop. “It’s not my fault he likes to go by Dick. Any moron could see how that would play out for him.”

“His parents called him ‘Dick.’ He uses it because it makes him feel close to them.”


“‘Psychoanalyze,’” Bruce repeated. “You’re a smart kid, Jason.”

“Nah. I just know shit.”

“What do you think being smart is?”

“If I was smart, I wouldn’t have gotten caught by you that night.”

“I’m glad you did.”

Jason watched him. He was gearing himself up the big reveal, the reason he was sitting here. Bruce could see it in the tension of his shoulders, the stiffness of his mouth.

“I don’t really wanna go back home,” Jason said, voice not quite a whisper. He hurried on before Bruce could interrupt. “I don’t need to stay here, okay? I can take care of myself. I’m not a charity project or anything. But you offered and — you’ve got good food.”

Something in Bruce’s chest clenched and soared at the same time. A lifetime ago, Bruce forced Alfred to force him to get help because he desperately needed it, but he would never ask. This boy had no idea how brave he was being in this moment, but Bruce did, and he knew he made the right choice offering Jason a ride that night.

“You’re welcome to stay, Jason,” Bruce said, trying to be gentle. “For as long as you’d like.”
Jason nodded and stood. “Um. Thanks. Cool. I’ll just go then. Uh. Here.” He stuck out his hand. It was only because Bruce was so practiced at keeping a straight face that he shook it without so much as a twitch of the lips. Jason turned and practically ran out of his office.

By the end of the month, Jason Todd was the second ward of Bruce Wayne. The media attention was only slightly less hectic than it had been for Dick, but Jason was far less impressed. Bruce made sure no reporters contacted Jason, not because he doubted Jason could handle them, but because he couldn’t count on him not to say something like, “my bedroom is a supply closet” just because he thought it would be funny.

There was still lingering tension between Jason and Dick. Dick seemed to accept that Jason wasn’t going anywhere, and stopped actively avoiding him. Jason seemed to accept Dick wasn’t going anywhere either, and tried to be less openly hostile. He also stopped making fun of Dick’s name. Still, Bruce got the oddest sensation sometimes that they were competing for his attention.

For example, Bruce had taken Jason shopping for new clothes, and they came home to Dick preparing four provolone and prosciutto sandwiches on fresh baguettes (Bruce’s personal favorite). Jason then made chocolate milkshakes (with help from Alfred, but only a little). As they ate, the boys kept watching Bruce as though waiting for him to declare a winner.

Bruce looked at Alfred helplessly. The bastard had the nerve to chuckle behind his napkin.

Soon, Jason was enrolled in school, a development he was far from happy about. One thing he had not missed while living on the streets, he loudly proclaimed several times a week, was homework.

One night, Bruce came home from a meeting with an important potential client to voices in the living room. Neither of the voices were British, so Bruce kept quiet as he crept through the hallway.

Jason and Dick sat shoulder to shoulder on a sofa, pouring over a textbook, papers strewn across the coffee table. Jason flung down his pencil.

“This is hopeless,” he growled. “Math is hopeless. I’m hopeless. This is a fucking special ed class and I still don’t fucking get it.”

“Hey, slow down,” Dick said. “This stuff’s not easy for anyone, let alone someone who hasn’t gone to school in a few years. Let’s try again.”

“I’ve tried fifty times. If I haven’t gotten it yet, I’m never gonna.”

“Whoa, none of that. You’re Jason Todd, man. You almost stole Bruce Wayne’s tires. You can do anything.”

Jason glanced up at him, and Bruce thought he might be puffing up his chest a little. “I would have done it too, if that douchebag hadn’t tried to kill me.”

Dick tapped his pencil against Jason’s chin. “That’s the attitude I’m looking for. Come on, three more times.”

“I dunno . . .”

“Fifty-three isn’t that big a jump from fifty.”

“I guess.”

“Atta boy, Jay. I got a good feeling about this one.”
Bruce left them to it. He could take the long way to his room tonight.

Barbara Gordon had a lot of conflicting opinions on Bruce Wayne. She thought he was too rich for his own good, but admired the way he donated so much money to charities. On the few occasions she had met him, she found him cold, but she was grateful for the friendship he provided her father (even though her father swore he didn’t have friends). She felt a certain camaraderie towards Bruce and Dick, because they both lost their parents when they were young and were pseudo-adopted, like she was, even though everyone knew about Alfred and Bruce and Dick and barely anyone knew Barbara’s dad was technically her uncle. She also felt like Bruce and Dick were kind of elitist. It was always a cool story to tell her friends, though, how she sort of almost kinda knew Bruce Wayne. Mr. Wayne was a big supporter of law enforcement, and of keeping law enforcement clean and ethical, and so was her dad. So was Barbara. Not everyone in Gotham felt the same — certainly, not as many cops as you’d think — but Bruce and Jim were committed. Babs relayed messages between them sometimes because her dad was an old geezer who needed help with technology. Every once in a while, if she was lucky, they would ask her opinion.

Not enough people asked her opinion about these things. She didn’t mean to toot her own horn — well, yeah, she totally did. Babs was smart. She had good opinions. She knew she did.

When Jim came downstairs, asking, “I’m going over to Wayne Manor for dinner, wanna come?” she knew tonight was one of the lucky ones.

Babs thought Wayne Manor was some lovely architecture, but she felt no envy for it. She liked her house. It was the reason she didn’t move away for college, even though, man, was she tempted. And besides, her dad needed her there. He didn’t have anyone else anymore. Neither of them did.

Still, dinner at Wayne Manor was way better than anything she or her dad could cook.

They had just finished a discussion on police brutality — Babs was in favor of better background checks, tougher consequences, and for god’s sake, something had to be done about the way people used those damn guns — when there was a lull in the conversation.

Jason — the not-technically-a-Wayne Babs had almost forgotten existed, despite having been around for six months or so — took the opportunity to ask, “You’re in college? What’s your major?”

“They’re a science to libraries?” Jason asked, scrunching his nose.

“Sure there is,” Barbara said. “It’s pretty interesting, too.”

“Seriously though. Out of everything you could have chosen to learn about, you went with libraries?”

Okay, this kid’s boyish smile and cute little Gotham accent would only get him so far in life if he was planning on acting like that.

“Be polite,” Dick hissed.

“I’m just saying,” Jason said. “Books are neat and all, but where I come from, college is a fairytale. If
I got to go, I’d try to do something cool and special.”

“My first choice was actually forensics science,” Babs said. “I wanted to join the FBI.”

“Whoa,” Jason said. She had, she could tell, grudgingly gained his respect. “So why aren’t you doing that?”

Babs shrugged. She looked at her dad, who was examining his plate.

“It gets kind of dangerous,” she said. “Maybe I got scared.”

Jason didn’t seem to buy that excuse.

“You could probably still do it,” Dick cut in. “If you changed majors now. With your photographic memory, it shouldn’t delay your graduation that much . . .”

The amount of stuff Dick remembered about her, she was surprised he didn’t have a photographic memory.

“Photographic — no way,” said Jason. “That kinda stuff only happens in the movies.”

Barbara smirked at him. “Wanna bet?”

Dick, Jason, and Babs wound up in the living room with Jason and Dick drawing exceedingly ridiculous portraits with vibrant felt markers. They flashed the pictures at her and she had to tell them what the picture was, and all the colors used. While they drew, Babs would talk with her dad and Mr. Wayne, but even they became engrossed in the game. And it was — well, it was childish, but it was fun, too. Jason tried to trick her by adding some tiny, random detail she could barely catch. Dick liked lots of color, and though he seemed to be going easy on her at first, he got increasingly competitive, especially when Jason said, “Just because you have a crush on her doesn’t mean you have to turn into a total wuss.”

Her dad choked on his brandy.

“I — I do not —,” Dick sputtered.

“Prove it, Grayson,” she said, and he spun around to go draw the Mona Lisa or something. Boys were so predictable.

“Face it,” Barbara said after a half hour. “I’m a genius. You can’t beat me.”

“I’d stop trying, boys,” Jim said, sipping his coffee. “The girl’s brain’s like a computer. It’s a lost cause.”

Barbara’s heart expanded. Her dad always talked about how beautiful she was, how kind she was, sometimes how strong her work ethic was. He rarely complimented her mind.

Barbara was beginning to wonder if he was afraid of it.

Jim looked at his watch. “Crap, it’s late. We have to go. I hope it’s not still raining . . .”

“Why don’t you stay here for the night?” Bruce asked.

Jim and Babs looked at him.

“I wouldn’t forgive myself if something happened because you two were driving home in the middle
of the night in the pouring rain. We have plenty of room.”

Jim and Babs looked at each other.

“Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt . . .”

So that was how Barbara ended up in a guest room of Wayne Manor, wearing a teenage boy’s pajamas. Dick had been very poised when he gave them to her, but his cheeks were pink, and so were hers, and it was all very embarrassing.

Babs threw herself down on her bed. She was a 20-year-old woman. God.

A knock on the door. Her dad entered.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yup.” She sat up. “So this is crazy, right? We’re actually sleeping in Wayne Manor.”

“Pretty crazy.” Jim sat on the edge of her bed. “You and me. Just a couple of kids from Jersey.”

Barbara snorted. “Everyone here is from Jersey. Except Alfred. And Dick. And me, actually. I’m from Ohio.”

“Eh, you’ve been here long enough. It counts.”

Barbara wondered if it did count, if was she was officially a Gotham City Girl. She sure as hell felt like one some nights.

Jim cleared his throat. He had that look on his face, the one that said he wanted to say something, but was scared of how she would react. Nothing good ever came from that look.

She tapped his knee with her foot, and he met her eyes.

“I want you to stay away from Grayson tonight, okay?” he said.

Barbara allowed the words to shift through her ears to her brain and down to her chest, where they settled like food she’d swallowed too quickly. And then —

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Babs —,”

“He’s sixteen. What kind of person do you think I am?”

“Listen, you haven’t seen this kid in action. He has a way of getting what he wants —,”

Every sentence sounded like metal scraping against metal. How could he not hear himself?

“He doesn’t want me, he has a crush on me.” She forced her voice to be steady. “Pretty soon he’ll meet some other girl and fall madly in love, and she’ll seem like — like some sort of exotic alien princess, compared to me. And by the way, I’m not some pay raise or a good grade. It’d be a lot harder to ‘get’ me.”

Jim huffed. “I’m just trying to look out for you —,”

“I don’t need you to look out for me.”
She’d hurt him. She could tell she’d hurt him.

*Good,* a small part of her thought.

*I’m sorry,* Daddy, *I love you,* thought another small part.

And a larger part thought, *Who are you looking at? Why don’t you see me?*

“Well. Okay then. Good night, Babs.”

And he left.

Barbara curled into a ball on the bed. It was too big, too soft. She closed her eyes, imagining she could hear the rain pattering the roof. Imagined it seeping through the cracks, drenching her, carrying her away like she was Alice floating in her own tears.

This was hopeless. She wasn’t going to lie awake all night waiting to drown.

Babs slipped into the hallway outside her room, even bigger and more foreboding in the darkness and the quiet. She took a moment to consider, in her mind, the layout of the house and the parts of the house she had seen — and then set off. She passed expensive-looking paintings hung on the walls and curtains pulled over what looked like hidden passageways and she felt like she was in one of her dime store mystery novels.

Eventually, she reached the kitchen. She made sure to be quiet as she brewed herself a cup of coffee.

When all that was taken care of, Babs knew she should go back to her room, but she wasn’t ready. You were only alone in Wayne Manor at two in the morning once.

She took off down another hallway, and another. She crept up ornate stairs. She passed a wall of photos of Bruce Wayne as a baby, of Bruce Wayne’s parents, of Dick Grayson in school photos, and one of Jason Todd. She came to a pair of beautiful glass doors, and tried the handles. They were unlocked.

She pushed open the doors and there, laid out before her, was a library.

It was like — all of Babs’s dreams coming true. Except she wasn’t hunting down murderers, or anything like that. But it was almost a dream come true.

Still clutching her coffee, Barbara went to the nearest book shelf.

“Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland? Good choice.”

Barbara looked up, eyes sandpaper dry. Bruce Wayne stood over her in silk pajamas and a robe. It was strange to see him out of a suit.

“This is a first printing,” she said. “I don’t even know how you got ahold of it. It must have cost . . .” She was about to say “a fortune” but then she remembered he had one of those.

“You like books, then?” Bruce asked.

“Well, yeah. Library science, remember?”
“I thought you were just doing that because forensics was too dangerous.”

“I am. But I can like more than one thing.”

“Point. My apologies.”

Bruce sat in the armchair next to hers. He was a strange man, she thought. There was always something . . . off about him. People called him cold sometimes, she had called him that herself, and maybe he was, but it was more than that. Like all of *Bruce Wayne: Socialite, CEO, Playboy* was some elaborate disguise he wore so no one could see the real person underneath.

If there even was a person. Sometimes, she wondered if the real Bruce Wayne was just a shell of the man that a boy who watched his parents’ murder could have been.

She saw him tonight, though, with his sons and his butler, and she didn’t know what to think.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said. “So I went to get some coffee.”

“Coffee’s not known for causing drowsiness,” said Bruce.

“I know. But it focuses me, for some reason. Maybe because my dad doesn’t like it.”

“He doesn’t like coffee?”

“When I drink coffee. It makes me seem too . . . adult, or masculine, or something.”

Babs didn’t know why she was telling him this. He was her dad’s friend, for God’s sake.

“Sometimes I don’t think he’s really seeing me,” she said, words too loud even though she spoke softly. Should she keep going? Would she say this if she wasn’t in a beautiful library in the middle of the night with cold coffee and *Alice in Wonderland* and the richest man in Gotham in his pjs? “I think he’s scared that I’m not — who I should be.”

“Who you could have been,” said Bruce. “If things were different.”

Babs looked at him. His edges seemed soft in the dim light.

“Alfred sometimes looks at me the same way,” Bruce said. “It was worse growing up.”

Huh. Maybe that’s why he was so . . . well. Something. It wasn’t usually hard for her to find words, but Bruce Wayne was always one to defy the odds.

“The older I get, the worse it gets,” Babs confessed. “He thought my being — myself — was, well, cute when I was young, but now I’m in college, and he suddenly thinks I’m dangerous.”

Bruce didn’t fidget. Barbara couldn’t remember ever seeing Bruce fidget. He was very still.

“He’s trying to protect you,” Bruce said. “He loves you.”

“Wow, that is such a dad thing to say.”

Bruce blinked. She thought she might have actually taken him by surprise.

A slow grin crept up her face. “You haven’t even realized it yet, have you? That you’re a dad?”

“Because I’m not. Dick and Jason both lost their fathers. I could never replace them.”
“You’re the closest thing they’ve got.”

“Hmm.” If Babs hadn’t known Bruce Wayne for quite some time, she would almost think he was laughing at her. “Well, I guess that makes it my job to lecture you about treating my son right —,”

“Okay, what is it about me that says ‘goes after sixteen-year-old boys’? Please tell me so I can change it, immediately.”

She was smiling, and it was soft and tired and this was all so surreal. She thought that if she were looking for a dad, Bruce Wayne would be a good person to choose. He was rich and had a weird sense of humor and, most importantly, he would never try to control his kids’ lives. He was too trapped in his own head to think he could manage what was in someone else’s. She liked that.

But, in spite of everything, she wasn’t looking.

The next thing she knew, her eyes were fluttering open. She was back in bed, underneath the covers, with a coffee cup and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland on the bedside table. A tall man shut the door behind him. She wasn’t sure if it was Bruce or her dad. She closed her eyes, and slept.

Bruce offered Barbara the library any time she wanted and, to his surprise, she actually took him up on it. Barbara was familiar to him, he thought. They weren’t that similar, not really. But she was familiar. And he enjoyed having her around.

All at once, Wayne Manor felt crowded. Two teenage boys were a lot more to handle than one. Barbara began her visits by solely keeping to the library, reading Bruce’s old fantasy novels and academic books about law, but she gradually inched her way out, teasing Dick with Jason or ganging up on Jason with Dick. And Jim came over more for dinner. And, of course, there was Alfred.

“Thank you, Bruce,” Jim told him one night. “I haven’t seen Babs smile so much as when she’s around you and your boys.”

Bruce and his boys. That was something.

In an email to Clark, Bruce wrote:

_It’s strange. I think we’re something resembling a family now. Of course, Dick, Alfred, and I were already a family, but it never felt like this. There are nights when there are six of us at the dinner table. Six. My parents barely ever had that many people over to the Manor at one time._

_I know Jim and Barbara are their own family. I know Dick and Jason only get along until they don’t. I know Alfred works for me. But we all fit together in a way I never imagined fitting with other humans. It does not make much sense, I know. But it feels real._

Clark wrote back:

_Other humans? Hang out with a lot of aliens, do you? Or maybe you just don’t consider most of your business partners to be human._

_All jokes aside . . . Bruce. I understand. You don’t have to explain to me. I may look like the paragon of American traditionalism, but I’m adopted too. My parents found me abandoned in a field as a_
baby. I know, firsthand, that family isn’t always what the world tells you it should be. Family is who you belong with. I belong with my parents. I belong with Lois and Jimmy and the Daily Planet. Maybe I could have belonged with my biological parents, but I’ll never know.

Bruce, you belong with those kids. You just do. I know I’m just some reporter from Kansas, and I know you have more trust issues than I could probably ever understand, but please, trust me on this.

And despite all his better instincts, Bruce did.
When it came to women, Bruce had something of a reputation. *Billionaire Playboy Strikes Again*, the tabloids would read whenever he so much as looked at a woman around his own age, give or take fifteen years. The only time he ever felt the need to discuss his love life with the media was when a rampant rumor took off that Bruce and Barbara were secretly engaged. Bruce issued a statement that he cared deeply for Barbara, but he considered her to be the younger sister he never had, and that she was rather openly in a relationship with a nice young man named Ted Kord anyways.

The public let it drop, but Jason still thought it was a great anecdote for family dinners.

Despite his image, Bruce really didn’t have much time for romance. There were a handful one-night stands, but fatherhood meant he couldn’t just disappear on a whirlwind weekend romance anymore. And there were only a few relationships. Vicki, his girlfriend from college, who ultimately decided she couldn’t have a rich boyfriend and pursue a serious career in journalism. Diana, the princess. At least, she said she was a princess. He still couldn’t find Themyscira on Google Earth. Talia, who burned hot and bright and maybe he loved her a little, but they both knew from the start that nothing could come of whatever it was they were doing.

It had been a long time since Talia.

Jason and Dick thought this was completely unacceptable. Dick was in his first serious relationship, and he often talked about how the world was just so much more *beautiful* now that he had Kory. Jason just thought it was funny to give Bruce a hard time.

The two of them, along with Barbara if they batted their eyelashes enough, liked to confront him about his love life at inopportune moments.

“So I did some research on online dating, and you’d be surprised at how effective it can be these days,” Barbara said while Bruce did bench presses in the home gym.

“It wouldn’t hurt to go on one blind date,” Dick said when Bruce was getting out of the shower.
“We think you’re lonely,” Jason said, somehow ending up in Bruce’s room at three in the morning.

Bruce decided it was time to put his foot down.

He invited Jason, Dick, and Babs out to his favorite pizzeria on a night when they were all free (not such an easy feat these days) and when they were busy stuffing their faces with pepperoni pizza, he made his case.

“Look, I appreciate how much you care about my happiness,” he said. “But I’m not lonely. I just don’t have time for romance, and that’s okay. You all keep me busy enough.”

Dick took his time swallowing pizza and wiping his mouth with his napkin. He cleared his throat. “We’re not kids anymore,” he said, like he was speaking to a child. “I’m twenty-one, I’m almost done with school. Babs has always been old, but now she’s, you know, really old, like, she’s a politician —,”

“I’m running for the House of Representatives which happens to have the youngest age requirement —,”

“And Jason’s an adult — well, legally, at least —,”

“Fuck you, Dickie G.”

“So you don’t have to worry about us anymore!” Dick finished, a bright, tomato sauce smile on his face.

Bruce admired his logic, but he didn’t think he would ever be able to stop worrying about them.

“They don’t you just date Clark?” Jason asked, going back to his pizza. “You guys already have a good thing going. It’d be easy.”

“I hoped you would have known this already, but dating has to be a consensual act. And Clark’s very happily engaged.”

Bruce didn’t mention that Lois kept dropping hints that if she and Clark were ever in the market for spicing up their sex life, he’d be the first person they’d call. He was fairly sure she was joking. Somewhat sure.

There were just some things about his life that his kids were better off not knowing.

“Fine, Bruce, be a spinster for all I care,” Jason said. He crumpled up his straw rapper and flicked it across the table. It bounced off Bruce’s chin, falling into his lap. “I’m sure you’ll be very happy.”

“I’m sure I will be, too,” Bruce said.

And he was. Until he met Selina.

From the moment he saw her across the ballroom, miles of sparkling dresses and slick tuxedoes stretching between them, he knew that talking to her would only lead to trouble. But she saw him too, her eyes a startling moss-green, and something about their gleam told him she didn’t have the same reservations.

“I think she likes you,” a voice said next to him. He looked to the side — and down — and there was a boy. Slim, hair a bit too mussed to be intentional, yet somewhat impressive in his well-fitting suit.
Bruce thought about asking who the boy was talking about, but he seemed far too intelligent for a stunt like that.

“What makes you say so?” he asked instead.

“She keeps staring at you like you’re being offered on the dessert table.”

“Hmm.” Bruce looked back to the woman and their eyes met again. He shuddered at their hunger.

“You know a lot about this sort of thing?”

“I’m observant.” He held out a hand for Bruce to shake. His grip was firm. “Tim Drake.”

“Jack’s son?”

“Yes, sir. And you’re Bruce Wayne.”

“Very observant.”

Tim tried not to grin. He didn’t quite manage it. “You should talk to that girl.”

“You’re as bad as Jay and Dick. Those are —,”

“Your wards, I know.” Bruce raised an eyebrow and he blushed, like he’d been caught doing something scandalous. “I met them once, when you were accepting that philanthropy award last year? They were very nice. Do they come to galas often?”

“No, these things —,” Aren’t really for kids. But Dick was twenty-one and Jason was eighteen and Tim Drake looked like he hadn’t started puberty yet. Bruce didn’t want to make him feel bad.

Tim seemed to get the idea anyway. His ears grew redder as he stared down at his glossy shoes.

“I hope you’re not bothering Mr. Wayne, Timothy,” an approaching man said, gleaming brown hair and strong jaw distinguished amongst a sea of distinguished men. Bruce knew him to be Jack Drake, Tim’s father. He had two women in tow — a blonde, his relatively new wife, and the woman who had been eyeing Bruce from across the room.

Up close, she was even more striking. Her dark hair cropped near to her face highlighted her fine features and those green eyes were set in lovely olive skin. A black dress hugged her figure. Her smile made her seem to be laughing at some private joke, though at whose expense Bruce had no clue. Maybe his. Maybe everyone’s in this room.

“Tim wasn’t a bother,” Bruce said, tearing his eyes away from the woman. “He’s very intelligent.”

“Gets it from me,” Jack chortled, but Bruce could tell he was pleased. “You’re quite the inspiration to him, you know. I never heard the end of it when you weren’t included in Time’s Most Influential People last year.”

“Dad.”

“That was actually quite the debate amongst my family,” said Bruce in an attempt to save Tim from his utter mortification. “My youngest said it was about time I was taken off the list, that I had stopped being influential years ago.”

He glanced at Tim, who was still watching his shoes, but smiling a little.

Jack didn’t seem to notice his son’s demeanor, instead moving on to his companions.
“You remember my wife, Dana?” Jack asked. Bruce nodded, though he hadn’t remembered her name. “And this lovely lady I have just had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of says she’s always wanted to meet you.”

“Selina Kyle,” the woman said. She extended her hand and he almost thought she expected him to kiss it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Wayne.”

Like Tim Drake’s, her grip was surprisingly firm for someone with such svelte fingers.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Miss Kyle. And call me Bruce.”

“I think I’ll save that for our next meeting, Mr. Wayne.”

“How do you know we’ll meet again?”

She smiled, and though she was the picture of sophistication, there was something in her smile, something feral. Like he was the mouse and he’d been trapped without ever knowing.

“I just have a feeling,” she said.

They chatted for a few minutes longer, until Selina Kyle declared she simply must leave with gracious thanks to the adults and a crafty wink aimed at Tim Drake that only Bruce seemed to notice. And then she was gone. Jack Drake continued on about about drilling for oil and Bruce forced her out of his mind.

They met again, a few weeks later, at a luncheon. Dick was accompanying him as a called-in favor from Lucian Fox because Wayne Enterprises needed networking and no one was better at networking than Dick Grayson. He ambled up to Bruce with a plate of caesar salad and a familiar woman on his arm.

“Hello, Bruce,” Selina Kyle said with her catlike grin.

“You two know each other?” Dick asked. His politely forced tone and hard eyes told Bruce they were due for an uncomfortable conversation.

“We’ve met,” said Bruce. “It was very brief.”

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short, honey. You’re a delightful companion.”

“I leave ‘delightful’ to Dick.”

Dick grinned. “And I am pleased to say that I follow through.” He raised a slow eyebrow, a move Bruce was sure had broken many a heart at Gotham Academy. Bruce tried not think about what else he might use it for. “I could always use a second opinion though.”

Selina laughed. “I appreciate the effort, sweetheart, but 25 is my cut off age these days. Have any charming older friends?”

“There’s Barbara. But she’s a politician.”

“Damn, that was my other requirement. No politics. Have her call me if she decides to change careers.”

Selina left then, with nothing more than a “Gotta go” and a smirk. He wondered where it was she always went in such a hurry.
Dick turned on Bruce.

“Not a word.”

“You could have, you know, at least attempted to be personable.”

“And you can attempt to get more salad,” Bruce said, taking Dick’s plate for himself.

“Wow, okay, mature,” Dick said. He stole a crouton before going back to the buffet.

Selina Kyle kept appearing, at nearly every event Bruce attended. Sometimes she had a date — men or women in equal amounts — but usually she came alone, and she always left alone. Each time they met, she spoke to Bruce for a few charged minutes before taking her leave. It became a game, against his better intentions, to see how long he could make her stay.

Everything reached a head one night when he invited her onto the dance floor. He couldn’t even remember having the thought to invite her before the words were out of his mouth. She didn’t miss a beat, coyly saying, “I thought you’d never ask.”

That’s why she was so dangerous. That’s why she was so thrilling.

They walked onto the floor.

As they began their waltz, they kept a respectable distance between themselves. Selina was a lovely dancer, holding herself tall and straight. It surprised him that she didn’t press closer, but maybe it shouldn’t have. He knew nothing about her, really. This would just be another one of her secrets.

“You look like you could use a break,” she said. Her lips formed words like hands might hold a grenade, like hers was the power to preserve or destroy.

“What do you call this?” he asked, just to see her speak.

“More networking. But if you’re really looking for a good time, you should give me a call.”

“I don’t know your phone number.”

“It’ll show up.”

Not long after, she excused herself. His phone buzzed the minute she walked out the door. The only message being: ;)

His stomach fluttered at the sight.

He didn’t call her for another month. He didn’t intend on calling her at all, but Dick found out, and he told Clark, who told Lois and — well. Greater men than Bruce had bent to Lois Lane’s whims.

Somehow, he ended up calling Selina and asking if she wanted to go to dinner with him, Clark and Lois as his audience.

“It’s a date,” Selina agreed. The phone clicked.

He put his cellphone back in his pocket. Lois watched him with barely concealed glee, and Clark looked something akin to proud.

“Are you happy?” Bruce asked Lois because he wasn’t ready to face Clark Kent’s pride.
“Very,” Lois said. She slurped her coke and fixed up her lipstick when she was done. “So tell me about this lady. Is she pretty? Open-minded?”

“Not this again —,” Clark started.

“Because I’m always willing to add another party to our future orgy.”

Clark blushed and groaned and Bruce wasn’t one to call things adorable, but, well. If he were.

Bruce took Jason, Dick, and Barbara for pizza again.

“I’m going out tonight,” he announced.

Jason coughed. Dick blinked. Babs chewed her pizza. And then —

“The fuck does ‘out’ mean?”

“Do you have an event?”

“Like, on a date?”

