A Bird in the Hand

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Summary

In this timeline, Jason does manage to steal something from Batman, though it isn't the Batmobile's tires.

Notes

I currently have plans for a three part arc, but we'll see how it goes. I'm usually really nervous about posting true WIPs (as in, I really haven't written all of it and am not entirely sure where it's going) but after much encouragement from Itispossibileihaveissues and some awesome tumblrites, I have decided to take the plunge. So just remember, you've all brought this on yourselves.

Also, please note that tags will be updated as the story progresses.
Chapter 1

Dick was swinging between two buildings when the sound of angry voices shattered the still night. Not an unusual sound in Gotham by any stretch, but he made a point of checking it out anyway. When he landed, he doubled back to peer over the edge of the building into the narrow alley below. The back door was open to the tenement building across the way – another one of Gotham’s plethora of low rent government housing – and there was a man in the doorway fighting with a kid about Dick’s age. Well, maybe “fighting” was a stretch; it was far more one-sided than that. The man had the kid by the collar of his shirt and was snarling something at him that Dick couldn’t quite make out. Then, to Dick’s shock, he pulled back and drove his fist into the kid’s stomach, seemingly with all of his strength. It had to have hurt, considering the size of the man, but to the kid’s credit, he barely made a sound as his skinny body absorbed the blow.

“You fix this, or don’t bother coming back!” the man shouted as he deliberately shoved the kid into a row of garbage cans.

Dick winced at the loud clatter as the boy tumbled over the cans, knocking them over and strewing the street with garbage.

The man promptly retreated back into the building, slamming the door in his wake.

Dick flipped down off the building and landed where the boy could see him, so as not to startle him. He wasn’t sneaking up on a bad guy, after all. “Hey, you all right?” he asked, hunkering down to the kid’s level.

He was startled to receive a hard kick aimed at his chest – which he caught with his hands, but that was beside the point. “Hey!” he exclaimed indignantly.

“Don’t come any closer!” the boy snapped as he scrambled to his feet and backed warily away from him.

Dick rose with him, but he hung back, giving the kid some space. Now that he got a good look at him, he realized the kid was quite a bit shorter than him, and probably younger than him by a good few years. He couldn’t have been more than twelve at the most. Dick frowned when a closer inspection revealed even more details, like the kid’s bleeding nose, the ragged, stained, once-white t-shirt that he was currently shivering in, and the stick-thin arms he held up to defend himself, just in case Dick decided to attack him.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Dick assured him. “I’m Robin.”

“No shit,” the boy sneered, though he seemed to relax fractionally.

Dick held back a grin. He reached into his utility belt (slowly, so the kid wouldn’t think he was reaching for a weapon) and withdrew a handkerchief. “Here.” He offered it to the boy and gestured at his nose. “I get those a lot too.”

The boy eyed the handkerchief as though Dick were offering him a giant hairy spider, but after a moment, he snatched it from Dick’s hand and pressed it to his bleeding face. “From Batman?” he asked, his tone surprisingly sympathetic.

“Oh yeah, right,” the boy said ruefully. “So Batman’s pretty cool, huh?”

“He’s totally astrous,” Dick confirmed.
“Huh,” the boy grunted. “My dad says he’s a self righteous prick who sticks his nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Dick cocked his head at the boy. “What about you? What do you think?”

“He’s all right, I guess,” the boy said with a shrug. “I mean, at least he’s trying. Nobody else does.”

Dick smiled, and felt himself warming to the kid. “By the way, if you’re gonna kick someone, you’ll get a lot more bang for your buck if you put your whole body into it, not just your leg muscles. See?” He demonstrated by sending one of the garbage cans flying. “It also helps if you aim for vulnerable spots like groin, ankles and knees.”

The boy’s eyes rounded in surprise. “Uh…thanks.”

“No problem. Hey, us little guys gotta stick together, right?” Dick shot the boy a conspiratorial smirk.

“Uh, yeah. I guess so,” the boy said sheepishly. “Anyway, I ah…I gotta go.” He turned to go, but Dick stopped him.

“Hey, wait. I don’t know what that was about,” he said, jerking a thumb at the tenement door, “but is there anything I can do to help?”

The boy scowled at the door, but then he shook his head. “Naw, it’s cool, I got it.”

“All right, but here, take this.” Dick reached into another compartment on his belt and pulled out a business card with one of his burner phone numbers on it. He handed it to the boy. “If he does that again, call me, ok? I can get the big guy to have a word with him.”

The boy’s eyes lit up for just a moment, before his expression clouded again. “Don’t think that’s such a good idea, but thanks anyway.” He shoved the card into his pocket and turned to sprint down the street.

“Hey, what’s your name?” Dick yelled after him.

“Jay!” the boy bellowed over his shoulder before he nipped down a side alley and disappeared from view.

Dick opened his wrist computer and tapped in the address of the building, the boy’s name, and the number of the phone he’d given him, so he wouldn’t accidentally throw it away. Then he shot his grappling gun up to the roof of the building and continued on his way.

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Jason opened the door to his apartment and slipped inside as quietly as he could. The house was dark, with that particular stillness that indicated it was empty. A pang of concern rippled through him, but he silently chided himself as he closed and locked the door behind him. His dad was fine. Two Face wouldn’t hurt him before the deadline – that was just bad business. As long as Jason didn’t chicken out, everything was going to be just fine.

He made his way to the shared bedroom without turning on any of the lights. He knew his way around, and the apartment looked a lot less shitty in the dark. Besides, electricity was best conserved for more important things like running the fridge and the stove.

He dropped his backpack on the floor and sat down on his bed - the smaller of the two mattresses on
the floor. He lit a single candle and pulled two items from his backpack, a pack of cigarettes he’d liberated from his dad’s jacket pocket a few nights ago, and one of his dad’s discarded pre-paid cell phones. He knew there was a reason it had been discarded, that he’d be dead meat if his dad found out he’d dug it out of the trash, but at the moment, he had too many other things to worry about to care about a measly phone. He lit up a cigarette and took a few drags to calm his nerves before he pulled the final necessary item from his pocket – Robin’s card. He stared down at it in the dim light of the candle, running his fingers lightly over the embossed letters and numbers. After a moment, he put the card down.

Maybe he shouldn’t. Robin had seemed like such a genuinely nice guy; it was downright despicable to take advantage of his kindness by dragging him into this. Besides, every minute Robin wasted on him was a minute he wasn’t spending helping people...innocent people who really deserved his help. Jason brushed the card and phone off the bed onto the floor with an irritable sigh. What was wrong with him? What was he even thinking?

He went to the kitchen and got himself a big glass of water. He already knew what was in the fridge - a really old jar of mayo, some cans of beer, and two cans of coke. He’d get the everlovin’ shit kicked out of him if he drank the beer, the coke was for later, and he wasn’t quite hungry enough to eat the mayo, so he wandered back to the bedroom with his water.

He drummed his fingers against his knee in agitation before he finally picked the card up again. Whatever his feelings were on the matter, the bottom line was, he had to go through with it. Without Robin, they were screwed. Quickly, before he could lose his nerve, he dialed the number and pressed send.

He chewed on his lip as the phone rang, seemingly endlessly. Then suddenly it clicked.

“Hello?”

For a terrifying moment, Jason’s mind blanked. He tried to say something, but nothing came out.

“Hellooo?”

“Uh…” Jason said, aware that that was not an answer, or even really a word.

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line before Robin said, “Jay? Is that you?”

Jason’s heart pounded in his chest as he swallowed hard. “You remembered,” he said (squeaked). Robin chuckled. “Yeah, I remember. What, you think I give my number out to just anyone?”

“Well...yeah,” Jason admitted. Not just that, but he failed to see what was so memorable about him in particular. Robin probably helped dozens of kids every week, and he’d bet dollars to doughnuts that most of them were a lot worse off than him. At least he still had his dad, and a place to live. A lot of people didn’t even have that much.

“I don’t, Jay,” Robin said seriously.

It suddenly occurred to Jason that Robin was trying to make him feel special, like he mattered. Usually when someone lied to him like that, they had some kind of ulterior motive in mind. Robin didn’t seem the sort though, so in this case, he thought it was probably just pity. Still, it was nice of him to try, he supposed.

“So what’s up? Is everything all right?” Robin asked.

“Nothing’s up,” Jason said. “I mean, I just...I dunno.” He fiddled with the hem of his t-shirt.
“You’re probably busy. I should let you go.”

“No, I’m not busy,” Robin said quickly. “Well, I’m just doing homework. I’d rather talk to you.”

Jason firmly tamped down the rush of warmth that elicited. Sure, Robin had said he preferred to talk to him, but over doing homework, which was like saying eating broccoli was better than getting kicked in the face. That sure as hell didn’t mean you liked broccoli. And anyway, what did it matter whether Robin liked him or not? Even if he did, he wasn’t going to for very much longer.

“So…what homework are you doing?” Jason ventured.

Robin groaned. “English. I have an essay due tomorrow on ‘Why the Caged Bird Sings’, which I totally didn’t have time to read. I skimmed the Cliffs Notes, but it only gives you enough info to answer the study guide questions, not write an essay.”

“I read that book,” Jason volunteered. He kept the fact that he’d failed the unit to himself. English was his least hated class, and he liked reading the books; he just wasn’t big on writing essays, or completing homework assignments in general. “What’s the essay about?”

“There’s a couple topics to choose from, but I think I’m going to write on this one: in chapter 29, Daddy Clidell introduces Maya to con men. Maya says that ‘the needs of a society determine its ethics.’ What do you think she means by this? Do you feel that she is correct?”

Jason frowned. “What do you think?”

Robin sighed. “I don’t know, I didn’t make it to chapter 29. What even happened?”

“Some black guys rob some white guys, and she basically figures that’s ok, on account of how much shit the black people had to put up with,” Jason explained.

“That doesn’t make it right, though, does it?” Robin said. “Revenge isn’t the same as justice, and it doesn’t fix anything. It just perpetuates the cycle of violence and oppression.”

“Yeah, but how were those people ever gonna get justice? You can’t put people in jail for treating you like shit. And even if you could, the justice system was totally stacked against them. So what if those assholes got robbed a little? It wasn’t like they couldn’t afford it,” Jason argued. “Besides, how do you know it was for revenge? Maybe they were just in a tough spot, like they just really needed the money, or someone they cared about was gonna get hurt.”