“Yes,” he said when they quieted. “On a date.”

“I can’t believe this. I might cry.”

“Was it the lady from the luncheon? I so knew you liked her, I can always tell.”

“You’re going to tell us everything, right? I mean, not everything, not sexy things, but everything else.”

“Will you all be okay tonight?” Bruce asked.

“For the last time, Gramps, we’ll be fine,” Jason said. “Babs will babysit us.”

She flicked him on the ear.

“I’m treating the boys to a movie tonight, anyway,” said Barbara. “To celebrate my nomination. We’ll invite some friends. It’ll be fun.”

“We should be the ones treating you,” Dick pointed out. “Or, I don’t know, maybe your boyfriend should.”

Barbara rolled her eyes. Bruce knew that Dick and Ted got along just fine, but when it came to Barbara Gordon, no one would ever be good enough.

“It’s not like he can fly out just for this. We’re having a Skype date later tonight.”

“Ooh romantic.”

Jason mimed a cat hissing, and Bruce figured it was time to diffuse the situation.

“Okay, I understand, you are all adults, you don’t need me to smother you,” he said. “I get the hint. Have fun tonight.”
“You too,” Babs said. “But not too much fun.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Jason said.

“Don’t do anything Clark Kent wouldn’t do,” Dick said.

“I do want to have some fun tonight,” Bruce said.

“OH BURN,” Jason yelled and Babs said, “The claws come out,” and Dick said, “What’s Clark ever done to you?”

And Bruce knew they were adults but they were his kids too and he didn’t think their ages could ever change that.

Selina must have been raised in wealth because she was the picture of elegance in her black dress and strappy heels and red lipstick. She pronounced all the French dish names with a perfect accent. The waitress nearly spilled water on Bruce’s lap because she was so busy staring at Selina as she ate pasta. He understood.

“Are you from Gotham?” he asked after the waitress’ numerous apologies.

“Born and raised,” Selina said.

“I wonder why we’ve never met before now.”

She shrugged a little. It was a good shrug, honest, and if Bruce wasn’t so adept at spotting aversions of the truth (the result of owning a business and raising two boys), he might not have seen it for what it was.

There was something under his skin as they ate, something bubbling between them. It was going to spill over soon, he knew, or explode. Maybe his kids were right, maybe he needed this. Maybe it was past time for a little explosion.

“Do you want to go back to my place?” he asked.

Although her expression didn’t change, there was something in her silence. He had a feeling he surprised her. He had a feeling that wasn’t very easy to do.

“No,” she said. His heart contracted. “I want to go back to mine.”

He called for the bill.

Selina’s home was not what he expected. She seemed so poised and elegant, always in a designer gown with pearls around her neck, that he expected a mansion. What he got was a tiny apartment next to a dark alley in one of the roughest parts of Gotham.

She didn’t comment as she let them into the apartment, other than a, “Make yourself at home.”
He sat down on a threadbare sofa and she went to the kitchen to pour them both a glass of wine. There wasn’t much for personal belongings here. No photos. The furniture cheap and generic. A cat sat under a coffee table, staring at him with gleaming eyes. It ran when he looked back, a flash of gray, and he heard another cat in another room meow a greeting.

Selina came back with two large glasses of deep red liquid. She sat on the other end of the sofa, passing a glass to him. There was something different about her in this place. Still in her dress, still in her pearls, her movements were rougher. She looked like a true Gotham girl suddenly, and maybe she always had, but surrounded by the refinery of the wealthiest the city had to offer, she was able to camouflage. He wondered how he looked to her now, if his own disguise had been stripped away.

“We have met before you know,” she said.

“Have we?”

“Yeah. A long time ago. On a rooftop. This rooftop.”

He didn’t understand. It wasn’t like he made a habit of running across rooftops, especially since he —

Oh. Oh.

He hadn’t recognized it. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t recognized it. He had thought — well, some things are just unforgettable. His parents. Dick’s parents. The rooftop. Had it really been so long?

And if they had met on this rooftop, that meant —

“You were the woman. On the roof. You talked to me . . .” It dawned on him then, in that way long-displaced memories sometimes returned when you least expected them. “You called the police.”

“I did.” She watched him, the way she always watched him at galas and events these past months, the way she had watched him that far-off night. Now he knew it was her, it was impossible not to reconstruct the woman sitting before him in his mind’s eye. Long hair. A cigarette dangling from soot-stained fingertips. Ripped jeans and combat boots and a leather jacket. But the same green eyes.

“Are you mad?” she asked. A childish question, he supposed, but an appropriate one.

“No.”

He realized the truth of it as he spoke. Maybe he should have been mad, or more uncomfortable with her going out of her way to find him, contacting him without disclosing this about herself. But it really had been a long time. And the man he’d been that night, the angry, sad, scared, hopeless young man, he didn’t exist anymore. Or he did, but now he was a father and a friend and so many things he never thought he could be.

Bruce’s phone rang. Alfred’s name flashed. He turned it off.

Selina watched him put the phone back in his jacket pocket, but didn’t comment.

“You saved my life,” he said. “I never thanked you for that.”


Bruce watched her. He heard the echo of a woman in his head, felt the phantom rush of drugs in his
veins.

*Just keep your eyes on me, okay? Or at least listen to my voice. I called some people. They’re gonna help you.*

*I don’t want help.*

*Well too bad, buddy. I don’t find handsome rich boys about to jump fifteen stories and refuse to help them.*

He forced himself back into the present. “Why did you find me?”

“Don’t know. I thought about you from time to time. And then I saw you on the news one day and I just thought . . . ‘I wonder how he’s doing.’ And I wanted to find out.”

“How did you get into all those events?”

“Oh, Mr. Wayne, adopter of orphans, funder of the police, defender of Gotham, there are some things it’s best you don’t know about me.”

He kissed her. He didn’t know why other than she was smirking and the wine made her lips look even redder and he couldn’t remember the last time he felt so much.

She gently, but firmly, pushed him away.

“I’m sorry,” he said, falling back into the cushions. “I don’t know what came over me.”

She held up a single finger as she carefully set down her wine on the coffee table.

And then she kissed him.

The morning splashed across Selina’s back. She had a surprising amount of freckles sprinkled there for someone whose skin was far from pale and whose hair was so dark. He leaned down and kissed one. She shifted, but didn’t wake.

Bruce carefully slipped from the bed to pull on his pants, which were piled by the bedroom door. He remembered his phone in his jacket pocket and fished it out. He turned it on.

62 missed calls.

He might have attributed them to work, but no one used phones anymore when email was so convenient. There were many from Alfred, a few from Dick, Clark, Lois, Jim Gordon, various business partners . . . and three from the Gotham City Hospital.

He opened his text messages to the most recent, sent by Lucius Fox:

**Turn on the news. Now.**

This was one of those times, much rarer now than they used to be, when the world turned in slow motion. A haze filled his brain, turning everything gray and foggy. He ran to the small, dingy TV in the living room and it felt like running through water. When he grabbed the remote, he couldn’t seem to press the buttons fast enough. He concentrated hard on moving his own fingers.
“There have been two confirmed fatalities, and at least two people are critically injured. All individuals involved however, have been advised to spend some time in the hospital. The man behind this hostage situation, who has thus far only identified himself as ‘The Joker,’ is in custody and investigators are looking into a possible connection he might have had to a hostage crisis last year in which members of Oliver Queen’s family were held against their will. Given that two of the men abducted tonight were the wards of Gotham socialite Bruce Wayne —,”

The TV clicked off. Bruce turned to see Selina, already dressed in what might have been the same leather jacket she wore when they first met, car keys jangling in her hand.

“Come on,” she said. “I’ll give you a ride.”

Tim knew he might be in shock. It was one thing to know it and another to experience it.

The waiting room was strangely still. A man slept in a corner. A women cried slow tears into her coffee. He thought he could have been sitting here in this uncomfortable chair for days and he wouldn’t have noticed. His brain replayed the events of the night and morning in an unstoppable loop.

He’d gotten into a fight with his dad. It was silly and typical — he asked to go out with his friends and Jack said he should probably be studying and he said his 4.5 GPA meant he studied enough and Jack told him not to take that tone with him and all the while Dana quietly read her Nicholas Sparks novel. Then Jack got a brilliant idea about the three of them going out for fast food — “like old times, eh?” — and, because Tim was a good, obedient son, he texted his friends he couldn’t make it tonight.

At McDonald’s, Tim got chicken nuggets. He liked burgers more, but his mom liked chicken nuggets. He missed her.

It wasn’t that Tim didn’t like Dana. She was very nice and smarter than most people thought she’d be. But she was so aggressively not his mom that sometimes her mere presence hurt like slapping a sunburn.

They only stayed for twenty minutes or so because his dad really did have work to do and on their way out, they noticed a group laughing at one of the outdoor tables.

“Aren’t those the Wayne boys?” Jack asked. Something hurtled in Tim’s chest. “We should go say hello!”

“Dad, no, they’re with their friends —,”

But Jack was already making his way to the table.

“Hi there,” Jack said as Dana followed and Tim slumped over to him, “you may not remember me, but —,”

“Mr. Drake, hi! Of course we remember you,” said Richard Grayson, standing to shake Jack’s hand, and then Dana’s. He cast a warm smile in Tim’s direction. “Timothy, right? We met once last year.”

Tim hoped to all things holy that his cheeks didn’t look as hot as they felt.
“Uh, yeah. We didn’t mean to bother you —,”

“It’s no bother, we were just goofing off. You remember Jason?”

A quick look at Jason showed that he certainly didn’t remember them.

“And this is Barbara,” a small redhead Tim knew to be the daughter of the commissioner of police, “Roy,” a boy in a red hoodie that clashed violently with his hair, “Helena,” a dark-haired woman who looked like she might punch any of them if they looked at her wrong, “and Kory.” A muscular, dark-skinned girl with fluorescent hair and a croptop so small Tim blushed again. “Guys, this is Jack and Dana Drake, and their son Timothy. They’ve done a lot for the public education system in Gotham.”

Everyone waved a little, but Tim could tell they were bored out of their minds. He tried to signal to his dad that it was time for them to leave. Dana nodded at him.

“Alright,” she said, “I’m pretty tired —,”

**BANG BANG BANG.**

There wasn’t time to react beyond a startled jump. And then Dana fell forward, her body arcing through the air as if she lost her balance. Horrible red seeped through her gold hair.

Someone screamed. Tim couldn’t even think.

“Just so everyone knows I’m not playing around.”

They spun around as a man approached. It was impossible to focus on any single aspect of him. The bright green hair. The painted white face. The red lips. The gun in his hands. Not like the kind of gun you see in James Bond films. The kind they give people in the military. The kind meant to kill.

“Who are you?” Richard asked. He sounded calm, incredibly so. If Tim were to speak, he would need to yell over the roar in his ears. “What do you want?”

“You,” the man said. “And your dear brother.”

“You’ve got us,” Jason said. He stood slowly and walked next to Richard so they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, an army of two. “You can put that away.”

The man laughed, like this delighted him.

“What have you done?” Jack whispered. He was kneeling next to his wife, cradling her head away from the crimson concrete. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?”

“Shut up,” the man said.

“YOU KILLED HER. YOU SICK SON OF A —,”

And he shot him.

Tim stumbled back. His face was wet, from tears or blood, he didn't know. There was so much blood.

“Anyone else have anything to say?”

No one did.
“Very good.” He waved the gun at Roy and Kory. “You two can leave.” He pointed it at Helena. “You’d probably get some good cash, but it’s not your dear old dad’s turn. Skidaddle.” He looked at Barbara. “And you — I think I’ll keep you. Your pop and Bruce Wayne are damn domestic, aren’t they?”

For a moment, no one moved.

“Well? Leave before I shoot someone!”

“Go,” said Richard. “Get help.”

“Yes, listen to dear Dick. I imagine someone’s already called the cops, but the more the merrier, I say.”

Roy and Helena ran off, already pulling out their phones. Kory grasped Dick’s hand briefly before running after her friends.

Then the man looked at Tim as if he’d forgotten he was there.

“Huh,” he said. “And what do I do with you?”

“Let him go,” Richard pleaded. “I don’t know what kind of beef you have with Bruce Wayne, but he has no part in it.”

Tim should probably make his own case, but all he could think about was the weight of his parents’ bodies at his feet.

“Hm, that’s true,” the man said. “Then again, it never hurts to have an insurance plan.”

He grabbed Tim’s forearm and yanked him forward. He put the gun to his head.

This couldn’t be real. Tim felt like he was outside of his body, watching everything from above.

“Come with me or the kid gets it.”

Richard, Jason, and Barbara looked at each other.

Don’t go with him. Get out of here. Just let him shoot me.

“Five, four, three, two —,”

“Okay! Okay, we’re coming, don’t hurt him.”

“I knew you’d come through for me, Richard. You’ve got a soft spot for little boys, just like your daddy.”

The man marched them to a white van with black windows and no license plate. He made Jason, Barbara, and Richard put their cell phones on the ground and shot a flurry of bullets into them. Babs made a small noise of horror, like it was this little act of injustice that made it all real. He then ordered them into the back and pushed Tim into the front seat. He pulled a handgun from a compartment and trained it on Tim while his other hand was left to steer.

Tim could hear the three whispering, but he couldn’t make out any words. He jumped as a hand was laid on his shoulder. He didn’t know whose it was and he wasn’t about to look.

Time was meaningless when they finally pulled up to an old warehouse. They could have been
driving for ten minutes or hours.

The man pulled Tim out and as he looked up at the warehouse, windows boarded up and locked and abandoned, it all suddenly seemed hilarious. This was like a movie. A bad C-flick he used to watch with his parents. *Don’t go in the warehouse!* they would shout and shake their heads when the characters inevitably ignored them.

He didn’t laugh.

They were led to a back entrance. Inside, the warehouse was dark, so dark. Tim couldn’t see a thing. His eyes tried desperately to adjust, but he could only make out the shadowy silhouettes of his partners. The gun pressed into his spine. Someone — he thought it might be Barbara — squeezed his hand.

And then she took off running.

*BANG BANG BANG.*

A scream. A body falling to the floor.

“BARBARA.”

“YOU FUCKING MANIAC, WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU TO HER?”

“Tsk tsk, such a mouth. For that, we’ll have your fun next.”

Some sort of wire was hastily wrapped around Tim's wrists. He was shoved to the ground and fell awkwardly on his shoulder. He heard a scuffle as he struggled to sit upright and then someone was falling on top of him.

“Sorry,” Richard whispered. “You okay?”

“Mmhm.”

Richard managed to roll off him. They listened to Jason struggle against the man. He hadn’t shot him yet, a lion playing with his prey before he pounced.

“Any ideas, kid?” Richard whispered, barely a breath.

“I don’t wanna die,” Tim whispered back.

“You and me both. Dammit, I wish I had my phone.”

Tim blinked. “He didn’t take mine.”

“What?”

Gun shots. Someone fell, but he was moaning. Not like Barbara.

“This didn’t need to be like this,” the man said. “You shouldn’t have struggled.”

*CRACK.*

“Jay,” Dick whispered.

*CRACK. CRACK. CRACK.*
He was beating him, Tim realized. With — with a baseball bat, or a golf club, or a — a crow bar or something. They could hear bones snapping like twigs.

_The phone._

Tim stretched his hand into his back jeans pocket. He fingers were sweaty but he managed to get a grip on the phone's edge.


But Richard was hunched over against the sound of his brother's agony. Tim twisted his head. He could barely see the glow of his phone over his shoulder. He managed to open the emergency setting without going through his passcode, and then he used his thumb to carefully, painstakingly type 9 . . . 1 . . . 1.

He hit call.

There was nothing left to do but listen to Jason grow silent. Tim made himself listen. It gave him something to focus on. It gave him something to get angry about.

Finally, the man stopped.

“Huh. Nothing to say? You had such a vocabulary too.”

Silence.

“Oh well. I guess Dickie is next, eh? What should we do to him?”

Footsteps. Tim held his breath.

“Beatings are exhausting. I think a good bullet through the brain will do the trick.”

The gun clicked. And then —

Sirens, distantly, but coming closer. Right outside. Parking.

The man sighed, mildly inconvenienced.

“Ah, fellas, looks like the jig is up. And just when things were about to get interesting.”

Footsteps leading away from them. The warehouse doors swung open. It was still dark out, but the light from the street lamps and flashing police cars allowed them to see the clown who had imprisoned them walk out into the line of cops waiting for him. Allowed them to make out the two lumps of flesh on the ground, barely human. Dick sobbed.

The rest all seemed to blur together.

Jason and Barbara were taken away on stretchers, which Tim hoped meant they were still alive. He tried not to look at them. There was so much blood. Tim saw the police commissioner get in one of the ambulances, his mustache seeping with tears.

Richard and Tim were untied and examined, but nothing seemed physically wrong with them other than some rawness around their wrists. A detective asked them questions and they revealed what they remembered. Dick did most of the talking. Tim was so tired.

After the questions, Richard asked if he could go to the hospital for his brother and friend and
somehow Tim wound up in the same car even though he didn’t want to go to the hospital at all.

He wanted his dad. And his mom. He even wanted Dana.

There were photographers in front of the hospital. To his surprise, Dick put an arm around Tim’s shoulders and maneuvered him through the mass into the building where they were finally free. A gray-haired woman in scrubs was waiting for them. She hugged Dick for a long moment, and he allowed himself to collapse into her arms. Tim slipped away. He found a waiting room and he sat down and he didn’t move and he didn’t sleep. It might have been morning. And all he could do was think.

His dad and stepmom were dead.

They were dead.

Dead dead dead.

His mom died years ago.

He was an orphan.

He had no family.

Everyone was dead.

Jason and Barbara were probably dead. He hoped they weren’t. He hoped someone saved them. Richard Grayson was a nice guy and he deserved some sort of happy ending to this horrible night.

Maybe Tim deserved one, too. It didn’t matter. His dad was dead.

He had felt lonely before, but it was nothing compared to the sudden realization that he was completely, totally alone.

He looked up as a woman walked into the waiting room — and blinked. He’d seen her before. He thought maybe she was one of the rich people his dad knew, but she wasn’t dressed like it.

He met her eyes. They were very green.

“Hey,” she said, making her way over. “Tim Drake, right?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, I don’t — I don’t really —,”

“Hey, it’s cool. I think you get a free pass. You’ve been through hell, huh?”

Tim sunk lower into his chair. She took the chair one space over, leaving a buffer between them.

“Are you a reporter?” he asked.

“What? No. It’s just been all over the news. Listened to it on the car radio the way up here. My companion wouldn’t turn it off. I think he’s some sort of masochist.”

“They released my name?”

“They released your parents’ names.”

He closed his eyes.
“Shit. Sorry. I’m not good with kids.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Gotham sure does make it hard to be one, doesn’t it.”

He didn’t know what to say.

“Have you been here all night?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“I haven’t. Last night I was having awesome sex —,”

A startled laugh erupted from his throat. He tried to cover his burning cheeks.

“Aw, sweetheart. Since you’re not a kid, I’m just trying to treat you how I’d treat one of my friends.”

“I’m not really your friend either,” he mumbled into his hands. “It’s very inappropriate to say things like that to strangers. And I’m a minor, so you could probably go to jail for harassment.”

“Shit, you’re right. Just forget it. It wasn’t even that good anyway. I prefer girls.”

He peeked up at her. “You’re . . .”

“A flaming degenerate bisexual, yes.”

He laughed. She smiled. It was a very strange moment.

And then Bruce Wayne and Richard Grayson walked in the door.

They commanded the whole room at once, handsome and strong and so much richer than anyone else in this building. Tim sat up straight. Even the woman crying into her coffee did a double take. The only person who didn’t seem affected was the woman by his side.

“There you are!” said Richard. He was heading right for them. “You disappeared on me.”

Tim shrugged. What could he say? That he didn’t feel like he had any right to be with Richard and his family and maybe he was a little irrationally angry that Richard even had a family to be with?

“This kid,” Richard said, slapping a hand on Tim’s back, “is a hero.”

Tim sputtered. “No, I’m not.”

“Uh, yeah you are. Totally saved the day. Hands bound and you still managed to call for help. Incredible.”

“He just forgot to take my phone is all.”

They grew quiet at the remembrance of . . . that man.

“Thank you anyway, Tim,” said Bruce Wayne. *He remembers my name*? Tim thought. But then he realized Richard probably told him. “Dick said that if it weren’t for you, the Joker would have shot him. We’re so grateful.”

Tim shrugged again and looked at his Converse. Their white tips were flecked with scarlet.
“How are they?” the woman next to him asked. He glanced at her. She was either here with Bruce, or just a total busybody.

“They’re both alive,” Bruce said.

It was quiet. Tim wanted to ask more. Sure, they were alive, but that didn’t mean they would stay that way.

“I’m sorry, Selina, for you ruining your night,” Dick said.

Selina . . . Selina!

“You’re her!” Tim said. “From that party! Mr. Wayne kept looking at you — oh my god, you had sex with him last night!”

“Um,” said Bruce.

“So I didn’t ruin your night too much,” said Dick.

“Tim and I have just been getting to know each other,” said Selina, having the decency to look a bit embarrassed. Not too much though.

Tim stuttered, “I’m so sorry, I don’t know why — she said she prefers girls —,”

“Wow,” said Bruce.

Richard was cracking up. “I can’t believe this is happening right now.”

“I won’t apologize. Girls are wonderful.”

Tim closed his eyes. “I’m sorry. It’s been a rough night. My dad would kill me if he were here.”

It got quiet again. Because Tim’s dad was dead. Right.

“Do you have anywhere to go, Tim?” Richard asked. “Today? Any family?”

Tim buried his head in his knees. He knew he looked like a baby, but he just wanted to block everything out. He wanted to pretend this wasn’t happening.

“I have an aunt in Philadelphia,” he forced from his mouth. “We don’t really talk. I don’t know. Dana was supposed to have custody if something happened to my dad.”

“You can come home with us for the night,” Bruce said.

Tim looked up. Bruce was just as stoic as usual, but his eyes were kind.

“I — I couldn’t —,”

“It’ll be no problem. You can take a nap, in a real bed. Eat something. We’ll get everything sorted out with your family.”

You can’t, Tim thought. My family’s gone.

“Thank you,” Tim said. “That’s really kind of you.”

“Here, I’ll take him to your house,” said Selina. “So you two can stick around a little longer.”
“I couldn’t ask you to —,”

“Hush. I hate hospitals. I love mansions.”

She held Bruce’s hand. Neither one of them seemed to be the softest, most forthcoming individuals, but the moment was suddenly much too intimate. Tim averted his gaze. Dick continued watching like he was working through an impossible mathematics equation. Then Selina was putting her hand on Tim's shoulder and they were leaving. Tim hoped Selina knew where they going because Bruce didn’t give any directions. There were still some reporters outside, but not as many as last night. Selina flipped them off when they started yelling.

“Sorry,” she said. “I guess I’m not much of a socialite after all.”

“You’re cooler than a socialite.”

Selina smiled. She had a nice smile, Tim thought. Pretty and coquettish but biting too. He could see why Bruce was so taken with her.

“You know what, kid? I’m keeping you.” She ruffled his hair. “Now let’s go break into Wayne Manor.”

When Alfred drove Bruce and Dick home late that evening, he didn’t want to leave the hospital, but he knew Dick would hide out way past visiting hours if he could, and he had to set a good example. Besides, Dick hadn’t slept at all last night. He needed his bed.

“I hate myself for letting that happen to them,” Dick said. He watched skyscrapers and corner shops pass outside the windows, the blue sky and white clouds. Bruce suspected he wasn’t seeing them at all, but rather that his heart was back in a circus tent, soaring through the air.

Bruce watched Dick, really watched him, refusing to allow his own heart to escape to the tent or the rooftop or the alleyway. You’re needed here, Dr. Quinzel said. In this moment, he believed her.

“Dick, you are talented and kind and brave, but even you aren’t much of a match for a man with a machine gun.”

Dick’s blue eyes drifted to him. He blinked and some of their fog lifted. “What are you going to do with Tim?”

“I’ll get in touch with social services. Contact the aunt in Philadelphia.”

“He didn’t seem too keen on her.”

“He didn’t.”

“So what happens if he doesn’t want to go?”

“Then we’ll go from there.”

Dick studied his face. “You can’t go around adopting every kid who watches his parents die, you know.”

“I don’t see why not.”
Dick leaned his head back on the headrest. “God, I can’t even tell if you’re joking.”

They reached the manor. Alfred escorted Dick straight to his bedroom, saying he would bring him food but Master Dick needed rest. Bruce found Tim and Selina playing chess in the living room. Selina reclined back, as if Wayne Manor were her personal spa. Tim had a scary focus on the game, but his eyes were bloodshot.

“I was hoping you’d be asleep,” Bruce said when Selina flicked her a smile in his direction.

“I rested,” Tim said. “Thank you so much, again, for letting me stay here. Your home is really nice.”

“I don’t like to be tied down,” Selina added, “but I could definitely get used to this.”

“How are they?” Tim asked. He kept his focus on the game, but his shoulders were wrought with tension.

“Barbara’s regained full consciousness. Her dad’s with her. The doctors are discussing their next options. They’re — well, they just wanted to warn us that there’s no guarantee she’ll ever walk again.”

Tim set down his chess piece.

“And Jason . . . he opened his eyes at one point. Most of the major bones in his body are broken. He’s lost a lot of blood. They’re trying to get him through the night. And then we’ll go from there.”

Fat tears splattered against the chessboard. Tim muffled a sob.

Selina moved onto the couch next to him and she put her arms around him. He angled his body away from her at first, but eventually curled into her like he couldn’t fight it anymore, like he needed someone to hold him. Bruce remembered meeting Tim Drake and thinking he was wise beyond his years, but in reality, he was just a boy.

“I’m sorry,” Tim whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Bruce said, moving to his other side. “You saved Dick’s life.”

“I couldn’t save them. I couldn’t.”

Bruce wasn’t sure if they were talking about Jason and Barbara or Tim’s parents, but he knew it didn’t matter.

“You saved Dick’s life,” he repeated. “He’s alive because of you. My son is alive because of you.”

“He should have killed me instead.”

It hurt the way words hurt when they lived inside a person and didn’t belong out in the world. It hurt like catching your reflection in a passing window, like Bruce’s first round of therapy after he survived the second darkest moment of his life.

“Tim, listen to me. Tim. Listen. Are you listening?”

He nodded into Selina’s jacket.

“No one deserves what you’ve been through,” Bruce said. He was not a warm person, not at all, but he put as much compassion into his voice as he knew how. He hoped it would be enough. “No one. But I’m glad you’re here. The world would have lost someone so uniquely wonderful if you weren’t.
You deserve to be here.”

Tim turned so he was looking at Bruce. “You’re saying he didn’t kill me for a reason?”

Bruce swallowed. It had been a while since Dr. Quinzel had given him one of these talks. He didn’t need them much these days. He tried to remember what she said.

“No,” he said. “Because that implies that he did what he did to your parents and to Barbara and to Jason for some sort of reason. And he didn’t have a reason for that besides hating me.” He took a breath. “But then he should have come after me instead of this cruel — joke, torturing the people I care about and killing anyone who got in his way. What he did was evil. Pure evil. And evil doesn’t have a reason.”

Tim breathed slowly. He wasn’t crying as hard, but Bruce knew that wounds like these took a lot more than pretty words to heal. They could take a lifetime.

“I have nowhere to go,” Tim said. “I’m completely alone.”

Selina rubbed his arm up and down, up and down.

“We’ll figure it out, Tim,” Bruce said. “I know it feels like it, but you’re not alone. I promise you’re not alone.”

Maybe Dick was right. Maybe he couldn’t protect every kid who needed protecting in Gotham. But he was damn well going to try.

Tim’s aunt was twenty-nine-years old and in rehab for alcoholism and if she had the means to provide for a teenager she would, but she didn’t. So Bruce started to go through the familiar paperwork in secret, with only a social worker’s help.

Dick walked in on him one night, hunched over his desk. Their eyes met. In the silence, Bruce set down his pen.

“You’re doing it aren’t you,” Dick said.

“He has nowhere else to go.”

“I don’t know how Jay will take it when he gets home.”

Not if. When. The odds still weren’t perfect, yet to Dick, there was no question. Jason Todd would come home because he was Jason Todd, and in Dick’s eyes, Jason Todd could do anything.