“Maybe so, but morality is absolute. It doesn’t matter if you’re black or white or rich or poor, stealing is wrong,” Robin insisted. Then he sighed. “Do you think that’s what the teacher’s aiming at, or do you think this is some kind of lesson in sensitivity?”

“I dunno.” Jason laid back on the bed and stared up at the water stained ceiling. His stomach gurgled but he ignored it. “Maybe both? Like, maybe you’re supposed to get why she thinks the way she thinks, but also get that just ‘cause that’s what she thinks, it doesn’t make it right.”

“You know, I bet you’re right,” Robin said. “Thanks. That was really helpful. I asked my friend Wally about this like an hour ago and he was totally the opposite of helpful. He spent the whole time stuffing his face and chewing in my ear, and then he had to go so he could talk to his girlfriend.”

Jason found himself envying this Wally kid just a little as he lit up another cigarette to settle his stomach. “No problem.”

Robin paused, and then he said, “Listen, Jay, I know you didn’t call to talk about my homework.
Are you ok? Did your dad hurt you again?"

“Nah, he ain’t even here.”

“You’re by yourself?” Robin asked.

“I can take care of myself,” Jason assured him.

“What about that thing he asked you to fix the other day? Did everything go ok with that?” Robin asked.

Jason swallowed hard. “Well…actually…I could sort of use your help with that. Do you think you could meet me here? It won’t take long, I promise.”

‘Yeah, I can meet you,” Robin said immediately. “I gotta run it past the big guy, but he shouldn’t have a problem with it, especially if it’s not going to take all night.”

“Cool. But ah…don’t tell him you’re coming to see me, ok?” Jason said. “It’s just…it’s kind of embarrassing, you know?”

“No problem. I’ll just say I have a friend who needs my help. I won’t give him any specifics. Hang tight. I’ll see you in about fifteen,” Robin said.

Jason clicked off the phone. He sat up, and a wave of dizziness and nausea crashed over him. He sprinted to the bathroom just in time to vomit into the grimy toilet. Unsurprisingly, there was nothing in his stomach but the water he’d just drunk, but his body insisted on gagging and retching a few more times till it finally got the message. He stood up and rinsed his mouth out in the sink with shaking hands.

This was such a stupid idea. What was he thinking? But he couldn’t lose his nerve, not now, not when he was this close to getting the help he so desperately needed. Luck had thrown Robin in his path just when he needed him most, and he wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth, not when so much was riding on it.

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It hadn’t taken Dick long to convince Bruce to let him go. All he’d had to say was that a kid was hurt and needed his help, and that was all she wrote. He still needed to complete his essay for tomorrow, but he knew that if this ended up taking too long, Bruce would write him a note for tomorrow so that he could get an extension. Neither of them liked doing that, but it was better than letting Jay get hurt by his skeezy dad.

He slipped in through the window, open just the way Jay had said it would be. He stilled, his instincts suddenly on high alert. The room was completely dark save for a single candle, flickering wildly in the draft from the open window and throwing writhing shadows all around the room. Dick crouched low in a defensive stance, his eyes and ears open for the slightest sound. He knew that Jay had said he was home alone, but his dad could’ve returned in the time it took Dick to get there. He sort of secretly hoped the man was there, because he itched to put a fist in his face. See how that abusive jerk liked it for a change.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps approaching - light, quick steps, and he relaxed back into a neutral stance.

“Hey, Jay,” he greeted as he stepped out of the shadows.
Jay yelped loudly and slapped his hand against the wall. The naked lightbulb above them flicked on with a low buzz, and Dick squinted against the sudden flood of sickly yellow light.

“Jeez, you wanna gimme a heart attack?” Jay hissed.

Dick’s gaze immediately zeroed in on the boy’s face, currently a swollen, mult-coloured whirl of dark purple, blue and red. “Jay, what happened?” he said, moving closer to get a better look.

“Nothing.” Jay avoided his gaze, and quickly flicked off the lights again, shrouding the room in darkness. “Look, it’s my fault, ok? I screwed up, and that’s…that’s why I need your help. Please.”

Dick put a tentative hand on Jay’s shoulder. “Why don’t you tell me about it? I promise I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Jay nodded. “You wanna sit? That’s my bed there,” he said, pointing to a dingy mattress on the floor. “You ah…you want something to drink? I’ve got coke.”

The mattress was so saggy that he might as well have been sitting on the ground, but Dick didn’t comment on it. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

Jay disappeared and returned a moment later with two cokes, both already popped open. He handed one to Dick and settled on the other end of the mattress with his own.

Dick murmured his thanks before he took a sip of the soda. “So tell me what happened.”

Jay took a gulp of his soda as though to steel himself for what he was about to say. “So, I run errands for my dad sometimes. Nothing big, just pickups, deliveries, that kind of thing. I never know what’s inside the packages – they don’t tell me and I don’t look. The other night, when you saw us, I’d just come back from a run. And…well…some goons had jumped me, and taken my package. My dad flipped out, and told me to go get it back. The thing is, I tried, but they were long gone by the time I got back there.”

Dick drank his soda and nodded. “Well sure, they’re not just gonna hang around waiting for you to come back with reinforcements, are they?”

“Yeah. So dad had to break it to his boss that we’d lost the package. Turned out it was a hundred g’s. Now they’re saying he stole it, that they’re gonna kill him if he doesn’t give them the money back.”

“Oh, Jay, tha’s-” Dick stopped abruptly. Did he just slur his words? Come to think of it, he felt strange, and really dizzy all of a sudden. He glanced down at his soda and then up into Jay’s terrified expression.

“I’m sorry!” Jay blurted just before Dick’s vision blurred and he lost consciousness.
Chapter 2

Jason pinched Robin hard on the arm, and when he got no response, he got to work. At first, it was difficult to figure out the various clasps and things on the Robin suit, but once he got an understanding of the design, he was able to make short work of the clothing. He left the mask on, because to do otherwise would have been sacrilege. When he had Robin naked in front of him, he stopped for a moment to study him, somewhat surprised at what a normal looking boy he turned out to be beneath it all. He didn’t seem so big or intimidating then, just a skinny kid covered in bruises, just like Jason. He ran a hand down Robin’s chest and felt a small thrill at the wrongness of it. His first impression had been slightly off, however. Robin wasn’t skinny, he was lean, and every inch of him seemed to be covered in flat, hard muscle. He was just so…perfect. Jason’s face heated as a rush of inexplicable emotions burned through him, and he quickly withdrew his hand.

He picked up Robin’s tunic and was about to stuff it into a garbage bag when he caught sight of the golden R logo stitched into the breast. Gingerly, he held the shirt up to himself and for a second, just...imagined. But then he looked down and saw the naked boy on the floor at his feet, and he knew he was no hero, and never would be. Quickly, he snatched up all the rest of the bits of Robin’s suit and stuffed them into the plastic garbage bag along with a sophisticated looking wrist computer, a smartphone, and a utility belt stuffed with a bunch of other hi-tech gadgets. Then he grabbed a few of his own clothes that he’d picked out earlier – a pair of old jeans that were a little too big on him, and his favourite t-shirt, and quickly re-dressed Robin in the clothes. He pulled a couple rolls of duct tape out of his backpack and started wrapping Robin up like a mummy. He wasn’t sure if all of this was actually necessary, but he couldn’t afford to take any chances. This was Batman and Robin, and god only knew what kinds of tricks they had up their sleeves, literally or figuratively.

When he was satisfied that he had Robin sufficiently secured, he grabbed the garbage bag full of clothes and ran downstairs. He sprinted up his street and over the train tracks to the nearest overpass. He waited, shivering in the freezing rain, until he saw a pickup truck approaching. Then he took careful aim and dropped the bag just as the truck passed under him. The bag full of clothes dropped into the bed of the truck and sped away into the night. He sighed with relief. It was a good thing he’d practiced that maneuver so many times – although usually he was just throwing rocks and garbage into other people’s cars for fun.

Without a moment to lose, he ran back to his apartment. When he got back, Robin was just coming to. Jason dragged him up onto his dad’s mattress and propped him up against the wall, so that he would be more comfortable.

“Are you all right?” he asked, peering into Robin’s face, and wishing he could see his eyes. He hadn’t been sure how much of his mom’s old insomnia medication would be enough, and how much would be too much, so he’d just guessed.

He retrieved the half-drunk can of coke from near his bed and crept closer to Robin, holding it out like a peace offering. “You want a drink? It was mine - it don’t have no drugs in it, I swear.”

Robin glared at him as if he’d offered him poison, and, well, Jason couldn’t really blame him for that one.

“Look, I’m really sorry about all this, but I could still help you with your essay, if you want,” he offered brightly. “It’s still due tomorrow, right?”

This time, Robin looked at him like he was insane.

“You gotta believe me, I don’t wanna hurt-”
Suddenly, Robin headbutted him right in the nose, going from groggy to deadly in the blink of an eye. Jason was knocked hard on his ass from the force of the blow. Pain exploded across his face, and he had to bite down hard on his tongue to keep from screaming as he clutched at his bleeding nose. God, what was with people hitting him in the face this week? Between those fucking goons, his dad, and now Robin, he just couldn’t catch a break!

Robin spent a few minutes thrashing around in his bonds before he apparently realized that there was no way he was breaking out of the tough, gummy duct tape. He sat up and for a moment, neither of them said anything as they sized each other up in light of the new circumstances.

“You’re making a big mistake,” Robin said. “When Batman finds us, he’s going to-”

“How’s he gonna find us?” Jason demanded. Blood dripped unnoticed down his face to soak into his grimy t-shirt. “I tossed out all your fancy gear, and you didn’t tell him where you were going.”

Robin snorted. “Do you really think you can outsmart Batman, like he doesn’t have any other ways of finding me?”

A chill ran down Jason’s spine. He’d heard the stories. Batman had powers. He was inhuman, a monster some people said. He always found his man, no matter what, and he did things, unspeakable things, to the people who crossed him.

It took Jason a long moment to realize that they could both hear him breathing raggedly in and out of his open mouth. He shut his mouth with a snap and gingerly wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. He struggled to control his trembling, equal parts from adrenaline, cold, and fear.