“You learned to live with Jay.” You learned to love Jay. “He can learn to live with this.”

“It’d be nice if you weren’t such a good person for once. If you actually thought about this.” Dick was angry, Bruce realized. Dick was angry a lot, of course he was, but he rarely showed it. He was just — Dick. Sunshine and charm and the perfect balance to Bruce and Jason’s natural darkness. It was easy to forget that he had seen his own share of horrors. “I like Tim, I do, but the kid’s gonna have a crap ton of issues for the rest of his life. And what if you can’t save him from them? What then? Just like you couldn’t save your parents, or mine, or Jason and Babs from that fucking lunatic, or even yourself from all those demons in your past, for Christ’s sake. I remember the man you were
when we first met, Bruce. I’ve never seen anyone more broken. I can’t watch you become him again for some little boy who can’t handle the horrible things that happened to him.”

Dick’s chest heaved. His eyes were dry as they glared at the wall behind Bruce’s head. Bruce allowed Dick’s speech to settle in the air between them. He allowed it to hurt. And then he stood and walked around his desk, closer to Dick, but not close enough that he could get in a good punch, which his balled fists indicated was one wrong word away.

“I love you, Richard. I love your brother.” That certainly got Dick’s attention, and Bruce tried not to consider the fact that a simple ‘I love you’ was such a shock coming from him. He plowed on. “And you’re right that I’ve failed to save a lot of people in my life. God, you’re so right. But you’re wrong about one thing. I did save myself. With your help, I did. That’s why I’m not the man you first met — why I’m stronger than he ever was. And maybe we didn’t save Babs or Jay, but they’ll save themselves too, with our help. And so will Tim. I believe in him.”

Dick scoffed. “You barely know him.”

He took a step closer, assured Dick wasn’t on the verge of violence. He rested a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve never been wrong before.”

Dick rushed forward and hugged him. Bruce nearly crushed him in his arms, amazed at how tall and lean he’d gotten. But he still fit the way he did when he was much younger, when he wasn’t too self-conscious to hug the only father figure he had left in his life. Bruce vowed to hug him more after this, and Jason, and even Tim, if that was something they needed. Bruce thought so. Boys needed hugs.

“Hey, B-man,” Dick said into his shoulder.

“Hm?”

“Ask Tim before you make him your ward or whatever. Ask if he wants to be adopted instead. I didn’t need a dad, but you know . . . he might.”

“Okay,” Bruce said.

And if he was a bit choked up, neither of them mentioned it.

Bruce did ask Tim eventually. It was the day Barbara came home. Escorted by Alfred, Jim Gordon wheeled her into the manor where Bruce, Dick, and Tim were all waiting, along with Selina, Helena, Roy, and Kory. Ted couldn’t get the time off work, but Babs’ good friend Dinah managed to fly out from California, along her boyfriend, Oliver Queen. He still had that mustache. It was a damn shame Jason wasn’t here to see it.

“WELCOME HOME,” they all chorused.

Barbara looked around at the streamers and balloons hanging from the ceiling, the snack-laden tables, the small group of people there to welcome her back, and she looked like she might cry.

She smiled instead.

Dick was the first to hug her. They held on to each other like they were drowning and the other was their life raft. Eventually, her friends pushed him aside in order to dote on her.
“You glasses are so cute,” Kory said. “Are they new?”

“Uh, no. I usually wear contacts.”

“They look great on you,” said Dick.

“I know, Richard.” But she looked pleased all the same.

“Yeah, she doesn’t need you to tell her she looks hot,” Dinah said. “Not when she’s got me.”

“Are you leaving me for her?” Ollie asked, not bothering to step away from the drinks table.

“Duh,” Babs, Dinah, and Helena chorused and they collapsed into giggles, an act Bruce suspected they only engaged in around each other.

Bruce found his way to Barbara eventually, with Selina and Tim not far behind.

“We’ve missed you,” he told her. “Alfred and I, not just Dick. He just talks the most.”

Her eyes glittered a little. “Don’t get too sentimental on me, Bruce. I’m barely holding it together as is.”

He didn’t want her to think he wasn’t so grateful she was out, but he had to ask. “How’s Jason?”

Barbara’s smile dimmed. “Better, I think. I wasn’t allowed to talk to him for very long, but he thinks he’s going to be moving out of the ICU soon. And then maybe he’ll be ready for visitors again.”

Bruce nodded. A week earlier, Jason had said — well, yelled — that he needed his space from Bruce and Dick. So they gave it to him. It hurt every day.

“And how are you?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

He arched an eyebrow.

“Okay, I . . . don’t know how I am. Sometimes I think I’m great and adjusting great and I’m so lucky, and other times I think I’d be better off if he killed me.” She laughed, a short, bitter sound. “Is that normal?”

“I don’t think I’m qualified to say.”

This time her laugh was a little more genuine and she said, “Never change, Bruce.”

She waved at Selina, who had visited her in the hospital once or twice, and gave Tim a warm hug, but she didn’t seem to be in a mood to talk much anymore. She excused herself to use the bathroom and brushed her dad off when he tried to help.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’ve been here before, you know.”

And she was gone. Jim and Bruce shared glances of the camaraderie that came from raising headstrong kids before Jim moved toward the cookies. Bruce thought it was a shame that girl never got her chance on the police force. She was tougher than all of them.

Selina cut her eyes towards Tim. Bruce heard the message loud and clear.
“Did you know Mr. Gordon adopted Barbara?” Bruce asked, casual.

“Oh, really? I didn’t know, no.” He said it with the genuine confusion of a boy who was used to knowing everything before everyone else.

“When she was thirteen. I think he’s her biological uncle.”

“Makes sense, I guess. I’ve seen old pictures of Mr. Gordon and he had red hair too.” Tim nodded, like he really had known all along.

Bruce looked at Selina. She was trying to seem inconspicuous, inching towards Roy and Dick. He sighed.

“Okay,” he said, turning to Tim. “Selina wanted me to be subtle, but frankly, I’m no good at that. So I have a question for you. It’s already in order for you to become my ward, but I was wondering if — well, I wanted to know if you’d rather, or if you would mind, if I adopted you instead. You’d take on my name, which would be — difficult, I know. You’ve already lost so much. I would never want to take that away from you as well.”

Tim was gaping at him. He forced his mouth closed, swallowed, and said, “If you had asked me that earlier this year, I might have cried.”

“And now?”

“I still might cry,” he admitted.

“Just think about it, okay? Really think. I don’t want you to make any impulsive decisions.”

“Believe you me, impulsivity is not something I have a problem with.” Tim tugged at the sleeves of his jacket. It was Dick’s, and much too big. Bruce would have to take him clothes shopping soon. He had a sizable wardrobe of his own, back in his house, but the clothes were all connected to memories, and Tim didn’t want to even look at them most days. “But I think . . . I think it might be nice to — not be a Drake. For a little while, I mean. I love my family, I love them so much, but — I don’t feel much like Tim Drake anymore, you know? Maybe I’d like being Tim Wayne more. Maybe he’s better. I’ll think about it.”

“Whatever you do, don’t sell Tim Drake too short. He’s a good kid.”

Tim smiled and then laughed, and it wasn’t bitter laughter, nor joyful, but the laughter that mixed all the sadness behind them and all the possibilities ahead of them into a single burst of sound.

Barbara wheeled herself back into the room, her face washed, glasses cleaned, ponytail tightened, and said, “Bruce, I sincerely hope you’ve ordered pizza.”
Bruce made it a point to stay out of his sons’ love lives. They had an unspoken rule to keep anything — *unsavory* — out of the manor. This rule was not always complied with — Selina *loved* mansions, and who knew what left Dick and Wally so giddy after “working out.” But the important thing was that the rule was in place so Bruce’s lectures could stick to when it is and isn't appropriate to do cartwheels and why you shouldn’t tell the media you haven’t eaten in three days, not how STDs are spread. They all liked it better that way.

So naturally, it gave Bruce quite a shock to walk into Tim’s bedroom and see a blonde girl in a purple hoodie lounging on his bed.

“Um,” he said.

“Well if it isn’t Bruce Wayne,” the girl said as she pushed her big earphones around her neck. “The man, the myth, the legend.”

Tim came out of his bathroom then, torso bare and a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Forgot my underwear —,” he was saying and then he spotted Bruce. “Dad. Did you even knock?”

It always gave Bruce a little start when Tim called him “dad.” He didn’t do it often, but Dick and Jason kept the d-word on lockdown at all times. They all knew what they were to each other, but lines still had to be drawn, for their own personal sanity. And then Tim hesitantly stepped over those lines and, more often than not, it left Bruce floundering.

“Yes, no one answered,” Bruce said. He hated how on edge he was, especially when the girl rifled through Tim’s dresser to toss him a his underwear. “Who’s this?”

“Stephanie Brown,” she said, with a little salute.

“Steph’s a friend of mine from school. She’s a junior.”

Tim was only a sophomore.

“We’re practically dating,” Stephanie Brown said and walked right up to Tim and gave him a big
kiss on the cheek.

If Bruce had been drinking anything, he might have choked.

“We are not dating,” Tim said. Bruce had gotten the impression that Tim wasn’t very comfortable discussing romance, but now he laughed. “Steph is just madly in love with me.”

“And can you blame me? The whole school’s in love with Timmy.”

“Oh,” said Bruce.

“No, don’t tell him that. Bruce, she’s joking, god.”


“Conner Kent? Clark’s younger cousin?”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Tim said, but Stephanie steamrolled ahead.

“All Conner does is talk about how great he is or how annoying he is, but even that ends up sounding like a sonnet. I mean, I totally agree that Tim is simultaneously the greatest and the worst ever and it still gets hard to listen to. Plus, that guy makes me uncomfortable, he’s so hot, it’s like he was cloned in a lab somewhere —,”

Tim grabbed one of his pillows and tried to smother Stephanie to death. She shrieked and giggled.

“Okay, I think you and my dad have bonded enough for one day.” Tim let up on the smothering and Stephanie pushed him off her, dramatically gasping in breaths. “He looks like he might have a heart attack.”

“I am not that old,” Bruce said. “But Tim, I was just going to remind you that, um, it’s your turn to help Alfred put away the laundry.”

“Sure thing,” Tim said.

“Ooh I’ll help,” Stephanie said.

Bruce walked out.

He . . . needed to talk to someone about this. But he wasn’t sure who. He could call Clark or Lois, but Stephanie’s monologue about Conner Kent still rang in his ears. He could talk to Selina, but he had a feeling she would just laugh at him. He could schedule an appointment with Dr. Quinzel, but she would want him to talk to Tim and he just . . . wasn’t ready. So he did what he could on such short notice and hoped Tim would forgive him one day.

Dick, Alfred, and Barbara sat around the Wayne Manor den, each looking curious to varying degrees as Bruce paced in front of them.

“Thank you for coming,” Bruce said. He kept his hands firmly by his sides. “I’m sorry it was such short notice.”

“Alfred and I live here,” Dick said. “And Babs was hanging out anyway.”

“I wasn’t ‘hanging out,’ I was working. Bruce told me I could use his computer for this code I’m developing because the tech is so much better than mine.”
“She’s, like, always here, it’s getting kind of weird,” Dick said.

“I have a problem,” Bruce said before they could spiral into Dick and Barbara, “and I could use some advice.”

“Just take viagra, you’ll be fine,” said Dick.

He ignored him. “I’m worried about Tim. There’s — well, there’s a girl in his room right now.”

“Oh, Stephanie?” Dick asked, eyes lighting up. Bruce blinked. “She’s a sweetheart.”

“You’ve met her?”

“Well yeah, she’s over all the time. Even Jay has met her.”

Jason had met this girl before Bruce. Jason, who moved out of the manor two months ago to live with Roy and Kory, and barely ever visited anymore. Jason had somehow managed to avoid Bruce well enough to meet Stephanie Brown, who Bruce had never even seen before, but who was evidently acquainted with every other person in his family.

He wasn’t sure what about this situation was the most pathetic.

Still, Dick tended to see the best in people.

“And what are your opinions?” Bruce asked Alfred and Babs.

“She always offers to help clean up,” Alfred said, which, coming from him, could be complimentary or insulting.

“She’s . . . a bit hard to swallow sometimes,” said Barbara, “but she’s a good kid. Her dad’s Arthur Brown, that guy who got locked up for leading an armed robbery on the Gotham National Bank a few years back? So, you know, for the circumstances . . . I think she’s just doing the best she can.” She ran a hand along one of the wheels of her chair. “Like any of us.”

“She was on Tim’s bed,” Bruce said. “And he was in a towel.”

Dick whistled.

Barbara sighed and said, “Bruce. Be honest. Did you want our advice on how to give Tim a sex talk?”

“Yes. No. Do you think I should?”

“You don’t even know they’re sleeping together,” she said. “They could just be really good friends. Tim’s not very comfortable around a lot of people.”

“Master Timothy does smile quite a bit when Miss Stephanie is near.”

“And she makes him act like a kid instead of my grandmother, may she rest in peace,” Dick added. “He deserves that. So, if you want, I’ll be the cool older brother and the devoted eldest son, and drop in to make sure they’re using protection. But just — don’t scare her away, alright?”

Bruce nodded. Something inside him shifted at how much Dick loved Tim. How much they all did.

“Oh, and one more thing. What do you know about Conner Kent?”
He never asked Dick if he talked to Tim. He didn’t need to. Dick was good for his word and Bruce could tell from the way that Tim avoided his brother’s eyes for a week afterwards that all had been accomplished.

Then there was the matter of Stephanie. Now that Bruce had met her, he just . . . kept meeting her. In the kitchen with Alfred. In the library with Barbara. In the home gym with Dick. Studying and whispering and giggling around every corner with Tim. Once, Bruce even caught her playing foosball in the game room with Jason, but he left them alone so Jason wouldn’t see Bruce and leave, as he inevitably always did.

Bruce was outright trying to avoid her at this point, and he didn’t even know why. He’d known Barbara through Dick’s (and Jason’s, but that might have just been to mess with Dick) prevailing crush on her, and now he thought of her as — well, not a daughter exactly, but a niece he was very fond of. And Dick and Kory had been dating for almost two years, and he knew things had been serious between them — might still be, though Bruce suspected Kory’s harboring of Jason was a point of tension in their relationship — and Bruce always found her to be a very sweet girl.

But there was something about Stephanie Brown. She was aggressively optimistic and borderline crude and never seemed to take much very seriously. But there were moments between jokes when she just seemed so . . . broken. Or on the verge of breaking. Like a time bomb. It reminded him of Jason in the weeks after the hospital: the staring at walls like they were movie screens, the sudden bursts of rage, the pretending Tim didn’t exist, all coming to head when Bruce came home to find Jason in his room with a packed suitcase.

“I can’t be here anymore,” he had said. He met Bruce’s gaze because he was never scared of a little thing like eye-contact.

Please stay, Bruce yearned to say. What can I do to make you stay?

Only he was afraid of the answer, so he kept quiet, and Jason left him alone in a manor that, for the first time in a long while, felt much too big.

Bruce knew time bombs, he loved them, he couldn’t regret them. But Jason's explosion had rocked the whole family to its very core, and they were still sorting through the shrapnel.

Bruce was worried that if Stephanie blew up, she’d take Tim with her.

“You’re being dramatic,” Dick told him when he voiced his fears. “Jason went through a crappy experience and now he blames us and he needs some space. He’ll come back. Eventually.”

“I don’t want Tim to get hurt.”

“No, that’s not it. You’re being dramatic, Dick. I’m worried about Stephanie. She’s so . . .”

“I know. I get it. But she’s not Tim. She’s a friend, and she’s not as fragile as he is.”

So Bruce did. He didn’t voice his concerns to Tim. He didn’t tell Stephanie to stop coming over. But he couldn’t be around her, waiting, listening to the tick tick tick of impending doom. He wouldn’t.

He doubled up on his attempts to avoid her. He kept their conversations clipped. He said he needed to work whenever she stayed for dinner. He had hoped no one would notice, but of course he was smarter than that, and so was she.
One afternoon, Bruce left his office for a late lunch to find Stephanie in the kitchen, munching on a peanut butter sandwich. Without a word, she grabbed the sandwich and left, presumably going back to Tim’s room. Alfred sighed, shook his head, and put the peanut butter back in the cupboard.

*Good job,* Bruce thought, feeling very much like the biggest asshole in all of Gotham, you successfully bullied a teen girl into not wanting to be in the same room as you. That’ll show her.

It was early in the morning when Bruce's work phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and frowned.

“Hello, Kate,” he said into the receiver.

“I need a favor,” said Kate Kane, and even though she wasn’t in the army anymore, her voice still rang with authority.

“It’s always business with you,” said Bruce, leaning back in his chair.

“You’re one to talk. It’s time sensitive.”

It had been a long time since he last talked to Kate. He had a tendency to forget how immediately abrasive she could be — that is, if she wasn’t completely playing you. Bruce had only ever known Kate’s two settings: charming and blunt.

Katherine Kane was one of the very few people left in the world who shared Bruce’s bloodline, and it showed.

Still, he was never one to complain about getting to the point.

“What’s the favor?” he asked.

“So my girlfriend’s a cop. She intercepted this ring of — child ninjas or something, really freaky stuff. The kids are being redistributed, mostly being sent back to their families, but some need to be found new families. One of the couples who ran the ring has a daughter and she needs somewhere to go. I told Maggie I had someone in mind.”

Bruce covered his eyes with his hand.

“I thought your girlfriend was Renee Montoya.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Do you only date police officers then?”

“It’s not like you to stall.”

Jesus. Was this what it was like to talk to him?

“Kate, I want to help, I do, but I’m not sure I’m in a position to at the moment,” he said.

“Is it because she’s a girl? Is your house some sort of boys club?”

“Kate, please. Jason walked out on us and I’m trying to keep things — civil enough for him to think about coming back. And I don’t think any new additions will help.”
“She can barely talk, Bruce,” Kate said. “She’s seventeen and she’s taught herself some English, but it’s stunted at best. She can’t read at all. You know why? Because the only language her parents taught her is the most efficient way to gut a guy. She needs someone in her corner, someone trustworthy, you know? She won’t make it on her own. Sure, she could kick anyone’s ass — but you and I both know that fighting’s not always enough.”

Kate sounded angry, but Bruce knew her well enough to understand that she wore her anger like she had worn camo and combat boots. It was a part of her, but it was also her mask.

“If you’re so sure she needs this, then why don’t you take her in?” he asked.

“Because an unmarried Jewish lesbian who got kicked out of the army is exactly what every social worker is looking for.”

He rolled his eyes. A flair for the dramatic was yet another thing they shared.

“Fine, I’ll see her. But I can’t make any promises.”

“Good enough.”

“When do you want to meet?”

“Uh . . . now?”

“What?”

“We’re at the gate to the manor.”

Bruce hung up without another word.

The girl sitting on the couch in the living room wasn’t tall and she wasn’t short. Her black hair fell just above her shoulders and her lean frame was a bit too muscled to be truly thin. She had a round face, unsmiling lips, and kept her head tilted down just enough that you would never think to look twice if you passed her on a crowded street. Knowing the life she had led to this point, Bruce could see how her demeanor was the perfect disguise for her weaponized body.

But not everything was a disguise. Her dark eyes were full of life, and death, and too many horrors for her age. A girl’s eyes, a killer’s eyes — not cogs in a machine. She was human and she was broken and damn Kate because she had him figured out, too.

“She’s name is Cassandra Cain,” Maggie Sawyer said when they huddled in the kitchen. “C-A-I-N. She just turned seventeen, so it would only be a year arrangement. Then she could live on her own.”

He glanced at Kate, who met his eyes. He knew she knew that Dick was approaching 23 and still lived at home.

“I would never throw her out,” he said.

“I know,” Maggie said. “I’ve got a daughter too.”

“So you know what you’re asking me to choose.”
“You’ve already chosen,” said Kate. “Haven’t you?”

“Okay, what does that even mean.” Maggie ran a hand through her blonde waves. “For once in your life, quit being an enigmatic asshole and be straight with me.”

Bruce’s lips twitched. “It’s genetic.”

“And you of all people should know I would never be straight with you,” Kate said. Her scarlet hair framed her pale skin and red smirk, like some sort of devil. Bruce had grown up with Kate the army brat, but sometimes he saw Kate the enchantress, and he pitied whatever hopeless woman was the subject of those hungry eyes.

Then again, catching the way Maggie looked at her, he suspected she was doing just fine.

“Hello,” said a soft voice from the doorway, and Bruce nearly jumped. Cassandra had snuck up on him — and no one ever snuck up on him. Even Kate, who worked with explosives, seemed perturbed.

All three of the adults hastily softened their demeanors. Maggie became motherly and Kate lost her hard smirk and Bruce tried to arrange his face into something close to pleasant.

“Water?” she asked, her voice a bit throaty. Bruce went about filling a glass.

She took it and drank, gulping the water down like she didn’t know when she would have this opportunity again. Bruce and Kate exchanged glances.

Finally, Cassandra held the empty glass in her hands and stared into it. “I do not wish . . . trouble.”

“You’re no trouble,” Kate said, but Cassandra looked at Bruce.

“I will go,” she said. “It is not your . . . job to — care for me. You are not my . . . um. Sorry.” She looked so ashamed.

“Father?” Maggie suggested gently.

“Yes. Father.”

Christ.

If he did this — if he really did this, not even two years after adopting Tim — Dick and Alfred would surely have some words for him — and Jason, Christ — he really, really shouldn’t —

But he looked at this broken girl, and his heart ached, and maybe it was a bit reassuring to know he still had a heart because he sure hadn’t felt like it lately.

“It would be an honor for you to stay here for as long as you need,” he said. He could feel Maggie and Kate’s eyes burning through him, but he paid them no attention. He was doing this because it was right, because a child needed home. It wasn’t for them.

Cassandra’s eyes shifted from Bruce to Kate to Maggie and back again.

“That is,” he added, “if you want to stay. I haven’t been a very good host so far, but . . . I would like to make it up to you, if you’d let me.” He paused. “I’m asking you to let me. You’ll be cared for. You can go to school, if you want —,”

“School?”
And that was the switch. Her eyes brimmed with a long-concealed light.

“You could go to the private school Dick and Jason attended, or even the public school where Tim goes — I’m not a big proponent for public education, but Tim’s parents have always backed it, and he seems to enjoy it enough — or we could homeschool you —,”

“I would like to learn to read,” Cassandra said.

And there it was again, his heart, breaking.

“Then you’ll learn to read.”

A smile flitted across her face, too quick to mean much, but there nonetheless. “Then I will stay.”

He knew from that smile, from that light, that he made the right choice. Or that there was never really a choice in the first place, and Kate must have realized that before she called. He couldn’t bring himself to be angry with her, though, not when Cassandra needed him. This was right.

He called for Alfred to show her to a room — Alfred gave him a look over her head, but he was used to strays by now, and knew arguing would do no good — and he saw Kate and Maggie to the door.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Wayne,” Maggie said, shaking his hand. “I promise you’ve done a wonderful thing today, you won’t regret it.” She kissed Kate’s cheek. “I’ll meet you in the car, babe.”

Then it was just the two of them.

“You are not that bad a guy, Bruce,” said Kate. “No matter what you want Gotham to believe.”

He arched an eyebrow. “I don’t want Gotham to believe I’m a bad guy.”

“Fine. No matter what you believe.”

His mouth flattened. She seemed to take his silence as a question.

“We’re more alike than you think, you know,” she said.

“I know we’re plenty alike. That’s why I prefer not to spend too much time with you.”

“Ha.” Kate didn’t even look offended. That was one of the best things about their similarities: honesty never offended Bruce either. “You’d make one helluva soldier, bud. You’ve got that thing about you. Whatever that thing is.”

Bruce shook his head. “You’re the soldier, not me.”

“So I know what I’m talking about.”

She smiled at him then, a beautiful, blinding smile. His lips twitched upward of their own accord. She would make a brilliant CEO, he mused. She had that thing about her.

“I hope I see you soon,” she said. “We don’t talk enough. I’d like to get to know your boys better.”

They always said this, and then they waited years to contact each other again, usually when one of them needed something. It had been the same song and dance with their parents. Bruce remembered thinking, back when Kate and her sister was just annoying toddlers with too-bright hair, that when he got older, he would make sure his family saw each other more often because family was important,
not something you treated as a footnote of your life. And he supposed he followed through on that promise with Alfred and his kids, the people he chose, but he tended to forget that somewhere out there was Kate and her family and once upon a time, they had been his family too.

In the end, Bruce and Kate fell into the same trap their parents always had. But maybe it would be different this time.

“I hope so, too,” he said, and he meant it. “Take care, Kate. Say hi to Bette for me.”

“Sure thing. Hang in there, Bruce.”

And Kate Kane was gone from his life as quickly as she’d returned to it.

One time, when Cass was ten years old, she and a couple of the other kids snuck out without a guard. They stole some of her dad’s money and went to McDonald’s. The other kids loved McDonald’s, they missed it, they just wanted some greasy hamburgers and soda — and they were telling the truth. They were all too young and too brainwashed to think that if they had managed to get out of here, maybe they should run, go to the police, something. A Big Mac was enough.

Everything was so loud. The cash registers, the scraping of chairs against linoleum, the cars parking outside, the sizzle of french fries. The kids talked around her, talking just to hear their own voices, and it was scary because no one was allowed to talk back home, but it was nice too. She’d never eaten fast food before and a nice, older girl ordered her Chicken McNuggets. They were so tasty.

A man in a business suit dropped a crumpled magazine as he passed their table. Cass bent down to snatch it up, and she smoothed it down next to her Sprite. There was a handsome, dark-haired man on the cover with his arms around two dark-haired boys, both a bit older than Cass and her friends. Her eyes kept drifting back to the man. In his high-necked, black sweater, he looked very . . . mysterious. Sad. Kind.

“That’s Bruce Wayne,” one of her companions said. “Guess he adopted a new kid.”

“Man, I miss celebrity gossip,” said another. “You never learn anything cooped up in that hellhole. No offense, Cass.”

_Cass_ was the only word she understood. She tried pinpoint anything else that stood out, that didn’t sound like mush.

“Br . . . Bru . . .”

“Bruce Wayne!” The boy’s eyes lit up. He tapped the man on the magazine. “That’s Bruce Wayne. Bruce . . . Wayne.”

“Bruce . . . Bruce Wayne.”

Her friends cheered. She beamed.

When they got home, her mother was waiting for them, like one of those tall, scary statues Cass had seen in front of an old church they passed. The other kids received horrible beatings. Not Cassandra though. She was too important, too good. So her mother just made her watch as she set the magazine on fire, the glossy faces of the Wayne boys shriveling to ash.
Cass hadn’t recognized Bruce Wayne, not until she heard Kate and Maggie say his name when they were trying to be quiet in the kitchen. She swore not to let Bruce know about their — history, or whatever it was. She didn’t want him to think she was . . . well, stranger than he probably already thought.

Bruce Wayne had offered her freedom twice, and she wasn’t going to throw it away again.

So she was quiet and stayed out of his way, spending the day in her room. She pretended to be asleep when Alfred knocked on her door to announce that dinner was ready, even though she felt very hungry. She couldn’t risk upsetting Bruce, and she knew she would.

An hour or so later, someone else knocked on her door. When she didn’t answer, the door creaked open.

“Cassandra?” an unrecognizable voice whispered.

She cracked an eyelid.

A handsome young man stood in her doorway. He was so lean and toned he could have been from back home, but he was too old. And he was holding something that smelled delicious.

She opened her other eye.

The man smiled. “Thought you might be hungry.”

He sat at the edge of her bed and placed a tray on her lap with a bowl of hot soup. The steam wafted upward to warm her face.

“I know you’re not sick, but chicken soup makes me feel better no matter what. It’s good for the soul. That’s what my mom used to say.” He cleared his throat. “I’m Richard. Dick.”

Dick. She liked it when people made words simpler than they needed to be.

“Cass,” she said. She tried to be poised as she slurped the soup — but, oh god, she was so hungry. And it was delicious.

“Slow down, tiger, there’s more where that came from.”

She blushed and looked up at him. His smile was full of light and joy and not at all condescending. She felt herself begin to relax.

“Very good,” she said.