“Shut up,” he growled.

Robin regarded him coolly. “What do you think you’re going to accomplish here, Jay?”

Jason flinched at the ice in his tone. A part of him wanted to apologise, to let Robin go and beg his forgiveness – anything to hear that genuine warmth in his voice again (and maybe to stop Batman from disemboweling him), but he knew they were way beyond that now. Even if he cut Robin loose right this minute, he’d still be the scumbag who tried to kidnap him. Honestly, he deserved whatever he got from either of them.

He moved over to sit on his mattress and hugged one of his knees to his chest. “I told you. I need a hundred grand by tomorrow or Two Face is gonna kill my dad. I reckon you’re worth at least that much to Batman.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know. I came here to help you,” Robin said.

“You came here ‘cause you thought my dad was beatin’ on me,” Jason countered.

“Are you telling me he isn’t?” Robin asked sharply.

Jason narrowed his eyes. “The point is, you don’t care what happens to my dad.”

“I do care, because I care what happens to you,” Robin said. “I could’ve figured something out – I still can. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Yeah, right,” Jason scoffed. “All you know how to do is beat people up or put them in jail! I don’t need your kind of help.”

Robin sighed. “Why are you doing this, Jay? You’re just a kid; you should leave it to your dad to
solve his own problems. How do you know he hasn’t already worked out this misunderstanding with Two Face? All of this could be pointless.”

Jason frowned. There was no way that his dad had solved the problem. The old man was probably drunk off his ass and down at the illegal gambling den on Fick Street trying to “win” the money back. He wasn’t going to tell Robin that, though. Robin already thought his dad was a loser. He just didn’t understand – no one did. Jason knew his dad was an asshole sometimes, but it was just because he missed his mom. He couldn’t blame him – he missed her too.

“Just shut up,” he snapped. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Gimme Batman’s number.”

“What do you want me to do, shut up, or give you the number, because I can’t do both,” Robin retorted.

Jason shot him a sour look. “Give me the number,” he gritted.

Robin smirked at his irritation, but he rattled off the numbers without hesitation. Jason inputted them into the phone and hit send. He tapped his foot nervously while it rang, and almost jumped when the line actually connected.

“Where are you?” a rough voice growled over the phone.

Jason slipped a sock over the phone receiver to muffle his voice, the way he’d seen his dad do sometimes. “Batman?”

“Who is this?” the voice demanded.

“Batman, it’s uh…I have Robin, here, and…I want a hundred thousand dollars, or…I’m gonna kill him,” Jason said, hoping it had sounded a lot more threatening to Batman than it had to his own ears.

Batman snorted. “A hundred thousand dollars? Is this some kind of joke?”

“It’s not a joke!” Jason insisted. Honestly, what did he have to do to get people to take him seriously? “I want the money, or he dies, understand?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line as Batman contemplated the threat. Then, “I don’t know who you are or what kind of game you’re playing, but if you so much as touch a hair on his head, when I find you (not if, when), I will beat you so thoroughly that you will be a drooling vegetable for the rest of your life, do you understand?” he grated.

Jason started to shake so hard he almost dropped the phone, but he mashed the phone to his ear and hugged himself with his free hand to try to mask it as much as possible. “Let’s hope it don’t come to that,” he said as evenly as he could manage.

“Gimme the phone,” Robin hissed.

Jason hesitated, but then he remembered that in the movies, the kidnappers always let the family talk to the hostage, so that they knew they were still alive. “Here he is, so you know I didn’t do nothin’ to him,” he said. He pulled the sock off the phone and held it to Robin’s face for him.

Robin gave him a sharp look, and Jason glanced away, knowing full well Robin could feel him trembling as he held the phone to his ear.

“B? It’s me,” Robin said. “I’m fine. He just drugged me a little and took off my uniform. No, he
gave me clothes. Yeah, I still have my mask. Listen, B, I think you should just give him the money. It’s kind of for a good cause, and-” He paused as Jason heard a whole lot of angry growling from the other end of the line. “You’re gonna want to trust me on this,” Robin said, firmly cutting Batman off. After another few seconds, he looked up at Jason and nodded. “He wants to talk to you.”

Jason brought the phone back to his ear, although he wasn’t sure he really wanted to hear what Batman had to say. “Yeah?”

“Do you have a location for the exchange?” Batman asked.

Jason put the sock back on the phone and wandered over to the open window. From there, he had a scenic view of the grimy high-rise across the narrow alleyway. “There’s an abandoned warehouse down by the shipyard.” He gave Batman the address and told him where to leave the money. “Once I have the money, I’ll call you, and tell you where Robin is. We meet in one hour.”

“I can’t do an hour. I’ll need twenty-four at least,” Batman said.

Jason blinked rapidly against a surge of panic. “I can’t wait that long. I need the money now.”

“I can’t get that kind of cash together that quickly,” Batman said. “I’m not made of money.”

“But…no, I need it by eight o’clock tomorrow night,” Jason said. “I don’t care what it takes – you get the money or Robin gets it!”

Batman sighed. “All right, 8pm tomorrow at the abandoned warehouse by the shipyard.”

Profound relief washed over Jason. Now he just had to wait till eight o’clock tomorrow night. He could do that.

“One more thing,” Batman said just as Jason was about to hang up. “How do I know you’ll tell me where he is once you get the money?”

“You don’t,” Jason said. He snapped the flip phone shut, ending the call. He took a deep breath and let out a shaky sigh.

“You know, you could’ve asked for more money,” Robin said. Jason startled - he had forgotten he was there.

“I don’t want your damn money,” he spat. “I just want Two Face off our backs, that’s it.”

Jason whirled on him. “I don’t want your damn money,” he spat. “I just want Two Face off our backs, that’s it.”

“You realize that if you stay in Gotham, you’ll be arrested for kidnapping and extortion. You’ll be locked up till you turn 18,” Robin said.

“As long as my dad’s alive, I don’t care what happens to me,” Jason said. He sat back down on his bed. “Look, I know you think I’m an asshole, and I don’t blame you, but I wouldn’t do this if I had any other choice.”

Robin shook his head. “I gave you another choice, remember? I offered to help you figure this out some other way.”

“Yeah, and I told you why that wasn’t going to work. If Batman could take down Two Face and his entire crew, wouldn’t he have done it already?” Jason asked.

Robin frowned. “You could’ve let us try. At the very least, we could’ve moved you and your dad
someday else, for your protection.”

“Forget it! I didn’t do nothin’ wrong, and I ain’t runnin’ and hidin’ like a rat!” Jason said.

Robin didn’t say anything, didn’t do anything except stare at him with those flat, blank eyes.

Jason squirmed uncomfortably. “I told you. I’m not looking to hurt anybody here. I just want my dad to be safe. You can understand that, can’t you? I mean, I don’t know if Batman’s your dad, or what, but—”

“My dad’s dead,” Robin interrupted.

Jason blinked at him in surprise. He really had thought Batman was Robin’s father. It seemed only natural. “Ok, well, what if you could’ve done something about that? I mean, wouldn’t you have done anything to save him, if you could’ve?”

Robin frowned. “Yeah, but my dad didn’t mistake me for a piñata on a regular basis.”

Jason looked away self-consciously. “I didn’t say he was the world’s greatest dad, I said he was my dad. He’s not perfect, but he’s all I got since my mom died. I don’t wanna lose him, too.”

“Hey,” Robin said softly, kindly, much more so than Jason had expected. “You’re not gonna lose your dad. Batman’ll give you the money. I told him to let you have it, and he listens to me. Of course, you’ll probably both go to jail for this…”

“I can live with that,” Jason said. After a moment, he said, very quietly, “Thanks.”

“Don’t— Robin yawned suddenly, “thank me yet.”

Jason yawned as well, a wave of exhaustion washing over him. “It’s getting kinda late. Maybe we should get some sleep.” He got up and closed the window. “Here,” he mumbled as he arranged his father’s threadbare blanket over Robin’s bound form. “It gets pretty cold at night, but this should help. If you need anything, just let me know.”

Jason settled into his own bed with his blanket and blew out the candle.

“Jay?” Robin’s voice floated to him in the darkness.

“Yeah?”

“What happened to your mom?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said she died. What happened to her? Was it an accident?”

Jason stared up at the ceiling. Even though he couldn’t see it, he could still imagine the exact pattern of the water stain. “I hope so,” he said softly.

“…I’m sorry,” Robin said.

“Don’t be,” Jason said. He yawned as his eyes slid shut, almost of their own accord. “G’night, Robin.”

“Goodnight, Jay.”
Dick blinked awake, squinting at the shaft of sunlight shining in his face. With a groan, he moved out of its direct path. He hadn’t noticed last night in the dark, but he saw now that the room’s only window was covered by a thin, hole-riddled sheet through which golden shafts of light shone. From the quality and angle of the light, it looked to be about mid to late morning. He shivered against the chill in the air. He’d hardly slept, partially because it’s pretty hard to sleep when you’re wrapped up in an entire roll of duct tape like King Tut, and partially because Jay hadn’t been kidding, the room had been freezing last night. Ironically, the duct tape had provided some insulation from the cold, though not nearly enough.

Using the wall for leverage, he pushed himself into a sitting position and glanced across the room to Jay’s bed. He was surprised to see it empty, the moth-eaten blanket having been cast aside. He wondered where his abductor had gone. He stilled, listening intently for sounds from the rest of the apartment, but all he could hear were faint scratching sounds coming from inside the walls. It was probably rats. He shuddered, though he sort of relished the idea of telling M’Gann that he’d slept in a rat infested building, just to see the look on her face.

He looked at the window again as a thought occurred to him. He could actually escape. He could break the window and use the jagged shards of glass remaining in the frame to cut his bindings. It wouldn’t be easy, and he’d be hard pressed to do it without seriously injuring himself in the process, but he wasn’t Robin for nothing.

Then again, what would happen to Jay if he ran away now?