“Alfred’s the best cook. Just wait until you eat his chocolate pecan pie.”

She smiled a little. She had eaten chocolate once. It was very good.

“So. Looks like you’re here to stay. I guess it’ll be cool to have a girl around. Other than Tim.” He grimaced. “Sorry, that was very Sexist Asshole of me. This is why I need Babs or Kory to keep me in check. Or Jason, who’s a surprisingly vocal feminist. I never mean it, it’s just that every once in a while, the circus creeps back in. You always had to dish it and take it in equal amounts or you’d be left in the dust. Not a good place to be for an aerialist.” He smiled a bit at some private joke, and then looked back to her, as if letting her in on it. “That’s what I was, an aerialist. Me and my family. The Flying Graysons. I still miss it sometimes, but Wayne Manor is awesome. Being rich is awesome. Except it’s harder to do handstands when everything in the house costs so much money. I’ve totally...
broken a Wayne family heirloom vase before.”

He laughed. Cassandra laughed. She’d never heard anyone talk so much at once.

“Well, I’ll let you rest,” he said, as if just now realizing how much he had shared. “I’m down the hall if you need anything.”

Cass nodded. She didn’t want him to go, not yet, but she wasn’t ready to ask him to stay. She ate the rest of her chicken noodle soup in silence.

She managed to stay in her room for most of the weekend. But she had visitors.

Dick came back a couple of times a day, and then there was Tim. He was different than Dick, quieter, but just as nice. He was smooth and smart and a bit funny, like one of those entrepreneurs on that show Shark Tank (she loved having a TV in her room. It was awesome). He could be very awkward though. Which just made Cassandra more awkward. And then they’d just sit there and stare at opposite walls in mutual awkwardness.

Not on the day he brought Stephanie Brown though. She was the type of person to see the awkwardness, politely acknowledge it, and then bulldoze right on over.

“Name’s Steph,” she said, swiveling around in the desk chair. “I’m Tim’s girlfriend.”

“She is Tim’s friend, who is a girl,” Tim corrected, but his smile was soft.

“Same difference,” Steph said.

“It’s really not.”

“I’m Cass.” Talking was getting easier, with Dick stopping by her room to chat so often. She still had to think of the words before she said them. “It is nice to meet Tim’s girlfriend.”

Tim groaned, “I’ve been so betrayed,” as Stephanie cackled.

“I like you,” she said. “I really, really like you.”

Something warm settled in Cass’s stomach.

“Seriously, though,” Steph continued, “why are all of Bruce’s kids so great when he’s such a dick? No offense to Dick, of course.”

“Jason can be a dick,” Tim said.

“Jason can be a dick,” Steph agreed.

Cass frowned. She didn’t know what it meant to be a duck, but it sounded mean. “Bruce is very kind,” she insisted.

For a moment, Stephanie darkened, like her sunny exterior had been washed away and what was underneath was an overwhelming amount of sorrow and rage. Cassandra had to look away because it reminded her of home.

But then Steph spun in the chair again and said, “Maybe he just hates blondes. Can you be a blonde racist?”

“I think you can be blonde and you can be racist, but you can’t be racist toward blondes,” Tim said.
“What do you call it when someone thinks blonde girls are stupid and useless then?”

“A sexist asshole,” Cassandra said and Stephanie grinned so hard Cass forgot what it looked like for her to frown. “I learned that from Dick.”

“God bless Dick and his artful grasp of the English language,” Steph said.

Stephanie had to leave to make her mom dinner, but she promised she’d be back soon. Tim tried to get Cass to come down to eat. She told him she wasn’t feeling very well.

It was a new boy who brought her a plateful of pasta this time. Cass knew he must be Jason, even though Tim and Dick dropped plenty of hints that she shouldn’t be expecting him.

“Figured I had to see the new addition,” he said. He didn’t sit down.

She watched him watch her. He was tall, taller than Dick, and broader too. His hair was unstyled, falling in his eyes. His jaw seemed permanently clenched, and he looked like he might run at any moment.

Dick might have had the gymnast’s body, but this was the fighter, no doubt.

“It pissed me off when he picked up Tim,” Jason continued. His voice was contemplative and casual. “He didn’t even wait for my body to go cold. But you . . . huh. I dunno, it’s like I just don’t have it in me to care. It’s just — a thing now, I guess. Bruce collects orphans like normal people collect baseball cards. Or like Selina Kyle collects cats.” Cassandra did not know who Selina Kyle was. He didn’t seem like he would tell her.

“I am not an . . . orphan,” she said.

Jason barked a harsh laugh. “You might as well be. Good parents don’t do to their kids what yours did to you. That’s some messed up shit.”

It was the first time anyone had mentioned her parents, or her home, or anything about her life before she came here. It hurt to remember, but it was good, too. It anchored her.

And he was right. It was some messed up shit.

“So you could totally take me down in a fight, huh?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I could . . . take you down.”

He grinned a shark’s grin. “I’ve been beat up by a teenage girl before and I’m not afraid to do it again.”

“Not like this,” she said, pushing her pasta around on the plate.

He was quiet. She wondered if she scared him, if he would realize that the things she could do — they weren’t fun or cool. Her whole body was a mistake in the worst kind of way.

“Lighten up, kid.” There was a finger under her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. She had never been touched so gently and so without fear. “You’re safe here, ok? With Bruce and Dick in your corner. And now me. I promise you’re safe.”

She was sure there was something to say to that, a question to ask, like If this place is so safe, then why did you leave? But she couldn’t find the words, and Jason didn’t seem to have any left.
She made it through the entire weekend without leaving her room. And then, Monday evening, Barbara Gordon visited.

Cass knew it was Barbara Gordon because Dick talked about her enough. She was probably in her mid-to-late twenties with bright orange hair and square glasses that framed blue-green eyes. She was in a wheelchair, which should have relaxed Cassandra, but it didn’t. There was something about her, like she was taking in all the escape routes, calculating the risks of fight vs. flight. Cass knew that look like she knew her own face in a mirror.

Barbara studied the room, the empty desk, the kingsize bed, the flatscreen TV. She took in the sepia photographs of Old Gotham that hung on the walls with a strange smile, which turned forlorn when her gaze moved to the shelves of untouched, dusty books in the corner.

“This used to be my room whenever I spent the night,” she said. “But I haven’t been up here in a while. Bruce got a wheelchair ramp installed, but, well . . . I don’t like to use it.”

“Why?” Cassandra asked when she didn’t continue.

“I’ve never been one for shortcuts.”

Cass didn’t see how using a ramp was a shortcut when you couldn’t take the stairs.

“It sucks, too,” Barbara continued. “The library is on this level. That was the reason I even started coming around here. I loved the library.”

Cass knew that word, she was sure of it. A library was . . . it was . . .

“Bruce has all these really old books and I would stay there for hours, reading them, holding them. It was pure magic.”

“Books!” Cass burst. “You keep books in a library!”

Barbara laughed a little. “Yeah. Have you ever been to a library?”

Cass shook her head, embarrassed. Barbara’s smile grew.

“Well, now I have to take you.”

Cass looked up.

“The library is — the single greatest invention, ever,” Barbara said, practically vibrating out of her wheelchair. “It’s a crime you’ve never been. We need to go — like, right now, come on, this will change your life, I promise.”

But Cass was frozen.

Sensing the shift in mood, Barbara wheeled forward. “What’s the matter? You don’t want to go?”

She shook her head. “I don’t . . . I can’t . . . I cannot — read.”

She expected Barbara to look concerned, even disgusted, but she just kept watching. The little crease between her eyebrows was the only sign she’d even heard Cass speak.

Cassandra swallowed against the growing lump in her throat. “So you will . . . forgive me . . . if I stay.”
Barbara took off her glasses and cleaned them on the hem of her shirt. Then she rolled forward until she was at Cass’ bedside. She didn’t quite meet her eyes.

“I wanna tell you a story,” Barbara said. “Is that okay?”

Cass nodded but Barbara still wasn’t looking, so she said, “Yes.”

Barbara cleared her throat. “Okay. So. Once there was a little girl — unrelated to me, I totally, absolutely, have never met her before in my life — and this little girl was . . . a genius, of sorts. Like, she could just look at something, anything, and then hours, days, weeks later, she could still see it in her head, every little detail. So one day, when this girl was twelve or thirteen, her parents died in a car accident. And she went to live with her uncle and his family, and they ended up adopting her, but then there was this whole thing where they got a divorce and her aunt got custody of the other kid, and so her uncle had to be saddled with his dead brother’s kid — but that’s another story.”

Cass thought that was very sad. She loved her parents, she supposed — but she didn’t miss them. She couldn’t imagine herself ever missing them. It sounded like the girl in the story had loved her parents enough to miss them, and maybe she even loved her aunt and the other kid enough to miss them, too. Cass was glad she was telling a different story.

“So, anyway, this girl became obsessed with justice. Like, really obsessed. She saved up her own money from odd jobs to take a community college classes on forensics, and she just knew that’s what she was meant to do. But her dad — her new dad, that is — he had already lost so much. And he was a cop, so he knew how dangerous it could be. So he begged her not to throw away her life like that, not to put herself in that much danger. And she loved him, more than she loved anything else. So she majored in library sciences, and that was — you know — okay. But she was so bored, so she got it in her head to run for Congress. And that was fun — and stressful — and it kept her busy. And then one day she got a nomination for the House of Reps, which was — well, it was actually really cool, and she thought she might get used to it, even though it wasn’t what she wanted, and then —,”

Her voice broke, and Cass had to resist the urge to cover her ears. She didn’t want to hear the end of this story either. “And then a psychopath dressed like a clown kidnapped her and shot her through the spine and it never mattered that she wasn’t a cop or a detective, that she’d spent her whole life avoiding danger, she still lost her parents and her brother and her fucking legs. So what was even the point of it all? I could have been doing something I loved this whole time. And now I’ll never get to. So I’m twenty-seven and back to odd jobs and figuring out what do with my life just like when I was eighteen.”

A heavy tear rolled down Cassandra’s cheek, dangled on her chin, and fell to her shirt. She wiped it away fast before her father could —

But her father wasn’t here. And she didn’t know these people, didn’t entirely trust them, but she still didn’t they would hurt her if she cried.

Barbara grabbed her hand. It was only practice that kept her from flinching. “Hey, don’t cry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to go off like that, I just wanted to — to — I don’t know.” She tangled a hand in her hair and smiled at Cass, the kind of smile some of the kids back home reserved for her. Friendly, and sad, too. “We’ve both got a lot of shit to sort out, don’t we?”

Cassandra thought everyone in this house had a lot of shit to sort out.

“Hi, girls.”
Bruce Wayne stood in the doorway. Cass hadn’t seen Bruce since the day she came to the manor. She hadn’t been ready to see him, but with Barbara still holding her hand, she thought she could now.

It made her wonder about Bruce, and if he planned this whole thing. But that was crazy.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Duh, Bruce,” said Barbara. She looked perfectly composed suddenly, but made no move to let Cass’s hand go. “We were just talking about boys and our menstrual cycles, god.”

Cassandra blushed and a laugh bubbled from her lips.

“I hate to interrupt that,” said Bruce, “but dinner’s ready. Are you hungry?”

Barbara looked at Cassandra. She was starving, she realized. She didn’t want to wait for Alfred or Dick or Jason to bring up leftovers.

“Yes,” Cass said. “And after we can — go to the library?”

She breathed in and held the oxygen in her chest, letting it fuel her and clear her head.

“If there’s one thing to know about library science majors,” Barbara grinned, “it’s that you never need to ask.”

Cassandra Cain became a gust of fresh air around Wayne Manor. Lois suggested it was due to their household needing more estrogen, but Bruce doubted it. Tim and Dick were hardly paragons of masculinity, and Cassandra was far from some type of Wendy Darling, a mother to a hoard of Lost Boys. She was quiet, but she was kind, and unexpectedly funny, and she didn’t let anyone push her around, and the Waynes never stood a chance.

Dick immediately loved her, far quicker than he had ever loved Jason or Tim, or even Bruce. Bruce wondered if it was directly related to Cassandra, or because Dick warmed up easier to girls than to boys, something Bruce suspected had every bit to do with his background as an acrobat and the toxic masculinity he must have ran into from time to time, and very little to do with his sexual preferences. Cass spoke easier around Dick, but she blushed a lot too at first. Bruce wondered if it was going to be a problem, but sometime after she obliterated Dick in a pull-up contest, the blushes came to an end.

Cass and Tim were . . . an interesting pair, to say the least. Sometimes they seemed to understand each other like no one else and sometimes they were so awkward together it was painful to watch and sometimes they ganged up on Dick or Bruce with brutal, efficient wit. And when Stephanie Brown visited — and she was becoming difficult to avoid again, with her surprising devotion to teaching Cass to read, though Bruce had never taken her for the bookish type — the three of them became some sort of superteam of teenaged sarcasm and inside jokes.

Cass still blushed quite a bit around Stephanie. Bruce tried not to think about it.

Barbara had something special with Cass, something Bruce couldn’t even begin to understand. It made him jealous sometimes, to see Babs and Cass disappear into Cass’s room, to find them in the library with their heads bent over a book, to see Babs wheel through the house at night with a
sleeping Cass in her lap to put her in bed. But more than that, it warmed his heart, weaved pieces of himself he hadn’t known were broken back together again. They needed each other more than he needed either of them, and they helped each other in ways he couldn’t help, and he would never come between that.

Even Jason seemed to be showing up more often. He didn’t talk to Bruce much, or Dick, but he ate dinner at the manor if Babs or Stephanie was around. Every time he visited, he brought a discount paperback to give to Cass, though she was far from ready for Jane Austen or Stephen King. Once, Bruce even saw Jason drop a thick stack of Anne Rice books in Tim’s room when Tim was out with his friends.

After all this time, Bruce’s kids could still manage to surprise him. As he watched Jason ask Tim’s opinion on *The Vampire Lestat*, and Dick help Alfred pack lunches, and Babs come down the second floor ramp with her books and computer precariously balanced in her lap, and Cass teach Stephanie the proper way to punch . . . he wondered if he had ever surprised them, or even if he had it in him to surprise himself anymore. But no — he had learned all his tricks a long time ago, and as much as he liked to pretend otherwise, he knew his family had learned them, too.

Steph had been herself for sixteen whole years now, give or take a few months, and she still managed to amaze herself with her capacity for fucking up.

Don’t get her wrong — she knew she fucked up a lot. She had failed her driving test three times now, and she totally forgot to study for her bio exam last week until the night before and when she remembered, she didn’t even try to stop her mom from taking one too many sleeping pills because she really needed to study. So she was very much not a stranger to fucking up.

But this time . . . man, she really, really fucked up.

When she first realized what was going on with her body, she thought it was some sort of huge, cosmic joke. Then, about seven minutes later when it sunk in that this was actually happening, she started crying. The ugly kind of crying — earthshaking sobs and snot *everywhere*. She let herself cry for a half hour alone in the bathroom, curled up on the cold tile until she ached. Then she splashed some water on her face and went into the kitchen to make herself some waffles even though it was two in the afternoon because dammit, she deserved some fricking waffles. She put bananas and strawberries and whipped cream and chocolate sauce on top because that’s how much she deserved those waffles.

When she finished eating the waffles, and cleaned off her plate and silverware, and put all of the waffle shit back where it belonged, and was totally sure she was not going to break down again, she called Tim.

“Hey,” he said after two rings. Just the sound of his voice, sweet and unassuming, made her feel like something warm was curling in her stomach. Like she was going to be okay because Tim was here.

“Hey,” she said back. “So I have news.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Good news or bad news?”
“Bad, probably. I mean, for some people it would be good news, but for me . . . Bad. Definitely bad.” She sighed. “I really fucked up, Tim.”

He was quiet on the other end. But he was still there. She knew he was still there.

“Okay,” he said at last. “Bad news. You fucked up. Lay it on me.”

She kind of wanted another waffle. Anything to keep her hands busy.

“Well. There’s no easy way to say this. So I guess I’ll just . . . I’ve got a bun in the oven.”

“You — what?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m pregnant, Tim.”

“Oh.”

Silence. She started to panic.

“It’s not yours. Obviously. I wish it was though. You’d make a great dad, I bet. And husband. And you’re hella rich. You could be like my sugar daddy. And I’d be your trophy wife. I’d just have to keep looking hot and partake in the occasional sexual favor — or not, sorry, that’s insensitive — but anyway, you’d give me and our kid everything we could possibly want —,”

“Steph.”

She stopped talking. Her eyes burned a little. Shit.

“Is the father . . . in the picture?” Tim’s voice was calm and warm and like a mini-psychiatrist and god, she loved him so much, she couldn’t help it.

“Not really,” she said. “He ditched town a while back, and I mean, I have his number, I can get ahold of him, but . . . well, he’s a total loser.” Not like you. Like me. “So I don’t imagine I’ll get much support out of him or anything.”

Tim was quiet again, and she imagined him thinking, if he’s a total loser, why did you let him fuck you? But in more polite terms because Tim would never be so crass. And he would never understand what it was like to have a screwup for a dad and an addict for a mom and be so sure that you were going to be a screwup too, that you would take any validation you could get, even in the form of the warm body of some asshole you sort of dated in freshman year, and knowingly doing it without protection because he always hated condoms and it’s like you’re daring the universe to fuck you too.

She wondered if Tim was hurt, even a tiny bit. She tried not to feel too guilty — he had made it perfectly clear, time and time again, that they weren’t really dating, even if it felt like they were when they snuck out to the park that night to swing beneath the stars, when he let her kiss him and he kissed her back. He just had too much shit in his life to figure out, and he didn’t need her to be a part of it.

Again, he had probably been nicer when he said it.

“So, do you want to — you know.”

Did she? She had thought about it all morning, she realized, without consciously thinking about it. She was a modern woman, and she knew it was an option, and she’d always been all for it for other people, but when it came to her . . .
“I don’t have the money,” she said. *Or the guts.*

She could imagine Tim licking his lips as he pictured what to say. “I do. I mean, Bruce does. We could —,”

“No. *God,* no. I am not let you or *Bruce Fucking Wayne* pay for my fucking abortion, *Jesus* —,”

“I’m sorry, it was just an idea, I’m sorry.”

She was crying again. Damn it.

“Are you at home?” she asked. “Can I come over?”

He was quiet for a moment, and she was afraid he would say no.

*Please Tim,* she thought. *After everything, after all that you’ve been here for, please be here now.*

And then: “I’m with Conner right now.”

Her heart stopped. “Does he —?”

“No, I stepped outside. We were just grabbing a burger. But we’re finishing up now, so just — just give me a few minutes, alright? I can come by your house afterward, or pick you up and take you over to the manor —,”

“Take your time, I didn’t mean to bother you —,”

“Come on, Steph, you’re never a bother.”

And she hated how it was like she could breathe again.

“Oh,” she said. “I’ll wait for you. Say hi to Con for me.”

“Will do. Hang in there, okay?”

And he was gone.

Stupid, perfect Tim Drake. Stupid, perfect Conner Kent. She wondered if *Conner* knew how much shit Tim had to sort out, or if he was a part of it. Or if she was.

God, now she was just being mean. This wasn’t her. She was better than this.

Before she even knew where she was going, she grabbed her bicycle and was pedaling as hard as she could away from her house. She didn’t even grab a helmet, which was so, so bad, as Tim was always telling her (*hypocritical punk — like *he* ever wore a helmet when he skateboarded,* but the wind flipping her hair, stinging her cheeks, was like nothing else. Her skin finally stopped crawling. She didn’t think about Conner anymore, or her parents, or Dean, or the baby. She thought about Tim, but only a little and only because she couldn’t help it. She was a compass and he was north and there was no way to block him out completely.

She realized she was biking to Wayne Manor at the exact moment her wheel hit a rock and she went careening into the street.

*Shit shit shit,* she thought as her arms instinctively covered her head and a car swerved around her.

“Hey!” She heard footsteps coming toward here. “Hey, kid, are you okay? Bruce, call 911 —,”
“Stephanie? Stephanie, is that you?”

Big hands rolled her over so she was looking up at the familiar faces of Bruce Fucking Wayne (strong jaw and blue eyes and dark hair and he wasn’t Tim’s biological dad, but he damn well could have been), Bruce Fucking Wayne’s Fucking Girlfriend (who she knew from tabloids, mostly, and spotting her lounging around the manor in tight dresses or her boyfriend’s shirts), and Bruce Fucking Wayne’s Fucking Butler (whose name was Alfred, and who was actually very nice).

“Oh great,” she moaned. “Now you know I sometimes bike without a helmet. Am I officially banned form your premises?”

“You know this kid?” the girlfriend asked.

“She’s Tim’s friend,” said Bruce.

“Don’t worry, Stephanie.” And that was Alfred. “I’m calling an ambulance now —,”

Suddenly, she was all too alert.

“No, no, don’t do that, please —,”

“You took quite the spill, you need to be looked at —,”

“Look, I’m pregnant and don’t need that spread all over Gotham, okay?”

Alfred lifted his eyes from his phone. Bruce’s girlfriend let go of her shoulders, allowing her to sit up finally. And Bruce looked like he might be sick.

God, he must think she was the biggest fuck up in the world.

He already does, a dark voice in her head reminded.

Bruce took a few calming breaths and finally said, “Tim’s the father.”

She blinked. “What? No. Your youngest’s innocence is still intact, fear not.”

Bruce blinked. “You mean, you and Tim never . . .?”

And god, she wasn’t one for blushing, but now Bruce Fucking Wayne was asking about her sex life with the boy she was madly in love with, her best friend, who had kissed her and then told her he wasn’t ready for a relationship and he might never be ready for a relationship because he didn’t even know what he was, and fuck it, she could have fried an egg on her cheeks.

“No,” she said. “I mean, as far as I know, Tim’s never . . . with anyone.”

Damn it, why did she have to say that? Tim had trusted her that morning before sunrise when he whispered, “I’ve been wondering if I’m, you know, asexual, and I mean, maybe not, because I — I mean, I really like you, Steph, I really do — but I don’t know, sometimes I just feel — I don’t know,” and Stephanie had curled her fingers around his and whispered back, “You’re my best friend, whatever else you are.”

She felt suddenly, incredibly tired. “You should ask Tim, if you’re concerned about his sex life. He’s the expert on it.”

Bruce nodded, and she hoped he didn’t take her up on that.
“You should really go to a doctor though,” said Bruce’s girlfriend. “I get not being into that scene — but especially if you are pregnant —.”

“No doctors. Not yet.” She was as resolute as she could be while sitting in the middle of a street with her elbows scraped and her head pounding.

“Let’s get you out of the street then miss,” Alfred said. He helped her to her feet and she felt a sudden wave of vertigo as they walked her to the car.

“We were heading home,” Bruce said. “Would you — would you like to come?”

“Okay,” Steph said, because what else was she going to do?

Alfred drove them to the manor in relative silence. There was a first aid kit in the car and Bruce’s girlfriend — Selina — carefully administered antiseptic to the cut on her forehead. It didn’t look too deep, so they placed a butterfly bandage over it, instead of trying stitches.

“You got lucky, kid,” Selina said.

“Yeah,” Steph said, staring out the window.

Steph had hoped Cass would be around and up for a martial arts lesson, because man, she wanted to hit something, but it was one of those rare days when no one was home. According to Bruce and Alfred, Jason had taken Cass to her therapy session, and Dick and Babs were working, and Tim was, of course, with Conner.

Steph always thought of Wayne Manor as some kind of haven of love and family, but walking into the completely silent household, knowing all three stories and the basement were empty of life, she could see how it might be lonely too.

Alfred went to get Stephanie some water and snacks, and Selina went to do — something, Selina was very mysterious — and then it was just Bruce and Steph alone in the living room.

They didn’t look at each other.

“Well . . .,” Bruce said, “I have some work I should get to . . .”

“Why do you hate me?”

She didn’t even mean to ask it. She had hoped to never let Bruce Wayne know just how much he got to her, but there it was, and she didn’t feel like taking it back.

Bruce stopped. Their eyes met for a moment before she violently flicked her own towards the wall.

Bruce sighed and came to sit on the sofa adjacent to her.

“I don’t hate you, Stephanie,” he said.

She scoffed. “I’m not an idiot. I know you think I am, but I’m not.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot —,”

“Cut the crap!” And crap, she was going to start crying again. She hated this so much. “There’s a kid inside me because of my loser ex-boyfriend and I just fell off my bike, so just — cut the crap. I know you don’t think I’m good enough to hang out with Tim or Cass or anyone else in your elitist family. And I don’t know if it’s because I’m not as smart as them or because I’m poor or because my dad’s a crook or whatever. But you don’t get to just — waltz around and treat me like shit because I’m not,
okay? Maybe I’m not a Wayne, maybe I’ll never be good enough for a Wayne, but I’ll tell you something. Most people in the world aren’t Waynes and they probably don’t live up to your impossible standards, but that doesn’t mean they’re useless. People are worth something even when Bruce Wayne doesn’t deem them deserving of his fairytale life. I’m worth something. So back. The fuck. Off.”

And just like that, it was like someone had popped the balloon inside her — like all the sadness and anger she had kept beneath the surface of a bright smile and a plethora of jokes as her dad went to prison and her mom fell off the deep end and Bruce Fucking Wayne started treating her like his rich person garbage and Tim sort-of-not-really broke up with her and Dean knocked her up — all of that just went, sort of whoosh, collapsing in on itself and ready to start being filled up again for another day.

She wasn’t even crying. Fuck yeah.

Bruce’s breathing was careful and measured when he said, “You’re right.”

She looked at him. What the fuck.

“I haven’t treated you fairly at all,” Bruce was continuing and he seemed poised and professional, but on a normal person, his expression might have been ashamed. “I’ve been — incredibly immature and rude and you have deserved so much more than that. It’s just . . . well, I’ll be honest. You scared me a little. A lot.”

“I . . . what.”

“I don’t have trouble understanding most people. I can figure out what they want and how to give it to them. It’s why I excel at business. But you . . . I couldn’t figure out what your game was. You came into this house like a whirlwind and you made Tim smile for the first time in a really long time, and I could never — figure you out. That scared me.”

Stephanie swallowed. “I don’t have a game. I’m a kid.”

Bruce dropped his eyes to his lap. “I may have been paranoid. When we first met, Jason had moved out not that long ago, we barely ever saw him anymore, and it was very difficult on — on the family.” On Bruce, she supplied in her own mind. “And something in you reminded me of him, before the accident, and after too. I was just trying to keep my family from getting hurt again.” To keep himself from getting hurt.

“So what. Now I’m preggo and suddenly not a threat?”

He huffed a breath that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Now I’m realizing I made a teenage girl feel as though I hated her, and it’s not my proudest moment.”

“You just didn’t realize how damaged I was before and now you like me. You have a thing for damaged goods.”

“I do not —,”

“Or you’re realizing that if only I had had your loving, but firm fatherly influence in my life I wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.”

“Yes. You got me.”

She peered at him. “Are you being sarcastic right now? I can’t tell. You’re like talking to a brick
He made an expression that again, on a normal person might have been a smile, but on him was a slight slant of his lips. He was a really weird guy.

“You know, Bruce — can I call you Bruce?”

“Sure.”

“You know, Bruce, you have this — this superpower. People just want to make you proud. You shouldn’t use it for evil.”

She had meant it as a joke, but she suddenly realized it wasn’t very funny. And Bruce was looking at her like he was seeing her for the first time, the way her dad sometimes looked at her when she was little and crawled into his lap, the way her mom sometimes looked at her when she wasn’t drugged up, and it was all too much. She dropped her eyes.

“I should — call Tim. Let him know I’m here.”

“Mm, yes. I should get back to work.”

She could feel that he was deliberating something, maybe touching her on the shoulder or arm or something. She was glad when he didn’t. She didn’t think she was ready for that.

She heard him walk away. She was relieved, but it still hurt. She hated that it hurt.

“Stephanie?”

She looked up, too quick. A normal person might be flustered. Not Bruce Wayne.

“I’m sorry you have to go through . . . what you’re going through. You’re right, you’re just a kid, and it’s a lot to take on alone. So I promise that I — that this family — we’ll be here for you. Whatever you need.”

She nodded. It was an apology in more ways than one.

“And, for what it’s worth — I think Tim is lucky to have you.”

She couldn’t look at him when he walked away. Alfred showed up then with suspiciously convenient timing and she gratefully accepted the glass of Pineapple juice he offered.

She called Tim.

“Steph! I’m on my way now —,”

“I’m at your house already, actually.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Bruce picked me up.”

“Oh.”

“Mmhmm. It’s a long story.”

“Looking forward to it.” He hesitated. “And you. I’m looking forward to seeing you, too.”
She didn’t know which way he meant it, but she didn’t really care. It was enough. He was always enough.

“You too, Timmy. Pick me up something greasy okay? I’m pregnant. I deserve it.”

“Ugh, fine, whatever. You’re so high maintenance.”

“You grow a small human inside your uterus and get back to me.”

“Okay, okay, I’m going to Taco Bell. See you, Steph.”

“Bye, Tim.”

She hung up the phone, and let herself just sit, listening to the emptiness of the manor. She thought about Bruce again, a little boy, alone, in this big house with his butler and his ghosts and she wondered if he ever felt hopeless. She thought it would be very easy to feel hopeless.

But Steph knew better. Tim was coming, and hopefully Jay and Cass soon too, and despite everything, she could hardly wait.

Stephanie never would accept Bruce’s offers to pay for an abortion, but she did accept his access to Dr. Quinzel, and she came out of her third therapy session deciding she wanted to see the pregnancy to fruition, but she would give the baby up for adoption. If Bruce’s therapist was all he could ever offer the downtrodden of Gotham, he thought it would be enough.

On a day early in January, Tim came home to a full house, snowflakes still melting on his eyelashes and lips a little blue but smiling all the same.

“A girl!” he announced and the den cheered.

“Of course it’s a girl,” Jason said. “Stephanie Brown’s X chromosomes would beat any Y they came across to the death.”

Tim sat down next to Jason, close enough that their shoulders touched. Bruce’s heart warmed until he saw Dick’s eyes tracking the same movement, jaw clenched.

Give him time, Bruce thought. He just needs time.

Barbara must have had the same idea because she reached out and took Dick’s hand.

“Where’s Steph?” Cass asked, bouncing a little in her seat on Jason’s other side. “Is she still in the hospital? Is she alright?”

“Steph’s fine. She’s resting after, you know —,”

“Pushing a kid out of her vagina?”

“Yes, thank you, Jason — and she’s going to be checked out of the hospital soon and her mom is taking her to iHop for celebratory waffles.”

“That’s good,” said Barbara. “I’m really glad.”
“Steph does love her waffles,” Dick agreed.

“And I’m sure she’ll be back soon,” Alfred said, as he forced Tim out of his heavy coat. “There’s no keeping Miss Stephanie down for long.”

“Cheers to that,” Jason said and they all drank whatever they had in their hand, a mix of champagne and sparkling cider and iced tea.

It was a rare day when they were all free and all wanted to be together. Not too long ago, Bruce thought there would always be days like this. It was strange, how he grew up so alone and yet became so used to having a family when it showed up. Now, he cherished this, the easy laughter, the familiarity. Not everyone got this. Not everyone kept it.

He was helping Alfred clean plates and glasses when he heard hushed voices from an alcove around the corner. He hesitated in the hallway.

“This isn’t a big deal,” Tim was saying. “But I just, I think I’ve finally got some stuff figured out. And you’re easy to talk to. Maybe because you don’t really talk back.”

“I’m waiting to know more words. Then I will talk back a lot.”

Cass. He was talking to Cass.

“Okay. So. I’ve done a lot of thinking. And I think . . . well, I know — I’m asexual.”

Silence. Bruce swallowed.

He was surprised, and yet . . . not surprised all. Tim could be anything. He was everything.

“I’m . . . I don’t know what that means.”

“Oh, right, uh — sorry — it’s basically . . . okay, have you ever felt attracted to someone?”

“Um.”

“I was there when you met Conner. And Steph.”

“Oh. Then yes.”

Bruce ran a hand over his face. Steph and Conner. They were going to be the death of him.

“Well, I don’t . . . feel like that. Not in the same way. It’s like my heart is drawn to people, but my body just . . . isn’t. And I was really confused at first, how I could feel like I was in love with someone and not want to — you know — with them. But I realize now those things don’t always have to go together.”

“Oh. That’s interesting. I didn’t know that.”

Tim laughed, unbridled and full of joy and Bruce was so thankful for Cassandra Cain.

“Does anyone else know?”

“Steph, sort of. But you’re the first I’ve ever . . .”

“Will you tell anyone else?”
“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll tell Dick next. To be honest, telling you is sort of a huge step for me.”

“What about Bruce?”

Tim was quiet. And then: “What about Bruce?”

“Will you tell him you’re . . . asexual?”

“Um. No.” Cass must have made a questioning face because Tim continued, “Look, I love Bruce, you know I do, but he’s not exactly the best with . . . feelings. He wouldn’t understand why this is important to me and he’d probably just — brush it off, or be grateful I’m not sleeping with Steph or something. I don’t know how I’d tell him. Maybe I won’t ever. It’s not like it effects him anyway.”

Bruce frowned. He supposed he had this coming, eavesdropping the way he was. He was bound to overhear something that might be . . . uncomplimentary.

But Cass wasn’t done.

“I think you should. When you’re ready. You should . . . give him a chance.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because he would give you one.”

Quiet. Bruce couldn’t even name all the things he was feeling. Tim was right. He was terrible at this.

“And if I give him a chance . . . and he’s a douchebag about it?”

“Then I’ll beat him up.”

Tim laughed and so did Cass and Bruce found himself able to walk again. He carried the plates he had to the kitchen, and washed them carefully. He had a washing machine, of course, but the rhythmic swiping of the towel on ceramic and the suds oozing between his fingers felt peaceful.

Someone came up behind him. He tensed.

It was Cassandra, and she was hugging him from behind, and he didn’t know what to do.

“You are not as sneaky as you pretend to be,” he said, relaxing a little.

“Sneakier than you,” she said. “Eavesdropping is not nice.”

He froze. “How —?”

“What part of ‘raised in a secret ninja colony’ does no one understand?”

He continued scrubbing. Alfred came in with more plates and set them next to Bruce, pretending not to notice the hug, though his mustache twitched the slightest bit.

“I miss when you weren’t so sarcastic,” Bruce said.

“I was always sarcastic.” Cass lifted on her tiptoes to place her chin on Bruce’s shoulder. “I just couldn’t articulate it.”

“Articulate. That’s a good one.”

“Thanks. Learned it from you.” She hesitated. “From your words, not your actions. You don’t
articulate much at all. In fact, you’re the very worst at articulating. But it’s okay. I’ll teach you.” She kissed him on the cheek and fell back to his side to help wash dishes.

Bruce looked over at Alfred helplessly. Alfred shrugged.

“You asked for this,” Alfred said.

Bruce flicked just enough soap suds towards Cass to make it look like an accident. She glared.

“I guess I did,” he said and dodged the sponge she threw at his head.
i am SO sorry this is so late! it's the end of the semester and school is really kicking my ass right now, so editing this was harder than i thought it would be.

but! one more chapter after this! (it's an epilogue, really, but i’m gonna call it a chapter) i feel like i’ve been working on this story for so freaking long, and it means so much to me, i can hardly believe i’m almost done. i’m so thankful to everyone who has been reading and commenting <3

WARNINGS: some racist and sexist language, discussion of a past suicide attempt

Age chart
Bruce: 39
Babs: 30
Dick: 26
Jason: 23
Cass: 20 or 21 math is hard
Steph: 20
Tim: 19
Damian: 12

“I think it’s officially time to stop adopting all the kids in Gotham, old man.”

Jason collapsed onto the couch next to Bruce. His face was flushed and his muscles loose, and though it had only been an hour since the party began, he was already well past tipsy. Bruce looked around for Jason’s red-haired roommates, but couldn’t spot them in the crowd.

“Roy’s with his kid,” Jason said, as if he could see Bruce’s thoughts in the movement of his eyes. “Kory’s working. It’s just me tonight, don’t look so disappointed.”

Bruce watched Jason take a swig of beer. “I’m never disappointed to see you, Jay.”

A faint smile flitted across Jason’s lips, but he drowned it in more beer. Bruce made a note to get Jason’s keys off him as the night wore on.


“It’ll be a miracle if you make it to thirty-nine,” Oliver Queen interrupted. Bruce sighed and turned his attention back to the man who had been rambling on about the last Hollywood premier he attended for the past half hour. The best thing about Ollie was that he kept Bruce from having to socialize with anyone else.

“‘Sup, pornstache,” Jason nodded to Ollie.

Oliver clenched his fist around his own sparkling blue beverage, one Bruce was certain was not being served in the kitchen.
“Jason Todd.” Ollie drew out the name like a slur. “Ya know, when I met you, I immediately thought, ‘what a fucking brat,’ and to this day, that’s still what I think whenever you decide to show up.”

Jason smiled, sickly sweet. “It’s hard to take you seriously when you have a weasel on your face.”

Bruce could feel someone come to stand at his shoulder, but he didn’t care to see who until a voice asked, “The party guests making you babysit them again?”

Armed with a boyish smile and a leather bag slung across his body was Clark Kent. He still wore those thick glasses and an overlarge flannel and his curls free of gel, like he didn’t know he was handsome, or like it didn’t even matter because his wife thought he was a knockout whether he wore contacts and a suit or whether he looked every bit the farm boy he was.

Bruce suspected that if he were to ever decide dressing the part of the rich socialite was no longer his cup of tea, Selina would need to have a long conversation with herself about what she considered valuable in a relationship.

“No different than my last fifteen birthdays,” said Bruce, and Clark’s smile managed to get even wider.

Jason launched himself out of his chair at Clark. Bruce coughed a laugh into his hand at the utter terror on Clark’s face right before Jason hugged him.

“Hi, Jay,” Clark laughed, patting his back. “I see you’ve already broken out the birthday schnapps.”

“Bruce’s parties used to be fun,” Jason mumbled. “Now they’re just full of boring old people.”

Ollie flipped him off.

“Careful who you’re calling old,” said Clark. Jason pulled back to look in his eyes, and they were suddenly much too close. Bruce was about to intervene, when Dick appeared out of seemingly nowhere to grab Jason by the neck of his leather jacket and drag him away.

Dick took in Clark’s uncomfortable, red face and a laugh bubbled out of him. He quickly schooled his expression at Bruce’s warning glance.

“Maybe it’s time to cut you off,” Dick told Jason, very serious. Bruce caught the twitch of his lips. “This must be a new record.”

Jason wrenched his arm from Dick’s grasp. He stumbled backward, nearly tumbling over the arm of a chair. Dick moved to steady him, but he dodged out of the way.

“I’m fine,” he growled and stormed off.

Dick stared after him, arm still outstretched. He forced himself to lower his hand to his side. Bruce felt a twinge of guilt — he had thought that because Jason seemed to be in a more relaxed mood tonight, coming to Bruce’s party without even his friends for emotional support, he would be able to handle Dick as well. But Jason’s moods were unpredictable as wildfire, and Bruce still wasn’t sure whether he or Dick was the forest, or the wind.

“Always the charmer, huh?” Oliver asked.

There was a moment, Bruce could see, where Dick almost snapped back, almost said something unbecoming like that Oliver could mind his own damn business. If he hadn’t taken his meds that
morning, he may have. But Dick had been in the spotlight nearly as long as Bruce and he knew how to perform.

Dick’s face softened into a smile. “I’m not sure if that’s exactly the word I’d use,” he laughed. “So where’s the rest of your crew, Clark?”

Not his most seamless transition, but it worked.

Clark craned his head to look around the room crowded with friends and dignitaries. “I think Conner ran off with Tim, and Steph and Cass probably kidnapped Kara. And there’s Lois, over by the salad bar with Selina, and — is that Diana Prince? Wow, haven’t seen her in a while.”

They all watched the trio of women whispering and giggling like schoolgirls, Lois in her button down and pencil skirt, Diana in her golden beaded dress, and Selina in a slick, black pantsuit. They fell disturbingly silent when a congressman leaned over to them, a greasy smirk plastered on his face. Bruce had a sudden memory from his college lit class: three witches, chanting around a cauldron, delivering an unknowing Macbeth’s fate.

“That looks dangerous,” Dick said. “I better go make sure they don’t decide to assassinate the mayor as a symbol of oppressive patriarchy of something.”

“I didn’t think Selina was one for politics,” Clark mused.

“Selina’s one for whatever makes her rich,” Dick grinned and made his way to the ensuing bloodbath.

Clark moved to sit beside Bruce. Ollie still reclined in the adjacent chair, but Dinah Lance was heading over in high heels and a low-cut dress and it seemed more important matters had gained his attention.

“Everything okay with the boys?” Clark asked quietly.

Bruce gave a half shrug. “It’s probably for the best that Jason made his dramatic exit before he caught a whiff of that — he has no patience for misogyny.”

Clark raised an eyebrow.

“One time, he gave a guy a black eye for calling his roommate a prostitute. Scared him enough that the guy didn’t even want to press charges.”

Clark raised his other eyebrow, and Bruce sighed.

“What do you want me to say, Clark? Things are — as okay as ever. They both only go to therapy sporadically, no matter how much I implore them to make a regular thing out of it. Dick has a hero complex and the misguided notion that he needs to suffer in silence. Jason’s so accustomed to anger at this point that I’m not sure he would know how to function without it. Sometimes I think Jay’s nearly forgiven him and then it’s back to — well. That.”

“And you?”

Of course, Clark always knew.

“I . . . can take whatever he throws at me. Whatever they throw at me. And I have to. It’s my job, I’m their —,”
He couldn’t force the word out. Some days it was easy, so easy he forgot there was ever a time before this, before them. And some days, words got caught in his throat like food he’d swallowed too quickly.

“Father,” Clark finished. His gaze was searching and gentle, and Bruce remembered meeting that gaze years ago, and thinking that if the world of journalism could give someone with such a soft heart a chance, he had the opportunity to be great.

“I’m glad you’re here, Clark,” Bruce said. It wasn’t enough. “I’m glad that you’ve — always been here.”

Clark smiled, too bright and and tinged with something Bruce would never understand, something a little like sadness.

“I’m glad to be here,” he said.

They sat for as long as they could before the sounds of Dinah and Ollie’s prolonged lip lock became too much to bear and they decided socialization with politicians and CEOs was preferable. Bruce introduced Clark to the mayor and Clark reintroduced Bruce to his cousin Kara and they chatted with Jim Gordon on when he finally planned on retiring and they wound up with Lois, Selina, and Diana, who had been abandoned by Dick for Barbara and her friends.

Altogether, the party wasn’t so bad.

“Master Bruce.”

Alfred stood a foot away, poised as ever, but far too somber for the festivities taking place around him. Bruce’s defenses immediately began to rebuild themselves.

“There’s a young gentleman at the door. He says he simply must see you.”

“Excuse me,” Bruce murmured to his guests and followed Alfred to the entryway. “How did he get past security?”

“He won’t discuss it with me,” Alfred huffed. “He claims it’s very important that he talk to you and only you. He refused to even enter the house without a guarantee that you were here.”

“Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“He allowed himself to be searched and does not appear to be in possession of any questionable materials. Plus, he really is rather . . . young.”

Alfred opened the front door and Bruce looked out at his front garden and then down — and there he saw a boy. The boy was dark, darker than Cass or Dick or Selina, with cropped black hair and clear green eyes. The beginning of carved muscle was evident on his biceps beneath his jacket, though he was far too young for such a physique. Something heavy settled in Bruce’s stomach.

“Hello,” the boy said. His accent was implacable.

“Hello,” said Bruce. “I heard you had something you would like to discuss.”

The boy glanced at Alfred, still at Bruce’s side. “I was hoping we could do so in private.”

Bruce’s lips twitched. This boy looked maybe ten years old, but he talked like a middle-aged businessman trying to make an important deal.
“Okay then,” Bruce said. “Please come in.”

“Sir —,” Alfred started.

“It’s fine, Alfred. Thank you.”

Alfred reluctantly left them in the entryway. Bruce noticed the boy’s jacket was much too thin for the February winter. He was shivering. Bruce held open the door and he stumbled inside, heaving a relieved breath when the door slammed shut behind him.

“I have travelled a lot,” the boy said, rubbing his bare hands together. “But I never spend much time in the cold.”

“Where are your parents?” Bruce asked. There was an energy in the air, humming through his body, like he could feel every atom of his skin. Electricity crackled between them, drawing him closer to the boy.

The boy’s eyes were downcast. “My mother . . . doesn’t exactly know I’m here. I left her a note. So she should figure it out. I may have committed identity theft in order to get a plane ticket. It’s nothing. She taught me how to do it. So.”

Bruce held his breath. “And your father?”

The boy looked up at him and Bruce didn’t know how he knew, but he knew. He had known since he opened the door and saw a child who talked like an al Ghul and stared up at him with Martha Wayne’s eyes.

“My name is Damian,” the boy said. “Damian Wayne.”

Bruce thought he was an expert at surprises at this point, but even he was not prepared to deal with this.

“I . . .” Damian just keep looking at him, unblinking, and Bruce forced himself to breathe. “We should call Talia. Where is she? Is she in America?”

“We were visiting Las Vegas, for business, and I —,”

“Okay. Okay. We’re going to give her a call right now.”

“No! This was supposed to be a secret!”

But Bruce already had his cellphone in hand. He pulled up Talia’s contact, untouched for no less than a decade, and flashed the screen at Damian. “Is this still her number?”

Damian’s face twitched, like he was trying not to scowl. “She changes it every other year.”

Bruce sighed. Of course she did.

“Alright,” he said. “What’s her number?”

Damian glared at the phone in Bruce’s hand. He didn’t speak.


Damian rattled off a number as he scuffed his shoe on the marble floor.
The phone rang three times before a silky voice said, “Al Ghul Enterprises, may I help you?”

That voice. Dry and smooth and and blistering, all at once. Bruce remembered thinking that she might not even be a real person, just the desert masquerading as a woman.

“. . . Hello?”

“Talia,” he breathed. “It’s Bruce Wayne.”

Silence. Too long, but it felt longer. And then —

“He’s with you, isn’t he?”

Bruce closed his eyes. Maybe a part of him still hoped she might have no clue why he called, that she didn’t have a son and he could return to the life he had been leading before he met Damian Wayne on his doorstep.

“Yes,” he said.

Bruce could hear her raw relief through the speaker. “Thank goodness. I was about to call the police.”

“You haven’t already? How long has he been gone?”

“Bruce, please.” She sounded so tired he almost felt guilty. “Don’t do this.”

Bruce glanced at Damian, who immediately bowed his head. “I’ll be right back,” he told him, and slipped into the dining room. Dick was eating a breadstick and laughing with Diana’s sister, Donna. Bruce caught his eye and waved him over. He watched as Dick made a skilled exit, saying a few words to excuse himself.

“What’s up?” he asked. “Where’d you go?”

Bruce pushed his phone into his shirt so Talia hopefully wouldn’t hear. “There’s a boy in the entryway. Can you stay with him for a few minutes while I take this call?”

Dick arched an eyebrow. “A boy? Anything you want to tell me?”

“He’s twelve, Dick. Please.”

There must have been something in Bruce’s face or voice, something desperate, because Dick’s whole countenance changed. He blinked and frowned and stopped teasing.

“Okay,” he said. “Sure, I’ll . . . sure.”

Bruce led them back to Damian, who stood exactly where he’d been left.

“Damian, this is Richard.” Damian turned suspicious eyes on Dick, who gave a little wave and a winning smile. “I’m going to talk to your mom in my office.”

Bruce started in that direction. Damian asked, “You are coming back, right?” but it was soft enough that Bruce could pretend he didn’t hear him.

Safe in his study, Bruce wasted no time on self-pity or fear and simply said into his phone, “How could you have kept this from me?”
He heard a scoff as piercing as a knife and he could picture Talia rolling her beautiful, scalding brown eyes.

“Don’t do that, Talia,” he snapped. “I think I had the right to know.”

“How could I have told you? You, a suicidal, twenty-something American who spent three weeks with me and then left the country to continue playing house with a circus boy in your big mansion? I’m sure you would have loved that the Arab whore you seduced was carrying your child.”

Bruce breathed in sharply. There was so much to say, he didn’t know how to start. *I never thought about you like that. I cared about you. I thought you cared for me too. I was already a father. I would have provided for you.*

The only words that left his lips were, “I wasn’t suicidal. Not when we met.”

“Oh, forgive me. Maybe the news just reached my backwards people a few years late.”

Bruce remembered once, when he was young and stupid, laying in a hotel bed after an exhausting, incredibly satisfying night and remarking on how “technologically backwards this place can be.” He remembered the gorgeous, naked woman next to him lifting her head and then absolutely tearing him apart with her words. She lectured him on the dangers of harmful stereotypes and supposed American exceptionalism and stupid, selfish men, and he thought, *Talia al Ghul, I might be a little in love with you.*

He wondered if Damian had even a fraction of his mother’s passion. Lord help the world if he did.

Bruce repeated, “I had the right to know.”

“I’m his mother,” said Talia. “I decide your rights when they concern him.”

He closed his eyes. “I’m not going to argue. Not right now. When can I expect you to pick him up?”

“I’m not picking him up.”

His eyes flew open. “What?”

“He worked this hard to make sure I didn’t know where he was,” Talia said, matter-of-fact, “and I can respect that.”

Bruce wanted to reach through the phone and shake her, yell, *That’s not what being a parent is! Sometimes you have to do what’s right even if it’s not what your child wants!*

But, Bruce realized suddenly, he had no right to tell Talia, who raised this boy for twelve years, how to go be a mother, not anymore so than Talia would have the right to tell him how to parent Dick or Jason or Tim or Cass.

“He can’t stay here,” Bruce said instead.

“And why not? You don’t have enough room?”

“He just can’t, Talia.”

“Please don’t tell me Richard is still living at home. Shouldn’t he be forty by now?”

“Dick’s twenty-six and, no, he doesn’t live here anymore. It’s not about that. I just have a lot on my plate right now and I can’t take this on too.”
“Yes, I imagine it’s trying being a rich white man in America.”

“Talia —,”

“Whether you like it or not, you’re his father —,”

“For god’s sake, I am not his father!” Bruce nearly yelled. “I don’t care how much DNA we share, we may as well be strangers to each other!”

Someone cleared his throat and Bruce was filled with a horrible dread. He knew, before he even spun around, he knew that he would see Damian in the doorway, his own mother’s eyes peering up at him in the kind of betrayal that comes from broken trust when you didn’t intend to trust someone in the first place. Meeting his eyes felt like trying to look at the sun. It burned, but he tried anyway.

“Damian was growing impatient,” Dick said, voice light and controlled. He spoke with his patented Dick Grayson charm, reserved for hotheaded socialites and celebrities who were not famous enough to be divas but managed it anyway. And now for Bruce. “He was gonna barge in here with me or without me.”

“Damian —,” Bruce began. He was almost glad when Damian cut him off because he didn’t have an end for that sentence in mind.

“I understand when I’m not wanted,” Damian spat, his every syllable acidic. “I apologize for the inconvenience.”

He rushed away. Bruce took a step forward, but Dick blocked his path.

“I’ll handle this. I think you’ve done enough.”

Bruce watched Dick leave and for a long moment, he was left alone in his office. He raised his phone back to his ear.

“I know you heard all of that,” he said into the receiver. “So let’s skip the bullshit.”

“Bruce,” Talia said, and her voice was not soft or gentle, but the emotion behind it surprised him all the same. “You are his father. And you are, indeed, a stranger to him, and he even more so to you. The only difference is you may stop being a stranger, but you can never stop being his father.”

“The only family I’ve had since I was eight has been one of my own choosing,” Bruce admitted. It was a strange confession to an ex-lover, but their relationship had always been strange.

Talia scoffed. There was no real malice behind it, and it was that, more than anything, that transported Bruce back to that hotel room, where the air was dry and the filtered sun warm and he could get completely lost in brown skin and hair and eyes.

“That is such an — American ideal,” she said. “This idea that you can choose your family. If you don’t like the people nature has given you, just drop them and find your own! That’s naive and, frankly, impossible. Good or bad, dead or alive, your family will always be your family. Blood is thick, as they say.”

“If you really believe that, why didn’t you tell me about Damian? Be honest.”

She was quiet for so long, he stopped expecting an answer. But then she said, “Perhaps I was afraid.”
She didn’t elaborate. Bruce wanted to ask what Talia al Ghul could possibly be afraid of, but he suspected her capacity for sharing her emotions had reached its limits. And, anyway, maybe she didn’t need to elaborate. Maybe he was afraid as well. Maybe fear was all anything ever came down to.

_Fear and love_, he corrected because he wouldn’t be here if Talia didn’t love Damian with all her heart, even if she had a strange way of showing it, and if some part of Bruce hadn’t loved Talia all those years ago.

“How long will he stay?” Bruce asked.

“As long as he wants.”

“He can’t stay forever.”

“He won’t. I am his mother, after all. He will come back to me.”

_He’s twelve_, Bruce wanted to say. _Twelve-year-olds are not meant to be totally in control of their own lives._

“He can stay for a few weeks,” he decided. “It’s been a while since I’ve raised a preteen. I don’t have the means anymore, and I can’t ask Alfred to take care of him or — or Dick to just give up his twenties.”

“You did. For him.”

That was different. Every moment between Bruce’s parents getting shot and Dick’s parents falling to their deaths was a waste. There were days when he was happy, sure, but stringing them together was like holding water with an open hand. Dick gave Bruce his life back. Being a single father to a young, traumatized boy at twenty-five was a far better alternative to whoever he might have become otherwise.

“He can stay,” Bruce repeated.

Talia did not thank him. He was glad. He wasn’t sure how much change he could take in one day.

“I’ll be talking to you soon then, I suspect,” Talia said. “I confess I have not missed you, Bruce Wayne. But we fit well together back then. Maybe we still do, as partners, if nothing else.”

Talia al Ghul and Bruce Wayne, partners. Parents. He couldn’t have imagined that when they first met, and he could barely imagine it now. But things had changed and he knew that even if he could never be the father he should have been to Damian when he was born, Talia was right in one respect: he was Damian’s father _now_, and he owed it to the kid after twelve years of absence to give it a shot. For a little while.

“I’ll have Damian call you tonight,” Bruce said. “Take care, Talia.”

She had already hung up.

Damian was _trying_ to meditate. But it was too damn cold.

With shaking hands, he zipped his jacket up to his chin. It still wasn’t enough. The cold was in his
bones, shaking his whole body. He shouldn’t have come back outside, he knew, but he couldn’t bear to be in that house any longer. He couldn’t bear to sift back through the throngs of rich, white people either, so instead he found a backdoor that led to the yard, which was just as expansive and beautiful as everything else about this place: trimmed emerald grass, and blooming ruby roses, and brick paths, and a fountain depicting some Greek god at the center of it all. Damian enjoyed the trickle and whoosh of running water, something he didn’t hear much of in the desert. He sat on the icy stone and closed his eyes and listened. He didn’t know how the fountain hadn’t frozen over yet, it was so cold.

I am not his father.

Damian gave up on the zipper, and shoved his hands back into his pockets. Clearly, he should have anticipated that February in New Jersey would be quite different than February in Nevada. People who preferred the cold to the heat had never experienced the cold in nothing but a light sweat jacket and jeans.

We may as well be strangers to each other.

Damian’s eyes flew open and he huffed a breath. He watched his own exhale materialize in the air before him.

This shouldn’t bother him so much. He very well knew that rejection was a possible outcome of seeking out his father. He supposed that, due to Bruce Wayne’s houseful of strays with no biological link to him, he simply miscalculated the odds.

Whatever. He was glad. His mother always told him they were better off alone, and he never listened.

Footsteps. His heart lurched against his will but it was just Grayson, arms laden with wool blankets and two steaming mugs. As he approached, he held out his arms to Damian and Damian realized he was expected to take one of the blankets.

“I don’t need your charity,” he said.

Grayson huffed an annoying laugh. “Oh, come on. Have you seen this house? A blanket and some hot chocolate is hardly charity.”

“If you’re not cold, then neither am I.”

“I’m just more used to this weather,” said Grayson. “Nothing to be ashamed of.”

Damian rolled his eyes because they were the only part of his body that still felt functional. Grayson set down the cups on the stone and then leaned forward to wrap a blanket around Damian’s shoulders.