Despite everything, he empathised with Jay. He understood why he was doing this, even if he didn’t agree with it. Of course, he knew what Bruce would say, that he was being too soft, that Jay was a criminal regardless of the circumstances. Justice was absolute. Bruce believed that, heart and soul. It was the driving force behind his every thought, word, and deed; the Batman’s raison detre. Unfortunately, Dick didn’t agree. Intellectually, he could accept Bruce’s logic, but the real world was so much messier than that. Sure, Jay had made some mistakes, but there was no such thing as an “innocent” victim. Regardless of what he’d done, Jay needed help, and Dick was going to do everything he could to make sure both he and his jerk of a dad were safe, come what may. Suddenly, he heard the front door open. Well, that settled that. He probably couldn’t have gotten away clean before Jay returned anyway, which meant he would’ve had to fight Jay, and he didn’t want to do that. He already felt more than a little guilty about headbutting him yesterday. After all, Batman hadn’t trained him so that he could beat up on kids half his size, no matter how cunning they were.

“You’re awake,” Jay said as he entered the room. “Did you sleep ok?”

“I would’ve slept a lot better if I hadn’t been tied up and forced to sleep in a rat infested building on a mattress that smelled like pee,” Dick couldn’t resist pointing out, though he softened the complaint
with sly grin.


“That’s what you took from that?”

Jay didn’t answer him. He just hovered awkwardly over him for a moment before he shrugged off his backpack and squatted down in front of Dick.

Dick noted with a pang of guilt that he remained at least an arm’s length away, just in case Dick decided to attack him again.

“I thought you might be hungry, so I brought you some food,” Jay said as he removed a handful of pastry looking things from his backpack. “Lessee, got this one seedy bagel thing, two glazed doughnuts, and this chocolate one! I even got us some milk.” He pulled a couple of pint-sized cartons out of his bag and set them next to the pastries. “Pretty good, right?”

Dick licked his lips. He was pretty hungry, now that he thought about it. There was something suspicious about the food though. It reminded him of the cans of coke that had been pre-opened, because the food hadn’t come in a grocery bag, bakery box, or even a napkin. In fact, the items had clearly just been tossed into the bottom of Jay’s grungy backpack.

Jay must have caught him eyeing up the food, because he said, “I didn’t drug it, if that’s what you’re worried about. There wouldn’t be any reason to now.”

“Yeah, but where did it come from?” Dick asked.

“Oh, there’s this bakery like, a couple miles from here. If you go real early in the morning on Mondays, they usually throw out all the stuff that they didn’t sell the previous week. It’s pretty fierce competition, but if you can get there before anyone else, you can get the stuff on the top, that hasn’t touched anything gross,” Jay explained. “Plus, you get the good stuff, like chocolate!” He waved the chocolate doughnut in Dick’s face for emphasis.

Dick’s stomach growled as the smell of chocolate and pastry wafted up. “You’re sure it didn’t touch the garbage?”

“I swear,” Jay assured him. He held the doughnut up for Dick, who finally relented and took a bite. “Good, right?”

It was kind of (a lot) stale, but aside from that, it was sugary and greasy and just what Dick’s stomach craved.

“You sure you don’t want any? We could split it,” Dick offered.

Jay shook his head. “Naw, you eat it. You’re probably starving.”

Dick couldn’t argue with that. “Can I have that one, too?” he asked when he’d inhaled the chocolate doughnut.

“Yeah,” Jay said with a shrug, feeding him one of the glazed ones as well. “You want the last one?” he asked, when Dick had finished.

Dick heaved a satisfied sigh. “No, I’m ok.”

Jay ate the last doughnut in two bites, shoving it into his mouth and swallowing almost before he’d
“We’ll save this for lunch,” Jay said, putting the bagel on a piece of old newspaper and setting it to the side. “Are you thirsty?” He opened one of the milk cartons and offered it to Dick.

Dick didn’t bother asking where the obviously shoplifted milk had come from, because at the sight of it, the pressure in his bladder, which had been gradually growing, suddenly became insistent. “Actually, I could use the bathroom.”

Jay cast a nervous glance in the direction of the bathroom. He seemed to be thinking the problem through. After a moment, he nodded. “Ok, here’s what we’ll do. I’m gonna take off some of the tape, just enough so’s we can pull down your pants. I’ll put you in the bathroom, you do your thing, and when you’re done, I’ll help you up.” He pulled a large switchblade from his jeans pocket and flicked it open with an audible snick. “We’re not gonna have any problems, right?” He brandished the knife like a threat, although Dick could see the bravado was driven more by fear than anything else.

“Right,” Dick agreed.

Jay helped him to a standing position. After he cut and removed some of the tape surrounding Dick’s waist area, they hobbled to the bathroom. When they got in there, they both eyed the toilet, though Dick with a lot more concern.

“Maybe you should untie one of my hands,” Dick suggested.

Jay glanced sharply at him. “Maybe you should just sit down,” he countered. He unbuttoned Dick’s jeans and slid them halfway down his legs, whilst attempting to look obliquely at the floor. Then he guided Dick over and sat him down on the toilet. “Good?”

His bladder now too full to argue, Dick said, “Yeah, just go!” He jerked his head at the door urgently.

Jay backed out of the toilet but waited just beyond the doorway like a sentry. Dick noted that he neither shut the door, nor turned his back on him, although he was obviously making an effort not to look at him. Dick sighed and just let go. He’d never had an overly developed sense of modesty anyway, particularly when it came to things that his parents felt were a natural part of being human. When Dick was done, Jay pulled his pants back up for him and wrapped him in some fresh duct tape before he deposited him back on the fetid mattress.

“Well, now I feel like you know me better than most people, including my friends,” Dick said, not without some resentment. “How about you even the score, and tell me little bit about yourself?”

“Like what?” Jay asked as he took a swig from the open carton of milk.

“Like…how old are you? What grade are you in?” Jay offered him the carton, but Dick declined with a shake of his head. He wasn’t particularly keen to drink anything else that Jay offered him, and besides, he didn’t want to be back in the same bathroom situation just a couple of hours from now.

“I’m fourteen, and I’m in ninth grade,” Jay replied. “Why, what grade are you in?”

Dick blinked in surprise. Jay was only a year younger than him? But he was so short! Dick had pegged him for twelve. Although now that he thought about it, Jay had seemed rather mature for his age. It explained how he had managed to plan and execute this kidnapping down to the last detail, something Dick didn’t think a younger boy could’ve managed quite so effectively.
“Why the Caged Bird Sings isn’t a ninth grade book at my school,” Dick said, avoiding the question. “What school do you go to?”

Jay snorted. “I may not be Batman smart, but I’m not that dumb.”

Dick’s lips twisted in a small smile of grudging approval. He didn’t point out that if he truly wanted that information, it would be easy enough to find out by other means. “All right, you don’t have to answer that. How about this, what do you do for fun around here?”

“I dunno,” Jay said with a shrug. “Sometimes I throw stuff off the overpass.”

Dick laughed, but regretted it a split second later when he realized Jay was serious.

Jay ducked his head self-consciously. “Guess that’s kinda lame. What do you do when you’re not being Robin, or doing homework?”

“I hang out with my friends,” Dick said, grinning just at the thought of them. He wondered what they were doing just then. Artemis would be in pre-calculus, an advanced class that she had been rather pleased to get into, although he knew she’d rather die than admit she was struggling just a little. Wally would be at lunch, because his school had two lunch periods, and he had the earlier one. “What about you, do you have friends?”

“Yeah, I got friends. I mean, I’m not a loser,” Jay said defensively.

When he didn’t elaborate, Dick wondered if he just didn’t want to talk about them, or if he was lying. Jay didn’t seem unlikeable enough to be completely friendless, though. He was clearly intelligent, and essentially good-natured, if a bit awkward and possibly a lot morally ambiguous. The bottom line was, there was no reason he shouldn’t have at least one friend at school.

“What are your friends like?” Dick prompted.

Jay shrugged and looked away. After a moment, he said, “They used to be normal, just guys from the neighbourhood, you know? But since we started high school, everything’s different. Now they’re mostly in crews and stuff. They keep trying to get me to join but…I dunno. They make you do stuff to get in, like steal stuff or hurt people. Man, I don’t wanna be no crook. I mean, I know I steal food and run errands for my dad sometimes, but it’s not the same, you know?”

Dick raised an eyebrow at him.

Jay sighed. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Maybe I should just tell ‘em I kidnapped Robin and blackmailed Batman – that’d get me in for sure.”

Dick frowned. “I don’t think-“ He broke off when he noticed Jay rather unsuccessfully suppressing a smile, and realized he was joking. He huffed out a soft laugh. “You’d probably be gang leader by the end of the year with those credentials.”

“Yeah right,” Jay said with a snort. “Trust me, it’d take a lot more than this to earn enough respect to lead a crew.”

In a flash, Dick suddenly understood what this boy’s life was like, how lonely and isolating it must be to be the only person he knew resisting the criminal culture in his neighbourhood. Given his father’s stance on the matter, it was surprising, and frankly kind of brave of him to even try. Dick wondered where he got his sense of morality from, if not his father. Perhaps his mother? Either way, despite his best efforts, Jay would eventually succumb to a life of crime, if for no other reason than to fit in. Dick resolved then and there that he would help Jay, and not just with his immediate problem.
If Jay didn’t want to become a criminal like his father and his friends, then Dick was going to make sure that he was free to make that decision for himself.

“I bet you hang with the popular crowd, huh? Like, jocks and cheerleaders and stuff,” Jay said when Dick failed to keep up his side of the conversation.

Dick snorted. “Believe it or not, having a secret life that pretty much takes up all of your time, doesn’t leave much room for a social life. I have friends, but they’re all a little different, like me.”

“That sounds cool,” Jay said with a wistful sigh. “Plus, you get to run with Batman, which must be pretty great. You get to hang with the Justice League, too?”

Dick nodded. “Sometimes. I’ve even met Superman,” he said proudly.

“What about Wonder Woman? She’s hot,” Jay said.

Dick laughed. “She’s nice, and smart, but I haven’t talked to her much, so I don’t know her very well. I’ve trained with Black Canary though, and she’s pretty astrous.”

“I bet she is,” Jay agreed with a lopsided grin.

“She’d wipe that look right off your face if she were here.”

Jay flopped back on the mattress and smirked up at the ceiling. “Man, she can do whatever she wants to me. I’m game.”

Dick snorted loudly. “Her boyfriend, Green Arrow, might object.”

“He’s pretty hot too; he can join in, if he wants,” Jay said off-handedly. Then, as though he’d just realized what he said, he coughed. “I mean, not that I’m like, gay or anything. I mean, it’s not like-”

“Sure, I get it,” Dick said, anxious to curtail the backpeddling. “I should introduce you to my friend Wally. I think you’d get along.”

“Wally who eats on the phone and has a girlfriend?”

Dick blinked in surprise. He’d almost forgotten he’d mentioned Wally last night. That phone conversation had seemed like a lifetime ago. “Yeah. He’s my best friend, although you wouldn’t-”

The sound of the front door of the apartment (and Dick used the term loosely) opening interrupted him.

“Boy!” bellowed a man whom Dick took to be Jay’s father. “Where are you?”

Jay’s smile instantly vanished. He scrambled to his feet and bolted for the door, but before he could take more than a couple steps, his father appeared in the doorway.

“Wait!” Jay said, physically blocking the doorway to prevent his father from entering the room.

Jay’s father gave him a strange look before his gaze suddenly settled on Dick. “What-”

“I can explain,” Jay said hastily. “It’s about the money, for Two Face. See, that’s Robin, and I already got Batman to-”

“Robin? Batman??” Jay’s father said, his voice rising as realization dawned on him. He shot Dick a wild, terrified look just before his attention shifted back to his son. “Are you out of your fucking
mind or just plain stupid, boy?” he hissed as he dragged Jay from the room, slamming the bedroom door shut behind them.

Unfortunately, Dick could still hear them quite clearly in the next room. The apartment wasn’t very big, and the walls weren’t exactly well constructed.

“No, it’ll work, Dad,” Jay tried to insist. “Batman already said he was going to give us the money. All we have to do is make the exchange tonight at 8 o’clock.”

“Oh, is that all? Well you just got everything figured out, don’tcha?” Jay’s father sneered. The sharp sound of flesh hitting flesh preceded a small gasp. “You stupid little shit! You’ve just gone and signed my death warrant, twice over! Now, if it ain’t you know who comin’ after me, it’ll be the Bat.”

“But Dad, we-”

“Shut up, shut the fuck up!” the man shouted.

“Ow, Dad…” Dick heard a loud clatter. “Wait, listen…”

The bedroom door crashed open a moment later, and Jay’s dad stamped into the room dragging his son by the scruff. Dick’s heart skipped a beat when he saw the long wooden spoon clutched in the man’s other fist like a weapon. He suddenly very much wished he had escaped when he’d had the opportunity.

“Listen, Robin, Mr Robin,” the man said, addressing Dick unexpectedly. “I didn’t have nothin’ to do with this. My boy, he ain’t right in the head, and sometimes he gets these stupid ideas, you know? But I never told him to do this, all right? You’ll tell him, won’t you, the Bat? You’ll tell him I had nothin’ to do with it?”

Dick frowned. “I don’t think-”

“None of this is my fault, and I’ll be goddamned if I’m going down for it, y’hear?” the man snarled.

Dick noted the man’s shift in stance as he tightened his grip on the spoon. “Ok, I get it. Let’s just take a minute-”

“Dad-” Jay broke off with a yelp as his father lunged towards him. The spoon caught him across his thin forearms, raised at the last second to protect his head and face, and knocked him to the floor.

“No, wait don’t-“ Dick flinched as the man viciously clubbed the boy cowering at his feet. Jay gave a muted cry of pain, curling reflexively into a protective ball. Dick willed him to get up, to fight the man off, but he did nothing to either escape or defend himself.

“Tell him this was all you,” the man bellowed at his cowering son as he struck him repeatedly with his makeshift cudgel. “Tell him!”

“Y-yeah, it was all my idea. I j-just thought…I just wanted to h-help,” Jay stammered, presumably at Dick, although he didn’t take his eyes off his father, or the spoon, for a second.

“Y’see? I didn’t have nothin’ to do with this,” the man said before the hit Jay several more times, as though to prove he was…what, innocent? The thought that this despicable display was for Dick’s benefit made him furious. It incensed in him a righteous rage that he hadn’t experienced since his parents had died, assaulting his most deeply held values of right and wrong. Justice may not have been absolute, but he absolutely wanted to kill this scumbag.
“Brats, huh, whaddyou gonna do,” the man scoffed. “But believe you me, this one’s gonna learn his lesson. You can count on it.”

“Wait, no-“ Dick winced as Jay cried out from a particularly spiteful kick to the ribs. “Stop it! I believe you, just stop!”

A final swing of the wooden spoon caught Jay across the temple and he collapsed onto the floor in a dazed heap.

“Get up!” the man barked, as though he hadn’t just put the boy there. He hauled Jay up by the arm and shoved him towards Dick. “Untie him, now!”

Jay retrieved the switchblade from his pocket, and began to saw at the tough, gummy tape. Dick tried to catch Jay’s eye, but the boy kept his head bowed, his eyes down. Jay hissed suddenly, and Dick saw that he had nicked his finger with the blade. It was then that Dick noticed how badly Jay was shaking, so hard that he was worried he’d cut him, too.

“It’s ok,” Dick said softly. “I’m going to help you, I promise.”

Jay hesitated for just a fraction of a second, but then he returned to his task as though he hadn’t heard Dick speak. When the tape had mostly been cut through, Jay began to pull it off of Dick, carefully so as not to hurt him any more than was necessary.

“Hurry up! Useless fucking...nevermind, just get out of the way,” Jay’s father growled. Without waiting for his command to be obeyed, he gave Jay a hard shove that sent him sprawling across the cheap carpet.

When he got closer, Dick detected the stench of cheap booze and stale cigarette smoke rolling off of him in waves. The fatty, sugary doughnuts roiled in Dick’s stomach. The man unceremoniously ripped the tape off of him, taking several layers of skin with it, although Dick refused to react to the rough treatment.

“Y’see? I’m letting you go. No harm, no foul, right?” the man insisted. When he had pulled off enough tape for Dick to free himself, Dick pushed the man away, though he was loathe to touch him. He removed the rest of the tape himself and stood up. His back popped and his knees cracked, but he was essentially unharmed. The same couldn’t be said for Jay, he thought with a fresh surge of anger.

“You’ll tell him, won’t you?” Jay’s father repeated. “You’ll tell him I let you go?”

Dick fixed him with a contemptuous look. “Believe me, I’m going to report everything I’ve seen to Batman,” he gritted. Without wasting another moment on the man, he turned to check on Jay. He saw him scrunch into a corner of the room next to the wardrobe, as though if he made himself small enough, everyone would forget he was even there. Before Dick could take so much as a step towards him, however, Jay’s father grabbed Dick’s arm and dragged out of the bedroom. Once in the living room, he shoved him towards the front door.

“Nasty business, this. Kids, huh?” the man rambled. “But don’t you worry, I’ll take care of him. He ain’t never gonna forget this, you can count on that.”

Dick almost offered to give the man a hundred grand not to brutalise his son any further, but he knew there was no way either of them could be sure the other would keep to that bargain, so he just gave the man a sharp nod and put as much distance between himself and the building as quickly as his legs could carry him. The sooner he found Batman, the sooner he could come back and give this man a taste of his own medicine, he thought darkly.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the short chapter after the long break. I realised belatedly that I should have ended the previous chapter here.

Bruce scanned the cluster of dilapidated buildings again as he circled the block, trying to peer into every window.

“Where are you?” he muttered under his breath, willing Robin’s grinning face to appear in one of the windows.

The kidnapper had stripped Robin of all his GPS trackers, so now all that remained was the RFID chip implanted beneath a flap of skin just behind Robin’s left ear. The problem was that in high population density areas such as the Narrows, where Robin’s chip had last been detected, the tracking system simply wasn’t accurate enough. There were dozens of buildings in the area, each crammed with tiny, squalid apartments, any one of which Robin could have been held in. The RFID chip was always meant to be a last resort, the GPS trackers having much better range and accuracy. The worst part of all was that he had taught Robin to avoid all CCTV traffic cameras, leaving this his only lead. Bruce growled in frustration. Either this kidnapper was very smart, or he was very, very lucky.

Equally annoying was Robin’s use of code. “Trust me”…as if Bruce would follow his lead blindly, no questions asked. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Dick – he trusted him with his life. He just couldn’t trust Dick with his own life. Dick was too confident in his own abilities, and like all teenagers, utterly convinced of his own immortality. Bruce loved him for that, knew that it made Dick the fearless fighter that he was, but lying in his bed in the small hours of the morning, it was just another worry to add to the pile that kept him from sleeping.

With a sigh, he turned down a narrow alleyway to make another loop. Suddenly, his phone began to ring. Seeing a foreign number, he gritted his teeth, steeling himself for another demand from the kidnapper.

“Yes?” he growled into the phone.

“Oh good, it worked! I had to run like twenty blocks with no shoes before I found a working payphone. You never think about how much you use your shoes until someone steals ‘em off your feet!”

“Robin,” Bruce said as a wave of relief washed over him, instantly curing his growing tension headache. “What’s your location?” Robin rattled off the address of the phone booth. “Stay there. I’ll be there in two.”

When he saw Dick standing on the street corner, shivering in some ragged looking civilian clothing, he pulled over sharply.

Dick hopped into the car and shot him a dazzling smile. “It’s good to see you, B.”
“What took you so long?” Bruce snapped.

“I was biding my time,” Dick said, his grin grown incorrigible.

Bruce merely grunted, though his lips did manage to twitch up of their own accord. “Report.”

Dick spoke rapidly as he dug a spare uniform out of one of the compartments in the passenger side door and started to get dressed. He briefed Bruce on all of his dealings with the kidnapper, starting from his run in with him a few days ago, and ending with his sprint to the phone booth.

“…so we should head back to the apartment before he does anything else to Jay,” Dick finished.

Bruce turned the car around without protest and gunned it back to the Narrows. When they got to the right apartment building, they used their grappling guns to get up onto the fire escape. In a well-practiced maneuver, they entered the apartment through the bedroom window, first Bruce, then Dick, covering his back.

It took only seconds to search the tiny apartment, and to realize that it was empty.

“Where’d they go?” Dick asked incredulously. “It’s only been maybe ten, fifteen minutes?”