“I’m fine,” Damian spat, but he found himself gripping the blanket closer to his body. Grayson smiled. God, he couldn’t wait to get out of here.

Grayson held out a mug of hot chocolate and Damian didn’t want to take it, but . . . well. He’d come this far. He grabbed it and gulped it down. The scorch in his throat felt like home.

They sat there in the quiet for a long time, with only the fountain as background noise. Even the bustle within the manor couldn’t be heard from out here. Damian finally felt like he could relax.

“Bruce’ll come around,” Grayson said out of nowhere.
I am not his father.

“I doubt it,” said Damian. “He seemed very adamant. But that’s fine.”

“I’ve known Bruce a long time. He’ll come around. I promise. He always does.”

“Look, Grayson —,”

“Uh, call me Dick.”

Damian cast him a dark, sidelong glance. “I am not calling you Dick.”


Damian blinked at him.

“ ‘Training for the ballet, Potter?’” he tried in a tragic attempt at a British accent.

“Yes, I’m aware of the reference,” said Damian, but he wasn’t really. He just knew Harry Potter was a popular children’s story. His mother didn’t see much use for it. “Anyway. It really doesn’t bother me. He’s got his family and I’ve got mine, and it was incredibly stupid and naive of me to think that we needed to meet. I will leave soon, I just wanted to meditate for a moment.”

Meaning you should leave, he thought.

But Grayson just continued to sit there and a small, traitorous part of Damian was grateful. The blanket and hot chocolate were helping, but Grayson’s presence seemed to warm him up the most. Heat radiated off his peacoat and dark jeans and bright blue socks just visible between his shoes and rolled up cuffs. He was like a human sun.

Damian imagined a life where Bruce Wayne knew he had a son and helped raise him. He imagined that instead of his mother and grandfather and aunt and the desert, he had Richard Grayson and the cold. He wondered if he would be different.

He needed to stop thinking like that. It didn’t matter at all.

“You know, when Bruce first brought home Jason, I didn’t want him to stay. I hoped he wouldn’t.”

Damian gave his best Did I ask? face but Grayson was staring out past the green and to the mansion, and his scorn was wasted.

“I tried to be nice to him, but, god, he made it so hard. He was a few years younger than me, and I’d never really been around kids before, you know? When I was in the circus, it was all grown-ups and then I moved in with Bruce and Alfred — and it doesn’t get much more grown-up than them, let me tell you. I had friends at school, I guess, but that was different. And then there was this foul-mouthed kid around all the time who had been through just as much rotten stuff as Bruce and me — maybe even more, because at least we had, you know, a home — and I didn’t know how to handle him.”

Damian scuffed his shoe on the brick path. “And what now?”

“Now, he’s my brother. I love him.” He gave a staccato laugh, too bitter for such a warm person. “I always loved him.”

“So what’s your point?” Damian huffed. This sounded like a nice story, but it didn’t feel like one. It felt sad. Damian hated sad.
Dick glanced at him, and the wryness fell away. “My point is that maybe Bruce needs to get used to the idea of you, but he’ll come through. That’s what family does.”

“If you truly believe that, you’re the naive one. You can only count on yourself.”

Grayson was silent, and when Damian looked up at him, he found his eyes already staring back. There was something like pity in them and Damian hated it, but he couldn’t look away.

“That’s a sad way to live, little man,” Grayson said.

Damian shrugged. It was the only to live, as far as he knew, but there was something about Grayson. He was about the age that his father would have been when he was born and he had similar blue eyes but darker skin and a leaner body. He looked more related to Damian than Bruce did. It made him uncomfortable.

And then there was the way he smiled easier than anyone Damian had ever known.

“Dick!”

Damian jumped. A boy was rushing towards them from the mansion, his hair windswept and cheeks flushed. Grayson stood up immediately to go meet him, without even a glance back at Damian.

“You bought the candles, right?” the boy asked. He wasn’t even wearing a jacket over his red button-down, but he didn’t look the slightest bit cold. It made Damian furious. “Alfred’s looking for them.”

His eyes drifted past Grayson to Damian, and heat curdled down Damian’s spine when he saw that his eyes were blue as well.

“Who’s this?” he asked, his voice professional and curious, like he was inquiring about his business partner’s dog. Damian clenched his fists and before he made the conscious decision, he was speaking.

“I’m Damian Wayne. Bruce’s real son. Just so you know. And you’re the adopted one, I take it?”

The boy blinked. “Um. Whoa. I mean, we’re all adopted. Well I’m the only one legally adopted, but — you’re Bruce’s — um. Okay.”

Grayson was frowning and that just made Damian angrier.

“Damian, this is Tim.”

“Right. Drake. I remember.”

Tim was frowning now too. Finally.

“It’s Wayne now,” he said.

“Sure,” Damian sneered.

“I put the bag with the candles in my room,” Grayson told Drake. “Do you need me to go —?”

“No, I’ll find it.” Drake cast Damian another bemused look and retreated to the manor.

Grayson sat back down and Damian pointedly did not acknowledge him, but he could feel Grayson’s thoughts like a tangible presence. He tapped his fingers along his leg until it became too
If you have something to say, then say it,” Damian snapped.

Grayson turned on him. “What the hell was that?”

Damian refused to break eye-contact, even as a flush worked its way up his neck.

“If you’re going to be staying here,” Grayson continued, “you can’t just —,”

“I’m not going to be staying. So you needn’t worry.”

Grayson snorted. “I ‘needn’t.’ Of course.”

Damian scowled. So he had good grammar. Whatever. Screw Grayson and screw Tim Drake and screw everyone in this city.

A hand was hesitantly set on Damian’s shoulder. He stiffened, but didn’t push it off. No one besides his mother touched him very much. It was strange.

“I wish that Bruce had told me to stop being such a spoiled brat when I was sixteen,” Grayson confessed. “And to treat my brother with respect. But he can be pretty hands-off. So . . . this is me telling you.”

Damian turned and glared at him. It was difficult to glare at Grayson, who seemed to annoy him less than the average human being, but Damian had a lot of practice.

“Tim Drake is not my brother,” he growled.

“Tim Wayne,” Grayson sang. “He’s Bruce’s kid in all the ways that matter and apparently so are you.”

Damian was completely horrified by that reasoning and it must have showed because Grayson burst out laughing. Damian bristled, and that must have showed too.

“Relax, kid,” Grayson said. “I’m just teasing you.”

Teasing. Huh. This man really was weird.

Grayson squeezed Damian’s shoulder and then he was pulling him into a standing position.

“Enough heavy stuff, okay? We need cake.”

“I do not need cake,” said Damian. He wasn’t allowed to have many sweets and he wasn’t going to start now just because the people of Gotham had no standards. “I need to meditate.”

“No, no more meditating.” Grayson led him by the shoulders down the path to the manor. “Cake time. Let’s go be twelve.”

“Both of us?” Damian was almost amused.

“Um, yes. When I was twelve, I was touring in the circus and then — well, there weren’t a lot of opportunities for cake. I gotta make up for lost time.”

Damian let Grayson push him along and he wondered, if on the off chance he did stay with these people, whether he would ever manage to understand them.
Bruce couldn’t quite bring himself to enjoy the rest of the party. He shook hands with more socialites and talked with old friends and blew out flickering candles in a single breath to loud cheers, but the whole time, he kept his eyes on Damian. For once, Dick kept to the outskirts of the crowd, and Damian stayed close to his side. Bruce saw Damian be introduced to Steph, Cass, and Babs. He saw Tim and Jason watching, but keeping their distance. Bruce wondered what tale Dick had decided to spin.

Bruce got the sense that Damian was watching him too, but he could never catch his eye.

It was past midnight when Dinah and Ollie finally emerged from one of the Wayne manor guest rooms (which he needed to remember to hire specialists to do a complete detox of) and left for a hotel somewhere. Bruce was too old for parties that lasted this long and he suspected Oliver was too, but only one of them was willing to admit it.

Dick, Steph, Babs, and Selina were staying the night. Jason hadn’t asked, but he was still around. It had been a long time since Jason spent a night in Wayne Manor and Bruce wasn’t about to discourage him.

Bruce never got a chance to talk to Damian privately again before he was curled up on a sofa, tiny body hunched in itself, protecting him from the cold even in sleep.

“So?” Jason asked, lounging in a love seat and sipping a beer. “Who’s Boy Wonder’s mini-me?”

There was a stillness in the room. No one wanted to appear to be listening, but of course they all were. Steph, Tim, and Cass tangled their legs together on the rug by the dying embers of the fireplace. Barbara typed away on her laptop. Dick entered with blankets and pillows in his arms. Alfred dusted a shelf that was perfectly spotless. Selina curled herself into Bruce’s side like the stray cats she always had a home for. No one stopped what they were doing, but their attention was entirely on Bruce.

“He’s my son,” Bruce said, and the words echoed like a pin dropping in an empty hall.

The only movement was Dick as he put a wool blanket over Damian’s body.

“Jesus,” Jason said at last. “I need a cigarette.” He settled for a swig of his beer.

“Is he going to be staying with you?” asked Barbara.

“For a time. His mother asked if he could.”

“You’re still in touch?” asked Selina, smirking a bit to show she was joking, but he knew she was curious too.

“We are now,” Bruce said. “Listen. I want you all to know . . . I didn’t plan this.”

“Thanks for telling us,” called Tim from the floor. “We totally thought you planned to have an illegitimate kid show up on your doorstep twelve years later.”

“I sure hope this doesn’t happen to me,” Stephanie said, reaching over to braid Tim’s hair.

“The dangers of unprotected sex,” Cass agreed wisely.
“He’s not so bad,” said Dick, expertly sliding a pillow beneath Damian’s head. He stepped back and turned his eyes on Bruce. “And I think it’s good that he’s here. Kids deserve to know their dad. If they have the chance.”

A memory flashed through Bruce’s mind, one of watching a young boy — about Damian’s age — watch his parents fall to their deaths, and then another of that boy telling him he didn’t want or need a new father. He thought of Tim and Barbara, whose parents were dead but accepted new ones anyway, and of Jason and Stephanie and Cass, whose fathers were all in prison.

He thought of his own father, and of Alfred and Ra’s al Ghul, and of his mother’s eyes in this new boy.

“Bruce is the only dad I need,” Cassandra said because she always believed in him more than he deserved.

Jason hummed and chugged the rest of his beer getting up to toss it in the trash.

“This has been fun,” he said, “but I’m gonna crash. Night.”

They murmured good nights as he went in the direction of his old bedroom. After that, everyone else started to drift off, Stephanie and Cass following Tim to his room to continue their sleepover, and Barbara probably going to the library. Dick put a hand to Damian’s head before leaving, to his room or to Barbara or to crash with Tim and Cass, Bruce couldn’t know. When they were all gone, Selina kissed Bruce gently — or as gently as Selina could kiss — and headed deeper into the manor, dropping clothes like breadcrumbs.

Alfred finally allowed himself to sit.

“Do you think I’m a bad father, Alfred?” Bruce asked.

“No, sir,” he said.

Bruce looked at him. He couldn’t imagine Alfred meant it, but he knew Alfred never lied.

“I don’t know what to do,” he confessed, voice quiet.

“This is new for you.”

“I’ve raised kids before.”

“Never one who already thought of you as his father. Never one who came looking for you.”

Bruce ran a hand through his hair, catching the remnants of gel from the morning. It was a nervous gesture he didn’t allow most people to see, but Alfred wasn’t most people.

“I let myself forget, sometimes, that I was never Dick’s father. It’s stupid of me. He told me he didn’t want that, and I still . . .”

“If I may, sir,” Alfred said and Bruce nodded, encouraging. “I don’t believe Master Richard was renouncing you as a father. Rather, I wonder if he was merely questioning why you might deny young Damian the chance, perhaps, to not suffer the same pain he went through. The same pain you went through.”

Bruce watched the relaxed planes of Damian’s face. He respected Talia, and her family to an extent, but he thought a life with them would have taken its toll eventually, and he was a grown man. He
could only imagine what that life would do to a little boy. There was a reason he never told his kids about his adventures with Talia and Ra’s beyond the vague anecdote.

“What did I do to deserve you?” Bruce asked because it was late and he was tired and it was all he could think to say.

“Very little, I assure you,” Alfred said, his eyes twinkling. “But watching you grow into a fine man has been its own reward. There was a time when I feared I would not see it.”

Bruce’s eyes darted to Alfred’s and away again, not willing to commit to a single home. This . . . wasn’t something they talked about. It wasn’t something he talked about to anyone, except Dr. Quinzel and Selina in their rare moments of complete openness. Reporters knew better than to try their luck at this point. He never asked Alfred, in the sixteen or so years since the incident, how it made him feel. He didn’t think he wanted to know, or that he was ready.

Maybe it was time to change that.

“I put you through hell, huh?” Bruce surmised, forcing himself to meet Alfred’s steady gaze.

“I cannot begin to describe how it felt to hear what you had nearly done from reporters attempting to contact me for a statement. I imagine ‘hell’ is rather understated.”

Bruce dropped his gaze to his own hands, wrapping his fingers together, studying the veins of his own body, the blood pumping within them, nearly purple in the dim light.

“I’m sorry.” It was a hushed confession, barely more than a breath. “It was never about — I knew how much you loved me, I did. I just felt like — like I didn’t have any purpose, like I wasn’t contributing anything valuable to the world. I should have talked to you about what I was going through, I just — I never intended to hurt you.”

“I am sorry I didn’t notice you were suffering so deeply.”

“Alfred, that wasn’t your —,”

“No.” Alfred’s watery eyes were like steel. “I was your guardian. It was my job to know. I failed you.”

Bruce reached across the distance between them to grasp Alfred’s hand. It was old and gnarled and Bruce’s hand was so much bigger than it used to be, but it felt like he was a young again, woken from one of his nightmares by his butler. Alfred would hold his small hand until he pretended to fall asleep, and even then, he wouldn’t leave.

Damian whimpered, and Bruce jumped up to check on him.

Alfred chuckled.

“Something to say?” Bruce asked.

“Not a thing,” said Alfred.

Bruce carefully gathered Damian into his arms. The boy was too old for this, probably, but not too tall. He murmured and draped his own arms around Bruce’s neck, burying his face his shoulder.

“Habit,” Bruce told Alfred as he passed him on his way to a guest bedroom.

“Of course,” Alfred agreed without so much as a twitch of his lips.
Bruce had a great deal of experience with troubled youth, but there was something about Damian that seemed to stump him. He couldn’t make him fit with the rest of the manor, and Bruce suspected he wasn’t trying very hard. Perhaps it was because he still had a family out there or because Bruce couldn’t measure up to the father he had built in his head. Or maybe it was due to his generally bad attitude. Dick was the only person whose company he seemed to genuinely enjoy, but even then, he was . . . grating. For the most part, he ignored Cass, Jason, and Barbara. He ordered around Alfred like he was his personal attendant. He hated Tim and because Stephanie and Tim were a package deal, he hated Steph, too. Bruce was the only person he couldn’t seem to make up his mind about: one minute, he was the only one he could tolerate, the next he couldn’t stand at look at him, and the next he was outright vile.

Bruce supposed he deserved it.

Still, Damian was spoiled. Dick was the only one who managed to get anything resembling manners out of him, but Bruce also got the feeling that Dick thought it was hilarious when Damian was rude, so the manners never did become a common occurrence.

And Bruce just . . . didn’t know what to do with him. He behaved less like a child than Tim had when he was fifteen, or Cass when she would go into that scary, drone like state as she worked through her parents’ conditioning, or Steph when she started having contractions in the Wayne Manor library while Barbara tutored her in statistics. He was nothing Bruce knew how to handle, and too familiar for him to try anything new.

It was two and a half weeks after Damian moved in that Bruce overheard him in his study. They were both supposed to be asleep — Cass was, and Tim was at least in his room, though he probably wouldn’t fall asleep until an hour or so before his alarm — but after he had gotten ready for bed, Bruce remembered that he left his cellphone in his office. He went to retrieve it and stopped short at the muffled conversation sifting through the crack of the doors.

“I miss you,” Damian said. His voice was soft and younger than Bruce had ever heard it. “I know this is what I wanted . . . I know I snuck out, but . . . Mother, please. If you can’t come get me right now, then I’ll go to you. I am certain I can find a way.”

A long beat. Bruce wondered how Talia’s voice sounded when she spoke to their child.

“I miss you,” Damian said. His voice was soft and younger than Bruce had ever heard it. “I know this is what I wanted . . . I know I snuck out, but . . . Mother, please. If you can’t come get me right now, then I’ll go to you. I am certain I can find a way.”

A long beat. Bruce wondered how Talia’s voice sounded when she spoke to their child.

“I’ve given it long enough. I think everyone would be much happier if I left as soon as possible . . . Okay. Yes. I understand. Goodbye. I love you as well.”

There was sniffle and a soft huff of, “Idiot.”

Bruce darted around the corner just as Damian threw open the doors. He listened to his footsteps grow quieter as he padded in the opposite direction.

Bruce snuck back into his office and found his cellphone beside his computer, where he had left it. His lock screen was a generic blue but after putting in the passcode, the phone background morphed into a photo. Babs had taken sometime before last Christmas, and it was a bit blurry from movement and dim from an evening illuminated only by the lights on the tree. Tim’s head was thrown back in laughter, and he clutched his sides. Cass, the spider monkey, was wrapped around Dick’s back as he stood on his tip toes to place an ornament. Jason’s hand covered half his face, but the ghost of a smile and a crinkled eye were just visible. Alfred looked as close to panic as he could get, reaching out to
Dick and Cass, and Bruce’s eyes were heavenward in a prayer for strength. Just out of the frame, he was sure Selina was sipping a glass of eggnog with a bit too much brandy mixed in, and Steph was rolling in laughter on a couch, and maybe Clark and Lois had stopped by and were vowing to never have kids, and maybe Jim was in the kitchen stealing cookies.

Bruce couldn’t remember the moment, but every time he looked at it, he felt like . . . like no matter where they all were, they were with him, too. When Tim drowned in his secrets, when Cass warred with her own body, when Jason went weeks without calling, when Bruce couldn’t be the person Dick wanted him to be . . . they were also this. This joy, this love, this family.

Damian didn’t have that. He couldn’t, not with the al Ghuls. And he believed he couldn’t with the Waynes. Everyone who stayed in this house had found acceptance in some capacity and Damian just wanted to leave. But if the phone meant what Bruce thought it meant, there wasn’t anyone coming to get him.

Bruce pocketed his phone and made up his mind.

The next morning, Bruce asked Damian over breakfast, “Why don’t we go out today?”

Damian continued meticulously cutting his pancakes like they were a rare steak. After a moment of silence, he looked up.

“Are you speaking to me?” he asked.

Bruce forced his expression to remain open.

“You haven’t really left the manor yet. We’ll go to some of my favorite spots in Gotham, get you acquainted with the city.”

“I hardly think I’ll be allowed in a brothel.”

Bruce ignored him. “What do you say? Just you and me?”

Damian squinted, like he was suddenly near-sighted and couldn’t make out Bruce’s features across the table.

“You and me?” he repeated.

“Yup. Dick’s on duty, Tim and Cass are at school. Jason is . . . Jason. It’ll be just the two of us.”

Damian set down his fork and squinted a bit more. When Bruce thought he would definitely refuse, he nodded once and left the table without putting his dishes in the sink. Bruce exhaled and did it for him.

Bruce’s chest fluttered with nerves as they walked down the Gotham sidewalk. He glanced at the dark head bobbing up and down at his elbow, and found it oddly nostalgic. Damian was incredibly different than Dick had been at this age, cool and reserved, while Dick was a circus kid with undiagnosed ADHD. But twelve was still twelve and Bruce noticed the way Damian’s eyes tracked
every dog they passed, the way he naturally gravitated towards the snack vendors, the slight twitch of his lips when an old woman hit an obnoxious teen boy with her purse.

It had been too long since Bruce allowed himself to just be in his city without trying to keep up some sort of public image. He breathed in the smoke and the pretzels and the humanity hanging in the air. God, it was a beautiful day.

They stopped at a small shop with frosty blue trim nestled in between skyscrapers.

“Really?” Damian asked, reading the sign. “Mr. Freeze’s Frozen Treats?”

“You’ll be singing a different tune when you have one of Mr. Freeze’s famous banana splits,” Bruce promised.

Damian sneered, but he could hardly believe it when Bruce ordered him the banana split and a strawberry milkshake.

“Mother would never approve,” Damian said, eyes darting between the treats.

Bruce raised his eyebrow over his own hot fudge sundae. “I won’t tell her.”

Bruce thought Damian nearly smiled.

As they finished, Damian asked, “What juvenile detour did you plan next?”

It wasn’t quite a win, but it wasn’t a rejection either.

“Let’s find out,” Bruce said.

They made it a couple of blocks over when Bruce stopped outside a shop with huge glass windows and a freshly painted sign with emerald cursive that read, The Poison Ivy.

“A flower shop,” Damian said. “Because I am a six-year-old girl.”

“Dick loved this place when he was younger,” Bruce said, trying not to sound self-conscious. He loved it, too.

Damian was still dubious, but he followed him inside.

The Poison Ivy was very green, and very alive. Thick vines hung from the ceiling and twirled around the walls and colorful flowers dotted every shelf. It was like someone had sliced a piece of the rainforest and placed it in perfect condition on a street corner of Gotham.

Pamela lounged behind the cash register and Dr. Harleen Quinzel was plopped on the counter.

“Brucie!” Dr. Quinzel cried, bouncing up to hug him. “Long time no see!”

“It’s only been a month,” Bruce said, carefully extricating himself from her.

“Aw, hon, I remember when ya used to be in my office three times a week.” She pinched his cheek like he was a child. Bruce had asked about her age once when he first entered her office and saw a woman with elaborate eye makeup who barely looked old enough to be out of high school. She smacked him on the arm and told him that it was rude to ask a woman such delicate questions, but he gathered over the years that they were in the same peer group. It was difficult for him to get over himself when he was young and angry, to open up to this bright-eyed girl, but he was glad he did.
“That was when I first started my practice, huh?” she continued, as if reading his mind. “We were both just babies, but you were a rich, famous baby and could’ve had any therapist in town. Yet you chose the kid fresh out of a PhD —,”

“There was no choice,” Bruce interrupted, grasping her hand.

“Therapist?” Damian asked.

Dr. Quinzel looked down at Damian’s confused scowl. Her whole face seemed to glow and Bruce knew he was in for a world of trouble.

“Little Bruce!” she screeched. Then stopped. “Wait, does me knowin’ who you are violate our confidentiality clause?” She looked back at Pamela, who just shrugged. “Uh . . . who are you, small child?”

“What does she mean, therapist?” Damian asked, shifting glares between Bruce and Dr. Quinzel.

“Dr. Quinzel is my therapist,” Bruce explained. “She has been since my twenties.”

Damian was still frowning, and beneath the anger, Bruce thought he saw a hint of betrayal. “What do you need a therapist for?”

“Lots of things,” Bruce said. “Sometimes big, sometimes small. Dr. Quinzel helps me work through anything that’s causing me anxiety, or she just lets me blow off steam so I don’t bottle up all my feelings.” Bruce recognized the scorn in Damian’s eyes. He was used to it. He had been secretive about his therapy when he first started, but now he was much too old to think it was anything shameful.

Harley patted Bruce’s hair, and he shot her a look. “A part of me wants ya to call me Harley when we’re off duty.” She flicked his nose. “But a bigger part of me really likes Dr. Quinzel.”

“Can I help you, Bruce?” Pamela asked, every bit as bored as Dr. Quinzel was enthused. “Or did you just come to chat with my girlfriend?”

Bruce moved farther into the store. “So it’s on again?”

“As of last night,” said Dr. Quinzel with a wink.

Selina had met Dr. Quinzel a couple years back when he took her to The Poison Ivy before a date. They had immediately clicked, and the pair still went for brunch-slash-shopping-days with Pamela every now and then. Bruce always found it strange, but now he realized their friendship probably had something to do with their inabilities to judge what was and wasn’t appropriate to say around kids.

Dick and Barbara and Steph combined never advanced Cass’ vocabulary quite as much as the day she met those three.

“I’m looking for something for Damian here,” Bruce said.

Damian just glowered as Pam gave him a once over. She stood up and Bruce felt a sudden, ridiculous urge to cover Damian’s eyes when he spotted the low neckline and high hemline of her green dress. He was fairly certain she would punch him if he did.

Pamela ran her hands along the leaves of her shelves like a musician stroking a piano’s keys. She stopped at a wall of strange, alien-like plants. She climbed up a step stool to retrieve a small plant in a
red pot, and brought it over to them.

“What is it?” Damian asked. It had red stalks with bunches of white bulbs that were dotted with black. It made Bruce uneasy, like it was staring back at him.

“Actaea pachypoda,” Pam said. “Doll’s eye. It’s a fruit, but don’t eat it. You’ll die.”

Damian’s mouth fell open a bit. He reached out a hand and stopped just short of touching the bulb.

“Who knows,” Dr. Quinzel said, “if you can take care of this bad boy, maybe your ol’ man’ll let you get a dog!”

Bruce looked at Damian, who looked at him with eyes lit like Gotham at night, and he thought, Oh boy.

They ended the day with pizza. Damian was trying really hard to not talk about dogs, and he was failing.

“We always moved around too much for Mother to consider animal adoption. We lived on a farm once, and I would milk the cows. There was this one cow, her name was Betsey, which I hated because it was horribly cliche, but it wasn’t like I could just change her name, so I, um . . .”

He trailed off, noticing that Bruce hadn’t touched his pizza in a few minutes. There was a flush to his cheeks, leftover excitement or embarrassment at being caught rambling. Bruce realized he’d been staring and tried to speak, but his only thought was that in this moment, Damian looked so much like Talia did when she told him about her culture. Bruce remembered wondering if he could ever care about something so much, and he remembered remembering Dick at home and he thought, maybe.

Damian was still watching him, so Bruce said the first thing that came to mind: “Selina hates dogs.”

Damian’s shoulders slumped just a little. “Oh,” he said. He stared at the doll’s eye, which watched him from beside his Sprite.

“I guess she’ll have to get used to it though,” Bruce said and when Damian looked up again, it was like the sun has risen just for him.

It had taken some planning and some serious commitment that they wouldn’t put all the responsibility on Alfred, but a month later had Bruce at the local animal shelter with his kids. Even Dick had managed to get the morning off duty, which meant that journalists and paparazzi waited for them outside the shelter. Wherever Dick went, the cameras followed.

Either that or Selina had called and alerted the media to their presence out of spite. Come to think of it, Bruce probably shouldn’t have texted her, Wanna help me pick out my new best friend? <3. She had responded, no thanks and also fuck you, but he had known her long enough to realize nothing with her was ever so easy.

“Dick should have stayed at home,” Tim said. He chewed on his lip as he eyed the mob. He had a
thing about reporters, more so than anyone else, and Bruce suspected it had to do with the night his parents died. “No one cares about the rest of us.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jason and Cass said in unison. They high-fived.

Bruce fought off a smile. He was surprised Jason agreed to come, and didn’t want to scare him off with too much affection. Earlier that day, he had gone to ask Tim and Cass if they were ready to leave, and when he saw Jason reclined on Tim’s bed with a book and an apple, he asked if he might want to come along as well. Jason took a slow bite of his apple, and chewed it methodically as he used a bookmark to save his place. He swallowed, shrugged, and said, “I could dig some puppies.”

It wasn’t the conversation they were long overdue for, and it certainly wasn’t forgiveness. But it gave Bruce hope.

“Okay, game plan,” Dick said. “We walk really fast. I intercept any questions. Damian gets inside untouched.”

“I can protect myself,” Damian said, hands curling into fists as if ready for a demonstration.

“Maybe against ninjas, or whatever your family business is. Not Gotham paparazzi.”

Damian huffed and scowled when Cass quickly ruffled his hair.

Dick led the way up to the shelter. Bruce put a hand on Damian’s shoulder and steered him forward, the rest of his kids forming a barricade around them.

“Slow news day, guys?” Dick called as the reporters rushed to him, cameras flashing, like a wave of lightning. A man made the mistake of turning his lens on Jason, who flipped him off.

Helena Bertinelli helped them slip into the shelter. Bruce had met Helena before, even outside of Dick and Barbara, since he sometimes did business with her father. She looked entirely strange in her volunteer khakis and rolled down socks, dark curls pinned up and away from her face. But she still assessed them with a stern glance, hands on her hips.

“You’re giving this place a lot of publicity,” she said, and somehow made it sound like an insult. “We’re not usually the chosen shelter of the celebrity.”

Just then, Dick managed to push through the doors. He didn’t look too harried, but Helena locked the gates anyway.

“Thanks for doing this for us,” Dick nodded at her.

“Let’s just make this quick, okay? You’re cutting into business.”

Helena led them down long rows of kennels of yipping dogs and napping cats. Cass stared longingly at the kittens, which Bruce pretended not to notice. If she wanted a cat, she could move in with Selina.

“I picked out some puppies that might be a good fit,” Helena was saying. “They need their shots, but they’re easier to train and usually have less issues with trauma.”

No one but Bruce noticed when Damian broke off to slip down a side corridor. He slowed to the back as the group carried on and then, when they were far enough away, he went after Damian.

There was a kennel, bigger than the others they had seen, that Damian was examining at the end of
the hallway. A large brown dog was curled up inside, his head raised to regard Damian with intelligent eyes. The name card read: *Hi, I’m Titus!*

Bruce didn’t speak, just watched as Damian wrapped a hand around one of the bars of the kennel. The dog tilted his head forward the slightest bit to sniff his hand. He gave his fingers an experimental lick. Bruce saw the flash of giddy joy across Damian’s face before he carefully schooled his expression. In that moment, Bruce didn’t see Martha Wayne’s eyes or Talia’s passion, Dick’s youth or the al Ghul spirit. Maybe he saw a glimpse of himself, but more than that, he saw Damian, and for the first time, he knew he was his.

There were footsteps behind them. Helena was not pleased.

“I closed down the shelter for you, the least you could do is stay with —,”


Helena peered at the dog. “Titus is nearly full grown. If you like Great Danes, we have a couple of puppies —,”

“No, I want him.”

She frowned, unable to puzzle out this small person who had the nerve to go toe-to-toe with her. “He’s well-bred, but his old handler probably hit him in some way. He has an issue with hairbrushes and other objects near his face, so he’s not easy to take care of —,”

“We’ll take him,” Bruce said.

He expected Helena to be angry for interrupting her, but her features softened into something resembling respect. She nodded once and left to go get the paper work.

“What was the point of us even coming along,” Jason asked, “if you were just gonna let the kid pick?”

Bruce shrugged. “I wanted the company.”

Jason rolled his eyes, but Bruce knew he was fighting off a smile, and he had a feeling Jason knew he knew.

Despite her rough edges and threats to call the police, Helena gave them close to an hour to play with Titus in a closed off room. He was shy at first, but quickly warmed up to them. Jason said he was going to teach him to sniff out heroin and dead bodies, and Tim insisted Stephanie was going to totally freak out the next time she came over, and Cass mumbled about cats as she stroked the dog’s big head. But it was Damian who completely transformed, giggling as he rubbed Titus’ belly and Titus thanked him by licking his face.

Dick came up to Bruce’s shoulder.

“Good addition, isn’t he?” Dick asked, watching Damian hug the Great Dane.

“Yes,” Bruce agreed.

Bruce wasn’t sure who he meant, but it didn’t matter. He could have been talking about any of the people in this room, and Bruce’s answer would still be the same.
Epilogue: A Wedding

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your patience! Finals were rough, but I'm happy to get this out to you.

This is the first story over a couple thousand words that I've completed in five years. It means so much to me, and I'm so grateful for everyone who shared the experience with me. You all deserve the world.

come chat with me about batkids on tumblr

or take a look at my super secret self-indulgent fanfic pinterest that i made out of boredom

love you all dearly <3

It came as a surprise when the invitation for Kate Kane and Maggie Sawyer’s wedding arrived. Bruce knew they were engaged, but privately, he never thought they’d make it to an actual wedding. He thought he knew Kate in all the ways that mattered, and he thought he knew she couldn’t commit to one woman for the rest of her life. Not because she was an uncommitted person — she had joined the army, for Christ’s sake — but because Kate was like Bruce. Bruce loved Selina, they’d been together for years, but they never felt the need to put a name to what they were. Everything between them — the weight of Selina possibly, maybe, in some way being Bruce’s savior — seemed to be more than any certificate could signify. They kissed and they made love and they told each other their secrets, but not as often as they should, and Selina could disappear for weeks with only a goodbye text and Bruce could push her away without realizing he was doing so until he heard the slam of the door on her way out. They belonged to each other, and they didn’t. They completed each other, and they didn’t. They were more than the sacred institution of marriage could handle.

Bruce thought Kate’s relationships were the same, whether she was with Maggie or Renee or any of the girls she cycled through in her first year after the army. But there was the proof on the ivory stationary that he didn’t know everything about Kate Kane after all. Maybe she was less like him than he always assumed. Or maybe she used to be like him, but she wasn't anymore.

What came as less of a surprise was the handwritten note that fell out of the card. Kate’s messy, strangely elegant hand scrawled, Bruce — When I say Wayne family, I don’t mean all of Gotham. Please try to restrain yourself.

Bruce rolled his eyes. At least Kate still had a flare for the dramatic.

“Are Clark and Lois going?” Selina asked one night, words mumbled against his lips.

“Hmm?” Bruce’s hand ran down her back, catching on the hook of her bra. He tugged on it once before moving his hand back up to her neck.

“Bruce.”

When Bruce kept his hand firmly above her shoulders, Selina pushed away from him and reached
around to unhook her bra with a practiced hand. They needed to work on her patience.

“I was just asking, were Clark and Lois invited to Kate’s wedding? They’re friends with Maggie, right?”

Bruce raised an eyebrow when Selina tossed the bra across the room.

“Is now really the time for this conversation?”

Smirking, Selina pressed against his chest. He could feel every bit of her.

“It wouldn’t be the first time they came up,” she whispered, lips grazing his ear.

Bruce flipped them, so her back was pressed to the bed. Sparks glittered in her eyes. He was glad he surprised her, but she never let him be on top for long.

“Oh, I see.” She dragged a finger from his sternum to his lips. “Do you want to be Clark this time?”

Bruce leaned down to kiss her. “I regret this entire relationship.”

Selina grinned and said, “Good,” just as he caught her lips.

The next time Bruce and Clark met for lunch, he made sure to casually inquire about Clark's relationship with Maggie Sawyer.

“Oh, yeah, we worked together when she lived in Metropolis,” Clark said over his tomato soup and grilled cheese. “She actually invited us to her wedding. I take it we’ll see you there?”

“Selina wants to carpool,” Bruce said. “I think Pam has been giving her a hard time about her carbon footprint again.”

Clark laughed, the kind of laughter that belonged to someone who was unashamed of joy.

“I remember when Selina got rid of her snakeskin heels. I never thought I'd see the day, but that Pamela Isley works magic . . .”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “She took a vow of silence in mourning."

"Selina sure is something else." Clark’s smile lingered. “But don’t you have about twenty kids to carpool with?”

“They all insist on maintaining their independence. But even so, the more the merrier. We could take the limo.”

“I’m sure Kate and Maggie will love you showing up to their wedding in a limo. Will Selina wear white, too?”

“Selina doesn’t wear white.” Bruce smirked. “And I’m Bruce Wayne, they should expect it.”

It was Clark's turn to roll his eyes. “Dick’s been living on his own too long. I’m afraid I’m beginning to know what you were like in college.”

“Ha.” Bruce took a sip of his coffee, too cold now. He forced himself to swallow. “We would not have been friends when I was in college.”

Clark was quiet and Bruce looked up to see his big, shit-eating grin.
“Is that what we are?” Clark asked. “Friends?”

Bruce rubbed a hand over his face. “I am too old for this.”

“That’s not too old for friends, Bruce.”

“One more word and I promise I will never call you that again.”

“I mean, I just want you to know it’s reciprocated —.”

Bruce was glad his kids weren’t around because he wasn’t proud of the way he threw a potato chip across the table. For a journalist, Clark had very good reflexes. He caught it, plopped it in his mouth, and tried to chew with his uncontainable grin.

Bruce knew forty wasn’t that old, knew he still had a long life ahead of him, and yet some days he felt his age etched onto his bones. All he’d been through, all he’d seen. He was born into a world not meant for a child and the world kept proving it over and over until he was eight and sadder than he had the right to be. He felt ancient by the time he graduated from college and the two years he spent as a real adult seemed to drain his life from him before he even thought about finishing the job himself. There were days when he felt that old exhaustion creep into his body, days when getting out of bed was the most he could hope to accomplish, days when he heard Dick and Selina and Alfred — the three who had known him before — whispering in the other room, their fear palpable as they called Dr. Quinzel for help.

“I’ll be okay,” he wanted to tell them. “I’m not who I was. I’ll get through this.”

He hated those days, but he knew they were necessary. One thing he’d learned the long way was that recovery didn’t always happen in a year, or ten, or fifteen. It could take a lifetime, but time didn’t mean it wasn’t happening. The important part was that for all the days when existing was too much effort, there were even more moments like this: sitting in a Gotham sandwich shop with cold coffee and crispy potato chips, his closest friend’s smile brighter than the fluorescent lights above their heads. In these moments, Bruce thought he might be young forever.

It had been a long time since Haly’s Circus came to Gotham. Dick stood on his usual platform, high above the ground, a net stretching out beneath him. He told Mr. Haly that it wasn’t necessary, but Haly said it really wasn’t even legal to let Dick do this at all, so they were gonna put the damn net up. Dick’s fingers flexed around the trapeze. It had been a long time since he’d done this. He should be afraid, he knew. A normal person would be afraid.

Down on the ground, Mr. Haly and Barbara Gordon watched him. They were less of an audience than he was accustomed to, and he knew they wouldn’t think less of him if he let the trapeze swing from his fingers, and climbed back to the safety of the ground. But an audience was an audience, and Dick was a performer. He longed to give them what they came for.

He jumped — and flew.

It wasn’t the same without his parents there to catch him, and he was out of practice. But he knew this routine in his muscles, in his bones, in his soul, and he got in a good flip as he soared from one trapeze to the next. The air whipping through his hair was an addiction. He craved it. He pushed himself off the next platform and tried for a double flip. He barely caught the trapeze with one hand, nearly dislocating his shoulder. Even from up here, he could hear Barbara and Haly gasp and the
sound was like heroin injected straight into his bloodstream. He beamed at them and Babs shouted, “Stop being an idiot, Grayson!”

He let himself indulge in flying between the platforms a few more times before he finally stuck his landing. There was a blissful moment when the wind still roared in his ears and his mind was calm. He wondered if his ADHD didn’t manifest itself until he was twelve, or if this had always been his medication. When he lost it, his brain was sent into overdrive.

He looked across the tent’s expanse at the other platform. It seemed so much farther away when he was standing here, rather than soaring through the expanse. He pictured his mom and dad, smiles fixed in place, waving at the crowd. No one in the bleachers could see the sweat making rivulets through their stage makeup. No one could see the wink his father tossed in his direction, or the way his mother’s smile softened in pride when she watched him.

Dick blinked away his parents’ ghosts, and started the descent. He made a mental note to ask Babs if she would mind stopping at the manor before he dropped her off at her house. He really missed his dad.

Barbara and Mr. Haly were waiting for him.

“I swear, in all my years, I’ve never seen anything quite like the Flying Graysons,” Mr. Haly said. “Are you certain you don’t want to rejoin the tour?”

Dick grinned. “I’m a cop now, Mr. Haly. I’ve put my fanciful youth behind me.”

Babs snorted, and Dick flicked her on the ear.

“Well, if you ever change your mind . . .” Mr. Haly shook Dick’s hand. He showed them out of the tent. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Gordon. And, of course, to see you again, Richard. Your parents would have been so proud.”

There was a lump in Dick’s throat, but he didn’t try to swallow it. He let it exist.

Dick waved goodbye to Haly and to the circus, and he wheeled Barbara the rest of the way to his car. He opened the door for her, but he knew better than to try and help her in.

When they were on the road, driving away from Dick’s first home, he asked, “So? What’d you think?”

“I think you nearly gave me a heart attack,” said Babs.

“Sorry, I forgot what an old nag you are.”

“And I guess I forgot what an immature brat you are.”

He glanced at her. Her tangerine hair fell around her shoulders for once, and the streetlamps transformed her hair into fire and her skin into snow. Dick wasn’t sure if the sight of her was burning him or giving him frostbite. He looked away.

“Have you talked to Ted lately?” he asked, and cringed. Good work, Dick, bringing up the ex. Real smooth.

Barbara looked out the window. “We don’t talk much. I saw on Facebook that he’s living with Michael Carter now. They were always pretty close.”
“Do you think they’re . . . you know . . .?”

Barbara smirked, and said nothing. He wondered if she actually knew, or if she liked to pretend she knew. Dick didn’t know who Kory was dating. He was always curious about her and Jason, and her and Roy, but he knew she would never entertain cheating on him. Their breakup had nothing to do with jealousy, and he didn’t regret it. Still, when they inevitably ran into each other a few months after they officially called it quits, he couldn’t help asking, “Was it worth it?”

He hadn’t known what "it" he was referencing. Her friendship with Jason? Her refusal to tell Dick anything about his brother besides that he was alive? Barricading Dick from her house because she promised a boy she barely knew a safe space? Was that all worth losing Dick?

Kory had put her warm hand to his cheek, and he leaned into her gravity. She smiled when she said, “If I didn’t believe it was, would you have loved me at all?”

Dick smiled softly at the memory. That Kory was always much smarter than him.

“You should come with me to the wedding,” Dick blurted.

_Holy shit_, he thought. ADHD problems — sometimes words flew out of him mouth before he’d even fully formed them in his brain. He’d briefly considered the idea of asking Babs if she wanted to come with him when Bruce got the invitation, but he never thought he actually would. He and Babs were . . . well, they worked the way they were. Just because they were both single, and age appropriate, and seemed to have stability in their lives didn’t mean they had to go and change everything.

Except . . . Dick wondered if it would even be that big of a change. He couldn’t help feeling like they were always leading up to this.

Babs blinked. “Um, my dad is friends with Maggie. We’re invited.”

He thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel, and let the motion anchor him.

“You should come with me to the wedding,” Dick blurted.

This horrible conversation.

Babs blinked. “Um, my dad is friends with Maggie. We’re invited.”

He thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel, and let the motion anchor him.

“Of course. Sorry, I don’t know why I — sorry.”

“I guess we can still go together,” Barbara said slowly. She ran a hand through her long bangs. Everything was fire. “If you don’t want to ask, like, Wally or someone.”

Dick shook his head too quickly. “No, I — I mean, I just figured that maybe if we go together, Kate would let Jason invite Roy and Kory? The three them are kind of a package deal. Which is weird. They used to be my package deal.” He laughed, on the verge of hysterical.

Babs kindly ignored the fact that he hadn’t known she was invited to the wedding when he started this horrible conversation.

“Roy and Kory will always love you,” she said, tapping his denim-clad knee with a single finger. He burned. “Living with Jay doesn’t change that.”

“I know,” Dick said. He took a breath. “I knew that a long time ago. Sorry.”

Dick’s face felt hot and his hands were cold and his heart thudded against his rib cage. He didn’t know why his body was reacting like this. He had been friends with Babs for so long he could barely remember what it was like before they knew everything about each other, and she still had the ability to look at him with her too intelligent eyes and make him feel like a fifteen-year-old with a crush on the cool college girl.
But he wasn’t fifteen anymore. He was a grown man and a working police officer who’d had loving relationships and lived on his own and there were two things he was never afraid of: flying, and Barbara Gordon.

For the second time that night, he jumped.

“Will you go to the wedding with me?” he asked.

He felt her eyes on him as he kept his eyes on the road.

“Okay,” she said. And she went back to staring out the window, completely unaware of the wildfire or the avalanche that she had given permission to consume him. Unaware, or uncaring.

Well. Maybe he was a little afraid of Barbara Gordon.

They pulled into a side parking lot that was next to the restrooms and dumpsters. It was empty except for a lone woman in a wedding dress sitting on a curb. No one acknowledged her as they sat in the car, the silence comfortable and necessary.

Kory reached across the console and placed her hand on Jason’s shoulder. Her natural heat coursed through his body.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, slight accent soothing.

He covered her dark hand with his own. “I’m good.” Good as ever, he meant, but that was still good. She knew that better than most.

He glanced in the rearview mirror at Roy’s fast moving fingers, flying across the surface of his cellphone.

“Hey, old man,” Jason said. Roy barely glanced up. “Lian is fine. Jade’s her mom.”

“Jade would think of no greater act of love than teaching Lian how to shoplift,” Roy mumbled.

“She just says shit like that to rile you up.”

“Yeah? And how do you know, oh wise one?”

“Cause I do the same thing.”

Roy finally lifted his eyes. They grinned at each other.

“I specifically remember telling you to only bring one person,” Kate said when Jason, Roy, and Kory got out of the car. He was sure they were something to see: Jason with his brown leather jacket pulled over his dress shirt, Kory’s thick, fluorescent curls hanging to her waist, Roy’s shock of red hair and his hand-me-down suit. Then again, Kate was something to see herself. Her white dress had long, lace sleeves and scarlet rubies sewn into the bodice so she glittered in the sunlight. It was lovely and somehow strong. Leave it to Kate Kane to make a wedding dress badass.

“Roy and I together count as a full person,” Jason said. Roy gave him the finger. “Shouldn’t you be busy?”
“I needed some fresh air. Don’t tell Maggie.” She went to run a hand through her carefully styled hair and barely stopped herself.

Jason didn’t point out that the wedding itself was outdoors, and therefore, all the air was fresh. He figured she knew.

“The pavilion’s that way.” She waved her hand and Jason saw chairs set up across the expanse of green park leading to a quaint gazebo. It wasn’t that far, but Jason imagined the walk in a wedding dress and heels would be less than pleasant.

He nodded at Roy and Kory to go ahead, and they did, even though he was the one who invited them. He sat on the curb next to Kate. The summer sun beat down on him, so he pulled off his jacket before sweat ruined his shirt. He got a cigarette and a lighter from a pocket.

“Want a light?” he asked.

Kate eyed him before sighing and reaching for the cigarette. “Don’t tell Bruce.”

Jason snorted. “He thinks I’ve quit. I mean, I have. You know. Mostly.”

They sat there smoking. He figured that if she wanted to talk, she would. There was never any use in forcing conversation.

“I love Maggie,” Kate said, her voice thick with smoke.

Jason hummed.

“After the army, there was this year where I . . . lost track of all the women I’d been with. I mean, I’m all for free love and everything, but it got really bad. I was basically using sex as an antidepressant. And alcohol and drugs all other kinds of shit.” She blew out a trail of smoke. “I remember when I heard that Bruce tried to kill himself and I thought — how could he do that? But it’s not like what I was doing was any better. It was just a slower suicide.”

Jason lowered his cigarette from his mouth. It wasn’t like he hadn’t known that Bruce had gone through some rough shit in his twenties — he’d read his Wikipedia page — but it was the first time he’d heard anyone talk about it in the open. It made him consider Bruce differently, though he wasn’t sure how.

“I never thought I might be getting married someday,” Kate continued. “I love Maggie, I want to marry her, but I — I don’t know if I’m ready to let go of all the other bullshit.” She turned to face him, a wry smile twisting her lips, red as her hair, red as the rubies on her dress. “Any advice, kid?”

Jason shook the ash from his cigarette onto the pavement. He said the words as they came to him. “Every time I get rid of old bullshit, new bullshit finds me. So you gotta learn to live with it, I guess. Don’t let it ruin your life.”

_What a hypocrite_, he thought. But he heard a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Bruce’s therapist, saying, _Don’t be too hard on yourself, honey_. He’d done what he had to do survive. He wouldn’t regret that.

“Kate! Zatanna sent me to — oh, hey, Jay.”

Jason looked to the grass to see Dick Grayson jogging over. He stopped in front of them, his shadow casting them in shade. A ring of sun shone around his dark hair and skin like a halo, like he was some sort of fuckin’ angel.
“Zatanna sent me to find you,” Dick said to Kate. “She’s pissed, by the way. Why would you hire her as a wedding planner?”

“The girl works magic,” Kate said. “You should see her poker parties.”

“I have,” Dick said. “They’re dangerous.”

“I went to West Point.” She snuffed out the cigarette until it was a stain of lipstick and ash on the pavement. “Thanks for the light, Todd. And the advice.”

Jason nodded. He felt uncomfortable being praised in front of Dick. There was nothing he could do that Dick couldn’t do better and he was sure everyone here knew it.

Kate stood, dusted off her dress, and saluted them. “See you boys on the other side,” she said. She kicked off her heels to make the trek back to the pavilion.

“She could try to make marriage sound like a fun experience,” Dick said when Kate was far enough in the distance.

“She’s nervous.” Jason glanced at Dick, but he’d shifted and the sun was too bright. He looked down. “I don’t even know why she wants to get married. It’s heteronormative.”

“You’re talking about the woman who got kicked out of the army for being gay. I think marriage is probably a big deal.”

“Whatever. Marriage is overrated.”

Dick laughed and sat next to him. “You’re so anti-establishment.”

Jason’s lips twitched. It was odd, Richard Grayson is his slim black tux, bathed in the sunlight like he belonged to it, surrounded by litter and smoke and Jason Todd.

He had a sudden, unwanted memory of being a boy in the manor, with this same golden god teaching him remedial math. “I can’t do it,” he said and Dick looked at him and said, “You can do anything,” and Jason was from the streets, not a mansion, not even a circus, but it was impossible for Dick Grayson to look you in the eye and tell you he believed in you, and to not believe in yourself a little too.

And then there was steel and pain and maniacal laughter and this same golden god screaming his name.

Jason realized he was running his hand along the fissure of his ribs too late. Dick saw him.

“The first place he hit me,” Jason said. He didn’t know why he said it. “I can’t remember most of it, but I remember — that.”

Dick watched him. For a moment, Jason thought he might reach out and touch his ribs himself, run his long fingers along the imagined crack. He wasn’t sure how he would react, what he would do, if he did.

Instead, Dick said, “Let’s get drunk tonight.”

It was another olive branch in a long line of rejected olive branches. Jason couldn’t remember how they got here, when loving each other stopped being a good thing and every moment they were together started to feel like being held underwater. There was no way to go back and find the exact
moment all this began. He couldn’t change it — and he wasn’t even sure he would if he could. He’d done what he had to do to survive. He refused to regret that.

But maybe they weren’t as lost at sea he’d always thought. Maybe it wasn’t too late to become something good again.

A slow grin spread up Jason’s face, and he met his brother’s eyes.

“Dickiebird, you are speaking my language.”

“I can’t believe you’re here with Dick Grayon,” Jim Gordon huffed as he took his seat behind his daughter. “I can’t believe my own flesh and blood ditched me for Dick Grayson, of all people.”

Babs turned around in her chair. “Do you see this? This sitting directly in front of you thing? I’d hardly call it ditching you.”

“It’s the principle,” Jim said.

Barbara rolled her eyes and looked across the pavilion to where Dick was standing with Jason, Roy, Kory, and Donna Troy. They all appeared to be laughing, and no one was punching anyone. She would definitely ask him how that happened.

His eyes flitted across the pavilion to meet hers and he offered a bright, easy smile. She pointedly ignored the flutter in her stomach. He just — didn’t look sixteen anymore, that was all. Not that he looked bad when he was sixteen . . .

Perv, she scolded herself. She forced her eyes away until they settled on Tim and Cass and Damian goofing off down the aisle. Cass and Tim kept trying to give Damian wet willies and he had resorted to punching away their hands with more violence than was strictly necessary.

“Guys, chill,” Barbara called. “We’re in public.”

Tim and Cass giggled and Damian scowled as he slumped down in his seat. When they looked away, Barbara grinned at her dad.

“Nice,” Jim said in admiration.

“Learned from the best,” Barbara said. Her smile softened into something a bit sad. “Do you ever miss my dad? My other dad, I mean.”

“You talk about your other dad too loud, and you’ll spread rumors,” Jim joked. Barbara didn’t hold it against him. Neither of them enjoyed discussing the past.

Jim scratched his mustache. “It’s been a while, but . . . yeah. I miss him a lot. You?”

“Yeah,” Barbara admitted. “Me too. And Jim, jr.?”

James sighed and downcast his eyes. “And Jim, jr.”

“He’s up for parole, you know. We should go visit him.”

“I doubt he wants to see me.”
“Maybe he needs to.” Jim scoffed. “We’ll talk about it, okay?”

He rolled his eyes, but they were strangely bright. “Once you’ve made up your mind, is there anything I could do to change it?”

Barbara smiled. “Finally he gets it.”

Jim met her eyes. He seemed nervous, all of a sudden.

“I was gonna wait to give you this, but well . . . I’m scared that if I don’t do it now, I never will. Bruce and I — we’ve been talking. About you. We know you’re not happy here.”

“Dad —,”

“Maybe happy’s not the right word, maybe it’s — satisfied. I guilted you into sacrificing your dreams, and then the — the incident happened, so you had to sacrifice even more — and you don’t deserve to compromise, Babs. You’ve spent your whole life fighting and the world has torn you down time after time, and just this once, you deserve to have the world in your corner. So here.”

Jim thrust a business envelope at her. She took it carefully. As she ripped open the flap, she noticed the official Wayne Enterprises seal, almost too beautiful to break. She shook out the letter and began to read:

Dear Ms. Gordon,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been chosen as a recipient of the Wayne Scholarship. Due to your superb work ethic, outstanding academic record, and ability to overcome extreme obstacles, Wayne Enterprises is awarding you the chance to study the major of your choosing at the Gotham university of your choosing.

The Wayne Scholarship Foundation is committed to promoting education in Gotham for deserving scholars both within Gotham and without who might not otherwise have the opportunity to attend university. If you have any questions, please contact Lucian Fox or Bruce Wayne.

Barbara raised her eyes to meet her dad’s. The paper was shaking and she realized it was because her hands were shaking.

“Dad . . .”

“I know Gotham U has a pretty damn good forensics science program. But it’s your choice.”

Barbara saw Bruce standing at the end of the aisle. He was talking to the Kents and to Selina, but he was looking straight at her. Their eyes met and he lifted the corner of his mouth in a Bruce Wayne smile, and she lifted hers, and they looked away.

“Dad,” she said again. “Thank you. I don’t even know how to — thank you.”

Jim coughed into his fist. “It’s the least you deserve. I’m sorry it took me so long to see it.”

Just then, Zatanna walked to the front of the pavilion.

“Attention everyone! The wedding will be starting soon, so if you could please take your seats . . .”

No one moved. She sighed.

“HEY, ASSHOLES. SIT DOWN.”
The wedding guests tittered and moved to their chairs. Barbara was grateful for the opportunity to turn away from her dad — not because she wasn’t happy, but because she was afraid she would start bawling if she talked to him any longer.

Dick took the seat beside her. “Hey,” he whispered.

“Hey,” she whispered back. A piano recording began to play, whimsical somehow as the notes danced in the open park.

“You okay?” Dick asked.

Barbara didn’t trust herself to speak. She pretended not to hear him and watched the wedding party progress.

It may have been her heightened emotional state, but when Kate walked down the aisle, escorted by her father, Barbara had the absurd thought of: That will never be me.

When Maggie walked down the aisle, she had to close her eyes.

God, where was this coming from? She barely even thought about her disability most days and here she was, right after being told that the dream she’d nurtured since she was thirteen was actually a possibility, accompanied by a beautiful boy on a beautiful day, wanting to cry because she couldn’t walk. It wasn’t like marriage was anywhere in the near future. It wasn’t like she couldn’t get married, like Maggie and Kate would have grown up thinking.

But... it had never occurred to her. She thought she considered all the options. She thought about how she would never be a cop. She put her career as a politician on hold in order to acclimate to her new reality. She thought about how she would never drive again, and how difficult it was to get dressed each morning and to pee and to go anywhere in the world because the world didn’t care about people who weren’t what they should be. And she cried about it. And then she grit her teeth in a snarl or a smile and she adapted because she had no other choice, because that was the way her dad raised her.

She never thought about marriage.

There was a hand on her shoulder. She didn’t need to look to recognize her father’s calloused grip, firm and kind. She reached up and held on.