Bruce eyed the chaotic room. Doors and drawers stood open all over the room, clothing and other belongings hanging haphazardly out of them. “It looks like they left in a hurry, and don’t intend to return.”

Dick nodded, agreeing with his assessment. “They’re probably on the run from Two Face, and I guess us, too. They can’t have gone far. We can still find them; we’ll just have Alf search the traffic camera footage.”

Bruce hesitated. “Wouldn’t it be better if we just let them go?”

“Are you serious?” Dick blurted. “There’s no way we’re leaving Jay with that guy. He was disturbed with a capital DIS.”

“That guy, as you call him, is his father, and his rightful guardian,” Bruce admonished. “Even if you manage to catch them, what do you intend to do? From the sounds of it, the last thing that boy would want is to be separated from his father. This leads me to believe that the violence was just aberrant behaviour brought on by a stressful situation. You said yourself that you thought the violent display was primarily for your benefit. Once they’re out of Gotham, I’m sure Jay will be fine. Besides, statistically speaking, at his age, putting him into the foster system may do more harm than good, particularly if the alternative is leaving him under the care of a parent that he clearly loves.”

“Statistically speaking, really?” Dick said, fisting a hand on his hip. “Trust me, B, I’m no fan of the foster system, but you weren’t there; you didn’t look into that guy’s eyes and see the crazy staring back at you. Besides, what if Two Face catches them before they can get out of Gotham? Then what’ll happen to them?”

Bruce frowned. Dick had a point. Perhaps it would be best for all concerned if they ensured that the boy and his father made it out of Gotham alive. He clicked on his communications device. “Penny One? I need assistance. Traffic and CCTV camera footage from the last fifteen minutes, Narrows, 1800 block, originating from my current coordinates. No vehicle description, but it’s a man and a boy, both Caucasian, dark haired. The boy will be approximately 12-14 years of age, and he’ll have facial bruising.” He glanced at Dick, who nodded a confirmation. “I need their location, ASAP.”

“Understood,” Alfred replied.

Bruce and Dick made their way back down the fire escape. By the time they had returned to the car,
Alfred was back on the line.

“I’ve found them sir, but you’re not going to like this. They’ve just been waylaid by a number of large gentlemen,” Alfred said. He sent the coordinates directly to the car’s navigation system.

The car roared to life, and Bruce pulled a quick j-turn. “I’m in pursuit.”

Every few seconds, Alfred updated the location based on glimpses of them he’d caught on the traffic cameras. They were moving fast, but the batmobile was faster. They were just closing in on the location when suddenly, Alfred said, “I’m afraid I’ve lost them, sir. They’ve gone into Old Gotham.” Bruce resisted the urge to growl in frustration. He’d been meaning to replace those cameras for some time. He really should have done it two weeks ago, instead of taking the night off. Contrary to Alfred’s overly conservative counsel, that knife wound wouldn’t have been severe enough to prevent him from changing out a few cameras.

“Switching to satellite,” Alfred informed him.

Bruce pulled over and scanned the streets, trying to guess which way they would have gone from there. No route looked more obvious than any other.

“Sir, I’ve- oh my word!”

Simultaneously, the report of gunfire echoed through the neighbourhood. Bruce made a beeline for the noise and the newly updated location on the GPS.

“Hurry!” Dick urged.

They pulled into a blind alley and screeched to a halt.

For a second, the batmobile’s halogen headlights illuminated nothing but a billowing cloud of dust, but then it cleared slightly, and they saw a boy kneeling on the ground, cradling a man in his arms. Dark red spread around them in a widening pool.

Bruce’s heart sank.

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It took several hours for the GCPD to process the crime scene and question them, but eventually, the CSI team cleared out, and the only people left to contend with were Bullock and his partner.

“All right, I think we’re done here,” Bullock pronounced.

“What about Jay?” Dick asked, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at him. Jay was sitting against a wall a few feet away looking small and rather lost. Dick had put him there some hours past with an order to stay out of the way. Apparently, Jay had taken the order to heart, because he hadn’t moved a muscle.

Bullock barely spared a glance in the boy’s direction. “We’ll take him down to the precinct and turn him over to SVU. They’ll sort him out a bunk; he’ll be fine for the night. Social services can process him in the morning.”

“That’s it? His dad just died, and you’re gonna lock him in a room at the station, alone, all night?” Dick demanded.

“Whaddya want, kid? We’re cops, not babysitters,” Bullock grunted.
Dick prodded Bruce surreptitiously in the back, shooting him a meaningful look when Bruce glanced at him.

Bruce deliberately ignored him. He knew what Dick wanted, and he didn’t want to have this conversation, particularly not in front of strangers.

Bullock walked over to Jay. They conversed for a moment, and then the boy got to his feet and followed Bullock to his car.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Jason, Jason Todd, and I’m not your son,” the boy growled sullenly as he got into the squad car.

Dick tugged on Bruce’s cape. “We can’t let them take him!” he hissed.

Bruce started back to the batmobile. “We’re done here.”

“Batman, wait,” Dick said, trailing after him.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Bruce said. “Besides, SVU and social services deal with these situations all the time. They’re best equipped to take care of him.”

“No, they’re not. He’s just watched his whole world collapse right in front of his eyes. No one understands what that feels like better than you or me,” Dick argued.

Bruce resisted the blatant manipulation and turned to look his young protégé in the eye. “I know you want to help this boy, but do you really think it’s a good idea to reveal our identities to him? He’s already betrayed your trust once, and he’s proven that he’s willing to do anything to get what he wants. What makes you think he won’t sell you out to the first newspaper that offers him…well, a hundred grand?”

“That’s not fair,” Dick accused. “He didn’t do it for the money, he did it to save his dad. If you could’ve done something to save your parents, wouldn’t you have? I know I would’ve done anything to save my parents. Maybe not now, because now I know better, but back then? I don’t know, B. In Jay’s situation, maybe I would’ve done the same.”

“No, Robin,” Bruce said, grasping him by the shoulders. “I know you, and I know you wouldn’t have done something like this, not even for your parents. You would’ve been tempted, but to kidnap a child and place him in danger just so you could extort money from his parents? You would never have made that choice. I understand why you might sympathise with this boy, especially after everything he’s been through, but you’re too blinded by your emotions. He’s a criminal just as much as his father was, and whatever abuse he may have suffered at that man’s hands doesn’t make him any less culpable for his actions. Remember, criminals come in all shapes and sizes.”

“So do victims, especially in Gotham. You taught me that,” Dick said. “Jay’s made some mistakes, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t deserve our help.”

Bruce bit back a grimace.

“Besides, he kept my mask on when he could’ve taken it off at any time. He’ll keep our secret, I just know it,” Dick said. “Please, B? I gave him my word that I’d help him. Don’t make a liar out of me.”

Bruce gritted his teeth. He’d known Dick would give him the hard sell, had anticipated it since he’d learned of the abuse, and yet, here he was, his resolve slipping after mere minutes of argument. He couldn’t deny that Jason cut a pretty pathetic figure slumped in the back of Bullock’s squad car.
Maybe he was getting soft in his old age, but...oh, who was he kidding? He never stood a chance of winning this argument, and he knew it - had known it the moment he watched the boy’s father die in his arms. Whatever his misgivings were about the situation, Jay needed their help, and Bruce wasn’t about to turn his back on him over, let’s face it, a bit of hurt pride. If anything, he should probably thank the boy for revealing the flaws in his tracking system. If this had been a real kidnapping, Dick might have been seriously injured.

With a deep sigh, he said, “Bullock, wait,” and strode quickly towards the idling police car to stop the detective from getting behind the wheel. “I have a friend who can take the boy for the night, and bring him to social services in the morning.”

The policemen regarded Bruce with a weary look. “What friend of yours is gonna want this gutter rat in his house?”

“That’s not important,” Bruce said brusquely. “The point is, you could drive him down to the station and spend the next hour and a half filling out all the proper paperwork, or you could turn him over to me, and be home in time for Leno.”

Bullock grunted in annoyance, but it didn’t take long for self-interest to win out over procedure. That was Gotham’s finest for you. “Fine, whatever.” He circled the car and opened Jason’s door.

“Change of plans, kid. You’re going with him.”

Jason’s gaze snapped to Bruce, and for a moment, Bruce recognised stark terror in those wide blue eyes. But then the boy looked down and seemed to marshal his courage. He got out of the car and shuffled over to the batmobile with the sort of resignation one might expect from prisoners destined for the gallows.

“Tell your friend to watch that one,” Bullock said, smirking around a toothpick. He wriggled his fingers. “Something tells me he’s got sticky fingers.”
Chapter 5

By the time they pulled into the underground “batcave”, as Robin called it, Jason’s stomach was churning so hard around a knot of fear that he kept having to swallow down the bile rising in the back of his throat. At Robin’s urging, he clambered out of the backseat of the car and stumbled out onto the slick, subterranean floor on unsteady legs.

“Well, what do you think?” Robin asked eagerly. “Totally whelming, right?”

Jason took in the enormous cavern with its pitch-dark recesses that looked like gaping mouths and creepy stalactites that looked like fangs, and shuddered. Those deep dark holes probably came in real handy for disposing bodies. He wondered how many corpses were stacked down there right now, rotting quietly where no one would ever find them. He just hoped that Batman’s promised beating killed him, because he really didn’t want to die choking on his own blood in the dark amongst a pile of maggoty corpses. He didn’t want to die at all, but especially not like that.

“It’s…big,” he said, when he realized Robin was expecting an answer out of him.

Robin grinned. “It’s even bigger than it looks! This cave’s part of a whole underground system that stretches for miles. The river eventually empties into the bay.”

So the bodies were eventually washed into the bay. That made a gruesome sort of sense, Jason supposed, since keeping a bunch of rotting corpses in your super secret lair would probably stink up the place too much. It didn’t bring him much comfort, though, as the thought of drowning in pitch-black, freezing water wasn’t much more appealing.

“I’m Dick, by the way, Dick Grayson.”

“Bruce Wayne.”

Jason tore his gaze from the rushing river beneath the platform to find that both Robin and Batman had unmasked, and were staring at him expectantly. He looked away immediately, but it was too late, he’d seen them. All hope that he would survive the night promptly snuffed out. Everybody knew that kidnappers only let you see their faces when they didn’t intend to let you live. Granted, he’d let Robin see his face, but that was because Robin had already seen him, and anyway it hadn’t mattered if he got caught, so long as his dad was ok. In this case, Batman and Robin didn’t care if he knew who they were, because soon, he wasn’t going to be able to tell anyone anything. He began to shiver, his whole body quaking in spite of his efforts to remain rigidly still.

“Are you ok?” Dick asked, his handsome face (yeah, Jason had noticed, despite everything else) scrunched in concern. “I know this is a lot to take in. It’s probably a bit over-whelming, huh?”

Jason nodded weakly.

“Why don’t you take him upstairs and get him a change of clothes?” Bruce suggested.

“Oh, great idea!” Dick said. “C’mon, I’ll show you my room.”

Jason followed Dick blindly up a long flight of stairs and into the biggest house he’d ever seen. For a moment, he forgot his impending death and simply gawked at the sheer opulence that surrounded him. It suddenly clicked in his head – no wonder the name had sounded so familiar. Bruce Wayne was that bajillionaire guy who had his name on all the buildings downtown.
Wait…what?

Why would some rich guy want to be Batman? Everyone always assumed that Batman came from the Narrows or some other such place. Who else would know the streets so well, or for that matter, care about what went down there? Bruce Wayne lived in a different Gotham entirely, one untouched by crime and poverty; what on earth would drive him to do this if he didn’t grow up losing everything he loved to those things as a matter of course? The disconnect, the incongruity of it, was so severe that it made Jason’s head spin.

“Why would Bruce Wayne wanna be Batman?” he blurted. “I…I mean…he’s got everything!”

Dick shot him a sad smile. “I think that’s his story to tell. Come on, let’s get you something clean to wear.”

Jason almost protested that he didn’t need anything when he looked down at himself and was somewhat surprised to note that his shirt was stiff with dried blood - his dad’s blood. Right. He wondered how he should feel about that. Sad, he supposed, but he didn’t really feel anything at the moment. There was probably something wrong with him, but he couldn’t muster the energy to care. He was going to be dead soon anyway, so what did it matter?

He let Dick lead him upstairs, and when Dick shoved an oversize hoodie and jeans into his hands, he obligingly changed into them. It seemed odd that they would want to dress him in Dick’s clothes before they executed him, but maybe they just didn’t want him to muck up their clean house in the mean time.

“What…are you…all right?”

For some reason, Dick was staring at him with wide, worried eyes. “Huh?” Jason said intelligently.

“Um…” Dick gestured vaguely at Jason’s chest. “Your dad was kind of…rough on you. Are you hurt?”

Jason cocked his head in confusion for a second before it dawned on him. Oh yeah, that. Again, he probably should be feeling something – he hadn’t taken a beating like that in some time – but mostly he just felt numb. “I’m ok,” he said with a shrug.

Dick narrowed his eyes, but he didn’t pry any further. Jason was grateful for that, at least.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. Let’s go see what we can find downstairs.”

Jason suddenly remembered the bagel that he’d scrounged from the dumpster earlier, and wished he had remembered to bring it with him. Not that Dick probably wanted it now, but it seemed like such a waste to have left it behind.

Dick chattered conversationally as he led Jason downstairs and through various hallways and rooms. Jason listened with half an ear, murmuring now and again when a pause indicated a response was required. Dick finally stopped in a room with a massive table, laden at the moment with heaping plates of food.

“All right, potroast! Alfred’s potroast is the best,” Dick informed him with a delighted grin.

“I thought you might approve, Master Dick,” someone said from behind them.

Jason whirled, throwing his hands up reflexively to protect himself from…an old man? He lowered his hands, feeling more than a little foolish when he saw that his would-be assailant was armed with
an oven mitt in one hand and a dish towel in the other. Still, looks could be deceiving. After all, if Bruce Wayne was Batman, then Lurch here was probably a ninja assassin or something.

“And who might you be, young man?”

“What’s it to you, old man?” Jason snapped.

“This is Jason, he’s staying with us tonight,” Dick interceded. “Jay, this is Alfred. He’s our butler, and lots more besides.”

“Lots more besides” was probably code for ninja assassin, Jason decided.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jason,” Alfred said with a kindly smile.

“Whatever,” Jason muttered before he carefully backed away from the old man and moved over to the table to glare at the assortment of delicious looking food. On a normal day, he’d be all over that like a hobo on a ham sandwich, but right now, it just made him confused, and then frustrated, and finally, just plain pissed off.

Why didn’t they just kill him already? Why all the rigmarole? Did they think they could fool him, lure him into a false sense of security before they whacked him? What was the point of that? Robin alone could overpower him if he wanted to, let alone Batman or Lurch. Maybe they were just fucking with him; Batman was known for liking his cat and mouse games, after all. Or maybe it was retribution, teaching him a lesson, tricking him the way he’d tricked Dick. He clenched his fists in frustration at the sheer helplessness of his situation. Maybe he did deserve to die after what he did to Robin, but it was so cruel of them to toy with his emotions like this. It was the sort of Jekyll and Hyde crap that Two Face would pull, except that Batman and Robin were supposed to be the good guys!

“Jason? What’s wrong?” Dick asked.

“What’s wrong?” Jason exploded. “What isn’t wrong with this freak show?” He waved his hand in a gesture intended to encompass everything. “Why don’t you just do what you’re gonna do and quit screwing with me? If you think I’m gonna beg or cry like some little baby, you can forget it! So just…just do it already!”

Dick frowned, though he seemed generally unfazed by Jason’s outburst. “Do what already?”

“Perhaps Jason and I should have a talk.”

Jason’s attention snapped to the corner of the room, where he saw Bruce lurking like a great hulking shadow. He hadn’t even noticed he was there until now, although no one else seemed surprised, so it seemed he was the only one.

Bruce peeled away from the wall, gliding smoothly towards them, cool confidence a thin veneer over the tension that Jason could read in every line of his muscular body. Jason knew that look well; it was the look of violence just barely restrained, and it never boded well for him.

“What, now? Before potroast?” Dick asked, a bit of a whine creeping into his tone.

Bruce’s hand closed over Jason’s shoulder like a vise. Jason resisted the urge to fight the hold - something told him he would only succeed in making it worse for himself.

“I think now would be best,” Bruce said to Dick, though he didn’t take his eyes off Jason.
“But-“

“Go ahead and eat - this shouldn’t take long.”

Dick frowned, but then he shrugged. “If you say so.”

Bruce pushed Jason firmly towards one of the hallways leading off the dining room. Jason knew it was irrational, but he couldn’t help but feel a little betrayed when Dick sat down and started shoveling food into his face without so much as a “nice knowin’ ya”.

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“Come, walk with me,” Bruce said. He tightened his grip on Jason’s shoulder, and was startled to feel little more than skin and bone beneath the boy’s borrowed clothing. He wondered if this was normal for other children – after all, he hadn’t had much cause to get physical with children other than Dick, and he was fairly certain that Dick’s wiry yet muscular acrobat’s frame was atypical for children of his age.

Jason cast a glance over his shoulder. “What about Dick?”

“This won’t take long. You can join him when we’re done,” Bruce said.

Jason shuffled forward at a snail’s pace, passively resisting Bruce every step of the way. His anger seemed to have fled him, leaving him fearful and anxious. Bruce could feel him trembling beneath his hand, shoulders hunched as though expecting a blow at any moment.

“You can relax, Jason. I’m not going to hurt you,” Bruce assured him. “Dick told me what your father said, how concerned he was that I might want retribution for the kidnapping, but I want you to know that that’s the furthest thing from my mind.”

Jason blinked up at him in surprise. “But...on the phone, you said you was gonna beat my brains in.”

Bruce winced at the memory. “That was before I knew what the circumstances were. I won’t lie; I’m not pleased with what you did, but I understand why you felt you had to do it.”

“You do?” Jason asked suspiciously.

“I do,” Bruce said. “It was a pretty brave, if foolhardy, thing to do.”

“Dunno about that,” Jason muttered at his shoes.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “What don’t you know about?”

Jason shrugged. “I only did it ‘cause I had to do somethin’, and I didn’t know what else to do. That’s not brave.”

“Sometimes, being brave is just about doing what has to be done when no one else can or will,” Bruce said.

Jason didn’t say anything to that, although Bruce felt him relax a little. He chose to count that as a minor victory. He let go of the boy’s shoulder and continued on, trusting that Jason would now follow of his own volition. He lead them down the east wing hallway, through the sitting room, and out into the rose garden. This garden had been his mother’s favourite, and he had spent countless hours playing in it as a child. Even after all these years, he still found it one of the most peaceful places in the manor.
Jason trailed after him, though he still hesitated every so often to peer anxiously back the way they had come. It was clear that the boy didn’t trust him, and Bruce couldn’t really blame him. Jason reminded him of a stray dog he’d befriended once as a child. His father had refused to let him keep it, but that hadn’t stopped him from leaving food out for the wary animal at every opportunity (with Alfred’s collusion, of course). One day, the dog had just disappeared. Alfred had tried to convince him that “Scraps” had found a family who could take care of him, but even then, Bruce had known it was a lie. He understood now why his father hadn’t let him keep the mangy animal, but there had been other options. They could’ve taken Scraps to an animal shelter, at the very least. Some other family might’ve been able to adopt him, even if they couldn’t.

Well, now that he was the adult in the situation, he wasn’t going to let history repeat itself. Jason wasn’t some stray dog; he was a traumatised child with some very complex needs. Bruce knew he was in no position to take him in – he could barely handle Dick as it was – but he was going to do his level best to ensure that no matter where Jason ended up, his needs would be met. Dick would be disappointed, but he would see the sense in it eventually.

“Where’re we going?” Jason finally asked after they’d walked for some minutes in uneasy silence.

“When Dick first came to live here, he found the house rather imposing and oppressive. I grew up here, so I never thought so, but I thought you might prefer it if we talked out here instead,” Bruce said. “My mother used to say that this garden was one of the most tranquil places on God’s green earth. She was a wonderful person – you would have liked her, I think. She had a way with people, children especially.” He paused expectantly, but Jason didn’t comment on his use of past tense in reference to his mother. He doubted that the boy had failed to notice, however. Whatever else he might be, Jason wasn’t stupid, or oblivious. “Dick tells me your mother’s passed away as well. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“’s’ok,” Jason mumbled. He shivered, and stuffed his hands into his hoodie pockets.