The brides were glowing, and so were their maids of honor. It was only Bette on Kate’s side, red dress striking against her golden hair. She was practically vibrating out of her skin, and her smile was nearly too wide for her face. Maggie’s daughter Jamie was on her side. Her short hair was prim and she watched her mother with love over her whole body.

The officiator began to speak with measured and gentle words. He spoke of Kate and Maggie’s union, of how beautiful it was that they were choosing to include both Jewish and Catholic traditions in their wedding, and hopefully they would continue to incorporate both their faiths into their lives.

He spoke of the impossibility of these two women standing before their friends, family, and God to consecrate their love, and yet how they had overcome every worldly obstacle to be here today.

Barbara interlaced her fingers with her father’s. She looked to her right, to Bruce sitting at the end of the aisle. He was stoic as always, but if you paid close enough attention, you could see the protective glance he cast Damian, the graze of his knuckles against Selina’s bare knee, the twitch of his lips when he locked eyes with Bette. Her gaze shift to Dick beside her, gazing at the ceremony with unabashed awe, so open, so unafraid of feeling.
She had never been one for faith, but she thought it was beautiful, too.

Everyone had to relocate to for about thirty minutes while Zatanna and her crew set up tables and a stage for the reception — proving that she really was something more than human. Naturally, Tim wound up at the jungle gym. Naturally, it wasn’t really his choice.

“But like . . . what’s he doing?” Steph asked. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, watching Conner hang upside down from the monkey bars. He was dressed a touch too casually for the event and his shirt slid down his body, revealing inhuman abs.

“Who cares,” laughed Cassie Sandsmark. Behind her, Kara wrinkled her nose. She continued to push her on the swing, albeit less enthusiastically.

“Tim!” Conner yelled. He had begun to do crunches, still hanging from the monkey bars. “Tim, come over here!”

All the girls looked at Tim. He blushed.

“It’s always the cute ones,” pouted Cassie.

“Didn’t you and Con literally date?” asked Kara. She was pushing Cassie with one hand now, and didn’t even seem to be breaking a sweat. The Kent family really freaked Tim out.

“Sure did,” Cassie said. “Hey, Tim, remember when we dated?”

Tim glanced at Steph, who was studiously picking a hangnail on her thumb.

“Yup,” Tim said.

“Is there anyone you haven’t dated?”

Kara said, “Me,” at the same time as Cass raised her hand from where she was attempting to ride the see-saw by herself.

“Neither of you are good examples. Cass, you’re his sister, and Kara, you’re gay.”

“I’ve dated guys before!” Kara pointed out. She watched Conner use the hem of his shirt to wipe sweat from his forehead. “Before I realized they’re all disgusting.”

“Am I being slut-shamed right now?” Tim asked. “Is that what’s happening?”

“You said it, not me,” said Cassie.

Conner was now repeating, “Tim Tim Tim” with every crunch. Tim rolled his eyes and turned to Steph.

“That dress is really pretty,” he said, lowering his voice. He meant it. The dress was purple, fun, flirty, and a bit rundown — just like Steph. He felt bad thinking of her as “rundown,” but he didn’t mean it in a negative way: the world had shoved a lot of crap at her, and sometimes it showed, but that was what made her so lovely.

She smiled. It lit up the galaxy. “Go talk to your boyfriend before he has an aneurysm. Hey, Cass,
let’s have a slide race!”

“When will you realize I am better than you at everything?” Cass asked, as she followed Steph to a pair of twin slides.

“Oh, maybe when it starts being true?”

Tim walked to Conner, who was still hanging upside down. His face was flushed from all the blood gathered there. Tim was sure his wasn’t much better.

“Does this make me Spider-man, and you Mary Jane?” Conner asked.

“I knew you liked those movies.” Tim tangled his hand in Conner’s mussed curls. “Nerd.”

Conner leaned forward until their lips were a hair width away and then — something grabbed Tim from behind. He reacted instinctively, spinning around to knee his attacker in the balls.

“Oh, shit,” Dick moaned. “Oh shit.”

Tim’s heart thudded, like it was a sledgehammer and his ribs were concrete. Breaths ripped themselves from his lungs without his control. He was vaguely aware of Conner flipping down to stand beside him. He reached out, and Tim stumbled away.

“Hey.” That was Jason. “Hey, bud, it’s just us.” A hand on his neck, forcing him to look into Jason Todd’s cool eyes. “It’s me. Breathe with me.” Tim did. Jason relaxed his grip. “We good?”

Tim nodded, still shaky. He began to notice that Steph and Cass had wandered over, and Kara and Cassie were watching him, and Conner looked ready to attack Dick himself.

“Sorry,” Tim mumbled.

“It’s totally fine.” With some effort, Dick let go of his crotch. “More than fine. No one’s getting past you, little man.”

They didn’t know it, but that was the point. The late-night self-defense lessons with Cass. The collection of newspaper clippings and Internet print-outs tracking the Joker’s previous crimes and his stint in prison. No one was ever getting past him again.

Jason and Dick had come to tell them the reception was ready, so they headed over. Cassie, Kara, and Conner went to sit with their families, and Tim, Steph, and Cass deposited themselves at the empty Wayne table Dick showed them.

Cass patted his shoulder before going to join Barbara and Bruce, who were chatting as they stood in line for refreshments.

“You sure you’re okay?” Steph asked.

“Absolutely.”

“You know . . . you know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

“Steph, I already talk to you about everything.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” She ran a hand through his hair. He didn’t mind. No matter how he combed it, it wouldn’t lie flat. “I love you, got it?”
He shifted his face to kiss her palm. “Got it.”

She left him alone then. He was glad. He needed to sit on his own in this crowd of people he loved and remind himself that he was here, he was alive, he was loved. No one was coming back for him. No one was coming back, period. All he had was this moment.

It wasn’t too long before Selina slipped into the seat next to him. She hoisted her long legs onto the pristine tablecloth, all light brown skin and muscled calves.

“You could take an eye out with those things,” he said, gesturing to her black stilettos. They must have been eight inches long.

She winked. “Your dad likes ‘em.”

Tim rolled his eyes. He would have to be an idiot to miss how much Bruce liked Selina’s wardrobe tonight. The only time he looked away from her legs was to tease Clark or keep Damian from setting something on fire.

“So where are the kids?” Selina asked. “Or does Cass have custody right now?”

Despite himself, Tim felt his mood lightening. “Please don’t call them that. How would you feel if I called Bruce your son?”

Selina smirked. “Well . . .”

“Oh my god, stop talking, I’m gonna throw up.”

But he was laughing and god, Selina Kyle worked wonders.

“Have you kissed Steph and Conner?” Selina asked. “That’s probably what Bruce would classify as an invasion of privacy. Whoops.”

“I have. But never at the same time. Not for Steph’s lack of trying . . .”

“Do you like kissing?”

Tim watched her passive, yet interested expression as she picked a piece of imaginary lint from her dress. For some reason, Selina was the only person he really felt comfortable discussing his sexuality with. He answered Cass’s questions and he joked about it with Steph and sometimes he even managed to swallow his anxiety to discuss his experience with Bruce, but with Selina — it just was. She had been so upfront with her own sexuality from the moment they met, and it didn’t matter to her who was or wasn’t having sex. She talked about it like she talked about the weather, but not in a way that made him feel insignificant. In a way that made him feel . . . normal.

“Sure,” he said, “sometimes. Kissing makes me feel — close to someone. Connected. I like that.”

“Hmm.” Selina pondered his answer. “I see what you’re saying. I guess I kinda like it too. If it doesn’t get in the way of the main event, that is.”

Tim snorted. On most people, an obsession with sex annoyed him to no end. But with Selina, it was kind of funny. She truly was a marvel unto herself.

Selina’s eyes tracked Diana Prince, all six feet of brawny, Amazonian beauty. “Tell your dad that if he doesn’t continue to buy me nice things and satisfy me sexually, I’m going to cheat on him. I miss girls.”
Tim didn’t understand Selina Kyle. He didn’t understand how someone could be so honest and so private at the same time. For him, it was either one or the other, no in betweens. Selina told people what she wanted them to know and she held onto her secrets and didn’t let them drown her. Tim didn’t know anything about Selina, but he knew everything he needed.

“I want to be you when I grow up,” Tim told her.

Selina smirked. “Naturally.”

Conner materialized out of the mass of bodies. His clothes were askew and sweat stained his hairline and he was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. A long time ago, Tim wouldn’t have been able to think of someone as beautiful without an existential crisis about what it meant that boys were beautiful and girls were beautiful and yet they weren’t beautiful the way he thought they were supposed to be beautiful. But this was okay.

He wondered what his parents would think if they knew him now. Would they be proud, disappointed, unsurprised? With a bit of effort, he pushed that thought away. There would be time to contemplate all of life’s unsolved mysteries. Now was for the moment.

“Dude,” Conner said, “they have mini-kosher hot dogs here. How sick is that?”

Well, Tim thought as he agreed that kosher hot dogs were totally sick, maybe the moment after this one.

Cassandra had never been to a wedding before. She cried when Kate and Maggie kissed. Stephanie insisted this was a perfectly normal reaction to weddings, but Cass could tell she still thought it was hilarious. Cass might have been nervous but she saw Kate’s father crying as well, and he didn’t look like the type of man to cry easy.

Cass really, really hoped so. She never used to be the type of girl to cry easy.

“Get it together,” she told her reflection. Her reflection stared back, red-eyed and uncaring. She splashed the sink water on her face. Now, her reflection was red-eyed and uncaring and wet.

She hated it. She hated seeing her mother’s eyes and the hard set of her father’s mouth. She hated that her own face didn’t even belong to her.

With a cry, she punched the mirror. It shattered.

Shit, she thought. Blood congealed on her knuckles and the fractures of mirror littering the floor sent the light from the dying bulb above her head in every direction.

She heard the wheelchair before Barbara appeared, but she didn’t move. There was no hiding this.

“Cass? Hey, they’re about to have their first dance — are you okay?” Cass heard Barbara’s sucked in breath when she saw the mirror. “Holy shit, what happened?”

The question was mostly for show because Barbara Gordon was far smarter than anyone she’d ever known. Barbara rolled forward and took Cass’s injured hand in hers. She ran a thumb over her knuckles and Cass winced. She hadn’t even known she could still feel pain.
“Cass . . .” Babs said.

“I didn’t mean to."

“I know."

Babs reached over for some paper towels and wet them with water. She began to wipe Cass’s knuckles clean, so gentle Cass wanted to cry all over again.

“We used to punch glass,” Cass said. The confession echoed amongst the empty stalls. “And walk on it, too. That was a punishment, but punching it was just to — to screw up our nerves. If you did it enough, it was supposed to stop hurting.”

Babs looked up at her. Cass could see her own reflection in the lenses of her glasses.

“Did it?”

Cass shrugged. “Pain stops being pain when its all you feel.”

Babs hummed. “Why did you want to hurt yourself?”

“I didn’t. It was just — instinct. I have good days, I swear. Not today though.” When her knuckles were clean of blood, Babs began to wrap paper towels around them in a makeshift bandage. “We weren’t allowed to cry. I always broke that rule.”

Barbara tied off the paper towels. “If that was the rule, we all would have been toast. Dick cries every time he watches The Lord of the Rings.”

Cass smiled. Barbara kissed her hand.

“Help me pick up some of the bigger pieces. Bruce’ll make a donation to the park for the damages or something.”

They worked together in silence. One of the best things about Barbara was that she never felt the need to talk for the sake of sound. She was completely at home in both noise and quiet.

When they finished, and all that was left on the stone floor was the glass glitter too tiny to grab with their hands, Barbara led her back to the Wayne table. Babs squeezed her good hand before rolling into place besides Dick. Cass sat in the empty seat between Tim and Steph. The brides were already dancing.

Up on the stage Zatanna somehow managed to assemble in a half hour, Dinah Lance and the wedding band crooned:

“Wise men say

Only fools rush in

But I can’t help

Falling in love with you . . .”

Kate and Maggie held each other close as they twirled across the makeshift dance floor. Their white dresses and their perfect coifs swayed in the breeze and their eyes held more love than Cass had thought was possible for seventeen years of her life. Before she knew it, tears cascaded down here cheeks for the third time that day.
Tim and Steph exchanged alarmed glances.

“Babe,” Steph whispered, “I know I said people cry at weddings, but remember they’re happy tears.”

Cass wanted to explain, but she couldn’t force the words out. It felt like she was a kid again, thoughts far bigger than her own vocabulary. Tim gave her one of his handkerchiefs and she wiped off her face but the tears just kept coming. She tried not to anticipate pain: a punch to the face or a ripped off toenail. They weren’t going to hurt her.

“Hey.”

Bruce knelt beside her. For once, she didn’t hear him coming. He reached up and wiped the wetness from her chin. Like Barbara’s, his hands were soft.

“You okay?”

“Yes,” she forced through chapped lips. “I just — Kate and Maggie are the reason — without them, I never would have —,”

She huffed, frustrated that the English language had to be so difficult. Bruce waited, not once breaking their held gaze. They breathed in rhythm with the music.

“Shall I stay?

Would it be a sin

If I can’t help falling in love with you . . .?”

“I am happy they’re happy,” Cass said at last, but she thought, I’m so grateful to be here, with my brothers, and my friends, and you.

“We owe them a lot, huh?” Bruce asked, but he thought, I’m so grateful that out of all the decent places you could have ended up, they brought you to my home.

Cass wasn’t sure why or how, but she heard him. Or maybe she read it in his eyes. She was sure he could read her own thoughts in her paper towel-bandaged hand and her traitorous tears. She hoped he could; being an enigma had its benefits, but she wanted to be known.

“Like a river flows surely to the sea,

Darling, so it goes,

Some things are meant to be . . .”

Bruce pulled her head to his shoulder. She rested it there and cried.

The wedding reception was in full swing. The band played a jaunty Top 40 song, and the mass of people twirling and jumping was so chaotic it made sense. People ceased to be themselves and became this creature made of music and sweat and laughter. Steph tried to pick out faces in the machine. She saw Clark and Lois doing a cute little swing dance. Kara and Cassie spun in circles with Cassie’s half-sisters, Diana and Donna. Dinah Lance and Oliver Queen made out. Selina kept
rubbing herself against Bruce, who kept pushing her away, even though he probably found it charming because he was a freak like that. Dick and Barbara giggled every time they made eye contact, but their dance was surprisingly rhythmic. She even saw Jason hopping up and down with his ginger friends in some sort of organized mayhem.

Steph would usually be the first person on the dance floor. Tonight, however, she felt oddly melancholic. Maybe because she’d spent the afternoon with Cass, who had done nothing but cry, aside from their brief interval of slide racing.

Steph was about to make a joke to Tim about how it looked like he’d be getting a new baby sibling soon, based on the way Bruce and Selina were dancing, when Conner Kent appeared out of nowhere. Of frickin' course.

“Hey, guys,” he said, disgustingly sweaty and still disgustingly perfect. “What are you doing all the way over here?”

Tim said, “Nothing,” at the same time as Cass said, “Not dancing,” at the same time as Steph said, “What are you, the wedding reception police?”

Conner blinked. “Um, I was just gonna ask if you wanted to dance. I love this song!”

Steph knew that when Conner asked if they wanted to dance, he really meant to ask if Tim wanted to dance. Steph and Cass exchanged dark, amused looks.

“I’m good,” Steph said, and Cass shook her head.

“Suit yourself. Tim?”

Steph had watched a single anime in her entire life because Tim promised she would love it. Therefore, she knew that if real life were an anime, this would be the part where Conner’s eyes got all big and sparkly and those little lines showed up on his cheeks to show he was blushing.

She hadn’t loved the anime, but she loved that Tim loved it.

“I . . .” Tim looked to Steph. She barely refrained from rolling her eyes.

“You don’t have to ask permission,” she said. “Go. Dance. Be young. Drink underage. Get into a bar fight. Follow your heart.”

Tim beamed and kissed her on the cheek. He let Conner grab his hand and pull him into the music.

“I’d be a terrible mom,” Steph reflected as she watched them go.

“Too young,” agreed Cass.

“Nah. Some people just aren’t meant to be parents, no matter what their age. Like could you imagine Selina as a mom?”

Cass thought about it. “Yes.”

“Really?”

“Not a grandma, but a mom.”

Steph barked a laugh. “Grandma Selina. God, that’d be awesome.”
Cass grinned. Steph was glad she wasn’t crying anymore. She thought of herself as a very compassionate person, but that had been a lot to handle.

She watched Conner and Tim writhe together like the lame boys they were. *Sure dodged a bullet with that one,* she thought, and almost believed it.

“What do you think you ever fall out of love?”

Cass didn’t even look surprised by the question; she just took her time answering, like she always did. When Steph barged into sentences without a plan, Cass found the perfect words.

“I guess if you can fall in love, you can fall out of love too,” Cass said.

Steph drummed her fingers on the table cloth. There was a purple stain by her plate where she had spilled some of her wine. Tim’s place setting was, of course, perfect.

“I guess I don’t know if I’ve ever really fallen in love, you know?” Cass side-eyed her, so she explained, “I mean, I feel like anyone I’ve ever been in love with—,” Cass continued to side-eye her, “okay, fine, the person I’m in love with . . . I feel like I was born loving him. There was no falling in, so can there really be falling out?”

Cass smirked. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Shut up. I hate you.”

But she was giggling now, so she supposed Cass had gotten what she wanted.

Stephanie took her wine glass and swirled its remaining contents. It was her first time at some fancy occasion where she was legally able to drink, and she wanted to like the wine more than she did. She couldn’t bring herself to finish it off.

“If you don’t like it, don’t drink it,” Cass said.

Steph glanced up at her. “Spooky. Did your parents also give you mind-reading abilities?”

“More like body language-reading. You were pretty obvious, anyway.”

“I wish my parents were more fucked up. It’s so hard to relate to your life experiences.”

Cass rolled her eyes. “You parents are plenty fucked up.”

Stephanie grinned and as she turned, she caught sight of Tim and Conner again. Conner had Tim around the waist, spinning him a little dangerously. They were both so beautiful it hurt her eyes. She didn’t belong in their world.

“Maybe I’m Icarus. And Timothy is the sun. And I flew too close and now my wings are melting and this proves that no matter how much you love someone, no matter how hard you try, sometimes people just aren’t meant to be together.” She spit into a napkin and started rubbing at the stain in the tablecloth. Then she remembered her mom saying to pat stains, not rub them, so she tried that. “Or, you know, kiss each other. Since we’re definitely together a lot.”

“Enjoying your Greek mythology class?” Cass asked with a smirk.

Steph refused to feel bad that she was taking the lessons she was learning in her hard-earned college education and applying them to her (lack of a) love life. “Yes, actually. I am.”
Cass flicked a piece of chocolate-dipped strawberry at her. It left a mark on her boob. Steph scowled, even though this dress was way too cheap and old to really get mad about.

“If Bruce Wayne sees me, I’m letting him know this was your fault.”

“He wouldn’t you believe you.”

Damn her and her flawless logic.

“Besides,” Cass continued, licking the chocolate stuck on her fingers, “you’re the sun.”

Steph watched Cassandra refuse to meet her eyes. She watched Tim smile up at the stars mid-twirl because he didn’t think anyone was looking. She watched Conner watch him, too.

She thought, Hell yeah, I am.

“Come on.” Steph pulled Cass to her feet. “Let’s go show these losers how it’s done.”

Damian didn’t understand weddings. Neither his mother nor his father found marriage necessary, so frankly, neither did he. Marriage was outdated and, in this day and age, it would likely end in divorce, so what was the point of even pretending Kate and Maggie had a chance? Because they were both women? Because Kate was Jewish? Because Maggie was law enforcement? They were adults, and he would not belittle them or himself in order to make them feel more comfortable.

Also, this wedding had proven itself to sufficiently boring. He snuck out of the reception early with a couple of dinner rolls to go find the pond he had seen when they drove in. After passing several signs ordering, DON’T FEED THE DUCKS, he found it, even greener and murkier than it had been through the car window.

A little family of ducks floated on the pond’s surface. He ripped off a piece of a roll and tossed it into the water. Immediately, ducks seemed to appear out of the bushes and from the depths of the pond to fight over the bread. He circled the pond a few times in order to spread out the breadcrumbs and took special care to toss large chunks to the ducks that were pushed to the back. Too soon, though, he ran out of bread. The ducks squawked angrily when they realized his predicament.

“I’ll be right back,” he told them and began to hike back to the pavilion.

When he returned, he searched for leftover dinner rolls, or crackers, or anything, but it seemed the Zatara girl and her cleaning crew had been busy while he was away. He huffed and ran straight into Dick Grayson. Dick steadied him and Damian looked up into his flushed face. He’d either been dancing for a while, or gotten a bit too friendly with the bar. Damian was putting his money on a combination of the two.

“Damian!” Dick crowed, ruffling Damian’s hair. Damian scowled, but didn’t swat his hand away. With Dick, it was easier to just let it happen. “Where’ve you been?”

“With more important people.” Or ducks. Same thing.

“Well, you better stick around, ok?”

“I’d rather not.”
“Your dad’s about to give a toast,” Dick sang.

Damian furrowed his brow. “What?”

Dick turned him in the direction of the stage so he could see Bruce’s tall form cutting through the mass of people surrounding it. He frowned. Bruce had been mostly hands-off this whole day, which Damian appreciated, and took as validation that his father also found weddings to be pointless, even when they were for his lesbian second cousin twice removed, or whatever Kate Kane was to him.

The music died. Bruce took the hand-held mic from the lady in fishnets and cleared his throat.

“Hello everyone,” he said. “I’m Bruce.”

Scattered laughter because of course everyone knew who Bruce was.

“I know I missed the time slot for toasts, but I wanted to say a few words. Kate Kane is one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. I haven’t always been the best family to her, but it was mostly because I was insecure. She really threatens my masculinity.” More laughter. “To me, family was something only a few people were lucky enough to have, and fewer were lucky enough to keep. So I told myself I didn’t need family, that I was better on my own, that everyone was. I pushed her away more times than I can count.” Damian bit his lip. Those words were a bit too familiar. They belonged on al Ghul lips and in Damian’s head, not in Bruce Wayne’s speech. “So Kate — thank you for never giving up on me. You have been through hell and back, and no one deserves this chance at happiness more than you. Also, Maggie is a godsend, so don’t screw it up.”

Damian searched for the brides. Their arms were wrapped around each other like they never planned on letting go. If Damian didn’t know better, he would think Kate was crying. It must have been the light.

“Now, I know this wedding hasn’t exactly been — traditional —,” more laughter, and Damian knew his father wasn’t that funny, “but I thought my gift to you could be leading the Hora, which is a chair dance often done at traditional Jewish weddings.”

There were a couple of whoop!s from the Jewish attendees (as well as Jason and Dick). Kate beamed even as she shouted, “This better be in addition to the million dollar check you left, cheapskate!”

The band struck up a jovial song and the laughing guests rushed forward to circle around Kate and Maggie. Mr. Kane dragged forth a couple of chairs, but at Kate’s glare, he allowed Jason and Dick to hoist her over their heads, lest he pull a muscle or something. Clark Kent was recruited to help with Maggie, and while Damian was fairly certain Kent could have held the chair over his head one-handed, he allowed one of Maggie’s shrimpy cousins to help him. Damian suspected most of the people here only knew what a Hora was because of that musical about the fiddler that Dick showed him. It was kind of Kate to allow them to participate in her traditions, but he also found it rather disrespectful of the guests to act like this was a joke.

He couldn’t wait to call Mother. They would laugh over how ridiculous Americans were.

“You don’t look like you’re having fun,” Bruce said, suddenly at his side.

Damian glared. “You don’t look like you’re leading anything.”

“Do you ever get tired of being so standoffish?”

“Do you?” Damian shot back.
“Touché.”

Bruce was smirking. He was awfully friendly tonight, and Damian suspected he too had made a close acquaintanceship with the champagne. It was nice though. Damian used to imagine his father, and when he did, he imagined someone Talia could love: someone strong, cold, and brilliant, someone who would see the things Damian could do, the things he had been through, and respect him for it. Bruce was all of those things, but he was more: compassionate and loyal, and he never loved people because of what they could do, but because of who they were. It was strange to rearrange all he thought he’d known about his father, but it was even stranger to rearrange what he’d thought he’d known about his mother. Talia al Ghul had once loved this man. It made him wonder.

They watched the guests make fools of themselves, with the brides above them the biggest fools of all, heads thrown back in laughter and fear, hands clasped.

Damian could feel Bruce watching him out of the corner of his eye. He sighed.

“You want me to dance, don’t you?”

“Yup.”

“And what if I say no?”

Bruce just grabbed him around the middle and lifted him up like he was a pillow.

“If I didn’t want to avoid sending you to the hospital,” Damian shouted as he thrashed in his father’s arms, “I would be out of this by now.”

“I believe you.”

Bruce set him in the midst of the dancers. He ended up in between — just his luck — Tim Drake and Stephanie Brown.

“Dami!” they chorused, pulling him along, away from his traitor father. Their hands were sweaty and their smiles were bright and breathless. They were the opposite of the al Ghuls. It was impossible to be with them and not remember where he had come from, and where he was.

“I hate you,” he said. He mostly meant it, too.

When Bruce stepped into the manor, hours of music and tipsy laughter echoing in his ears, for one startling moment it was completely silent. He had a striking memory of the years after his parents died, cooped up in this big house with only Alfred for company, trying not to drown in a quiet so loud and all-encompassing it became its own type of noise. When Dick moved in, it was like realizing the world had been on mute and he hadn't even noticed. Suddenly sound was everywhere.

It was the quiet he heard now. He let himself experience it. Breathe it in, fester in his lungs, and whoosh away from him again.

And then —

“Dude, you are so drunk!”

“You're one to talk, Grayson —,”
“Dad, Jason offered me alcohol —!

“Shut the fuck up, Tim, you’re twenty-years-old —,”

“Language. Need I remind you that there is a young boy in your presence —”

“Big talk. I remember you had some colorful words to share when you forgot to save your new algorithm to your hard drive last week —,”

“Stephanie, I swear to God.”

“Cass, protect me, Babs is using her angry eyes.”

“You probably deserve it.”

“Titus! Attack Drake!”

“Ow, what the hell —,”

“Damian, what did I tell you? Teaching your dog to attack Tim is not a ‘fun trick.’”

“See, this is why I hate dogs. And children.”

Bruce escaped to the living room for a moment of solace before the chaos inevitably descended upon the rest of the manor. Alfred was vacuuming the spotless floors. He turned when Bruce entered.

“Ah, Master B,” Alfred said, switching off the vacuum. “I thought I might have heard your voice.”

“The vacuum’s loud,” said Bruce, “but it’s not that loud.”

Alfred smirked in that infuriating way of his. Most people thought Bruce inherited his patented smirk from his wealthy father, but Bruce knew the truth.

“How was the wedding?” Alfred asked.

“It was good. Nice. I’m glad I went.” He smiled. “Glad to be home though.”

They listened to the arguments and laughter in the other room, the screams and the giggles. He heard, “Barbara ran over my foot on purpose!” and “Bruce will ground your ass so hard!” He pictured Selina pretending to have a migraine and Jason pretending to be drunker than he was so he could be free to be happy. Tim and Cass and Steph would curl up on the ground in front of the fireplace or on a too small couch, until you couldn’t tell where one ended and the next began. Barbara would tease Dick for staring, and he would tease her when she finally gave into the urge to get out her computer. Damian would bury his head in Titus’ neck so no one could see him laugh.

Alfred was smiling too. “We’re glad to have you home.”

Bruce didn’t like to credit one thing to saving his life. It could have been the jagged-edged woman with the leather jacket on the rooftop. It could have been the bright-eyed therapist with the pink-dipped hair. It could have been the butler with steel for eyes, or the gentle journalist, or the flying boy, or any of the kids who followed. It could have been Bruce when he allowed himself to be saved.

How it happened didn’t matter so much as the fact that it did. He was alive. His family was in the other room. They were here with him, and it was enough. They were always enough.
Something crashed in the distance.

“That sounds serious,” Bruce said.

“It sounds like we’re needed,” Alfred sighed. “After you.”

With Alfred on his heels, Bruce led the way back into his home.

End Notes

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