Bruce considered offering him his coat, but decided against it when he took a step towards him, and the boy subtly backed away from him. “How long ago did she die?”

Jason shrugged. “I dunno, couple years, something like that.”

“That would make you twelve when she died?”

“I guess.”

“If I may ask, how did she die?”

“She…got sick, and then she died.” Jason stopped and glanced back over his shoulder again. “Do you think we could go back to the house now? I’m real tired.”

Bruce noticed that they had stopped near a stone bench surrounded by a circle of pea gravel. He decided it was as good an opening as he was going to get. “Why don’t we rest here for a minute if you’re tired?” he suggested, taking a seat on the bench.

Though it was dark, the moon was bright in the sky, and the garden was lit with small, tactfully placed solar lights that gave off a soft, warm glow. Jason took two steps into the circle of gravel before he balked again.

“I told you, I’m not going to hurt you,” Bruce said with a touch of impatience. Even poor old Scraps hadn’t been this skittish! “Here, have a seat.”

At the suggestion, Jason reluctantly moved to sit next to him. Bruce gave the boy’s shoulder a
reassuring squeeze, noting the tension in his muscles and the small tremors wracking his bony frame.

“You’re freezing.” Bruce said. “Would you like my coat?”

“’m ok.”

“Here,” Bruce offered, scooting closer to Jason so he could put his arm around his shoulders, the way he did with Dick sometimes. Dick tended to find comfort in physical contact, and he just assumed that it was a trait that all children shared. “How’s this?”

“It’s...ok,” Jason said slowly. He peered up at him with an inscrutable expression, the bruises on his face making him doubly difficult to read.

Bruce contained a sigh. He wasn’t used to interacting with children who weren’t Dick. Now, bullshit and small talk between drunken socialites? That, he could do. He had considered including Dick in this conversation – Dick always had been better at this sort of thing - but he’d been concerned that Jason would think they were ganging up on him. He realised now that he should’ve just sent Dick to gather this information for him, since Jason probably trusted Dick a far sight more than he trusted him. It was too late now though – they were already here, so he might as well try to get what he could out of the boy.

“You know, I used to play in this garden when I was a boy not much younger than you,” Bruce offered into the awkward silence. “This was before...before my parents died. They were killed in Crime Alley during a mugging when I was ten. It was Alfred who raised me, after that.”

That should get Jason talking, Bruce decided. At the very least, the boy should have some questions about his reasons for donning the cowl. Most people did, who’d heard the story.

But Jason just waited apprehensively for him to continue or not, as he saw fit. It was then that Bruce realized the boy wasn’t going to engage voluntarily with him. He had been hoping to avoid turning this into a one-sided interrogation, but it seemed the only way to get information out of Jason was to ask him direct questions. Well, it wasn’t ideal, but if he was going to help the boy, he needed to know more about his family history.

“Do you have anyone like Alfred in your life, a family friend, or a relative who could take care of you?” Bruce asked.

“No,” Jason said. He fidgeted in his seat, and Bruce absently transferred his grip to the back of the boy’s neck to stop him from squirming, like he used to do with Dick when he was younger. Jason stilled at his touch. “Is that all? Can we go back now?” he asked hopefully.

“Soon,” Bruce assured him. “First, I need you to help me with something.”

He felt Jason go rigid under his hand. “But...what about Dick? Maybe we should get Dick...” Jason started to get up, but Bruce gently pressed him back down on the bench.

“Dick can’t help me with this, Jason, only you can,” Bruce said. “I want to help you, to make sure that you’re taken care of, but I can’t help you unless you help me first. Do you understand?”

Jason bit his lip. “Oh. Yeah, ok. I get it.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow at the boy’s tone. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No,” Jason said quickly, though his gulp was audible in the quiet garden. “I just...uh...I know you probably think all us Narrows kids know how to do this kinda thing, but, you know, I never done it
“Wait, ok, just relax, all right? Look, I’m doin’ it, see?” Jason suddenly slid off the bench to kneel in the gravel between Bruce’s parted knees.

“Doing what- hey!” Bruce all but squeaked when the boy reached for the waistband of his pants, brushing against some very intimate areas along the way. His knee-jerk reaction was to shove the boy off of him. Jason fell back onto the ground with a startled yelp and a spray of gravel.

Bruce shuddered involuntarily, every cell in his body cringing at the wrongness of those small hands on his…person. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

Jason interrupted him with a wordless shout and drove the heel of his sneakered foot into the side of Bruce’s knee.

Bruce stumbled back against the stone bench, and Jason used the momentary distraction to take off into the darkness like demons were nipping at his heels.

Bruce winced at the pain shooting up his knee as he gave chase. In a strange coincidence, that kick was one of the first maneuvers he’d ever taught Dick. It was designed to disable a stronger opponent, and he was annoyed to realise that if there’d been more weight and muscle behind it, Jason might have torn the ligaments in his knee.

It didn’t take long to catch up to the boy – he was fast, but he didn’t know where he was going, and seemed to be crashing through as many rose bushes as he avoided. At this rate, he was going to tear his skin to shreds on the thorns, hoodie or no.

“Jason, stop!” Bruce reached out and snagged the boy’s arm, jerking him to an abrupt halt.

“Ow, lemme go!” Jason shouted, frantically wrenching at his arm to free himself from Bruce’s grip. He tried to kick Bruce again, but this time Bruce was prepared, and with a quick shift of weight, he swept the boy’s legs out from under him and pinned him to the ground.

“Stop fighting me; I don’t want to hurt you!” Bruce said.

Jason stopped struggling somewhat abruptly at the command. In the sudden silence, his wild, ragged breathing seemed unnaturally loud. “Ok…ok, just…” He grimaced. “Fuck. Just take it easy, all right?”

“Jason, no!” Bruce quickly grabbed the boy’s wrists to stop him from unbuttoning his own jeans. “That’s not what this is about. I would never…do that.”

Suddenly conscious of the position they were in, he quickly rolled off of the boy and moved a pace or two away, where he sat down with his hands on his knees in as neutral a position as he could think of.

Jason sat up and stared at him, eyes wide with fear and distrust, chest heaving as he sucked in sharp, shallow breaths.

What had he been thinking, dragging the boy out here in the middle of the night like this? A kid from such a dubious background, of course he would think the worst!
“I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression,” Bruce said, though it hardly seemed adequate. “I just wanted to talk, to understand your situation a little better. It would help me – and social services – to determine what’s best for you, so that we can ensure that you’ll be as happy and comfortable as possible in your new home.”

“Oh… “ Jason’s face flushed so red, Bruce could see it even in the dim lighting. “Uh…ok.” Slowly, cautiously, he got up and sat down cross-legged in the grass next to Bruce, albeit with a healthy gap between them.

Bruce gave him what he hoped was a friendly and reassuring smile. “Are you all right?”

Jason nodded vigorously. “Yeah, yeah I’m good. You really had me goin’ for a minute there, boss. Haha, good one.”

Bruce ached for the boy, for the hasty smile that couldn’t quite mask the fear in his eyes, for the nervous laugh that quavered ever so slightly at the edges. He’d never wanted to hug anyone so badly in his life, but he restrained himself, because frankly, it would only make matters worse.

“Would it be all right if I asked you some questions now about your family?”

Jason nodded again.

“Do you know if you have any extended family, any grandparents, aunts or uncles, cousins, that sort of thing?”

Jason shook his head. “None on Dad’s side, anyway. I dunno about Mom’s side; I never met any of ‘em.”

“What was your mother’s name?” Bruce asked.

“Catherine.”

Bruce waited, to see if he would elaborate.

On cue, Jason said, “Catherine Elizabeth Spencer - that was her maiden name. Dad used to call her Kitty-Cat. It used to drive her nuts.” The last was said with a note of wistful longing.

The look on his face reminded Bruce so much of Dick that he reached out to give the boy’s shoulder a reassuring touch, only remembering at the last minute that it might be misconstrued. He dropped his hand somewhat abruptly.

Bruce pretended he hadn’t noticed the aborted gesture, but from the sudden stiffening of his posture, Bruce could tell that he had. He kicked himself mentally. This boy wasn’t like Dick or even himself at that age – he needed to be careful, vigilant, to think things through before he acted, or reacted, as the case may be.

“He wasn’t always like this, you know,” Jason said, ignoring the obvious tension between them, or perhaps talking to cover it. “My dad, I mean. Back before my mom got sick, he used to spend lots of time with us, hanging out, watching TV, making pancakes, real family stuff. I mean, it wasn’t perfect – they still fought sometimes - but that’s normal, right?”

Bruce nodded. “All parents fight sometimes,” he agreed. “But during these fights, did he ever hurt your mom, or you?”

Jason looked down as he ripped small handfuls of grass out of the earth. “I guess,” he admitted softly.
Well, there went Bruce’s theory that the abuse was just a reaction to the extraordinary situation. It was disappointing, but given the boy’s heightened levels of fear and distrust, it was hardly surprising. “That’s not normal,” he felt constrained to say. “You know that, right?”

Jason shrugged. “I still miss him, though. You probably think that’s stupid. I know Dick does.”

“It’s not stupid at all,” Bruce said gently. “Boys love their fathers, no matter their flaws. We can’t help it – it’s built into our DNA.”

Jason sighed, and Bruce was pleased to detect relief there. At least he’d done something right tonight.

“Jason, I want to ask you something, and I want you to think carefully before you answer me.”

“Ok…”

“If you could choose who to live with, anyone you wanted, who would it be?”

Jason scowled up at him, and then he looked away. “Can’t I just go back to my apartment? I can take care of myself – I been doin’ it a long time now, even before my mom died.”

“Even if you could subsist on stolen food and clothing, how would you pay for the rent on your apartment? Your father may not have done much in the way of providing for you, but at least he kept a roof over your head, such as it was.”

“No way, I scraped up rent for us loads of times,” Jason protested. “It’d probably be easier if I didn’t have to worry about him stealin’ all the rent money.”

Bruce quashed a wave of chagrin. “You’re fourteen, you can’t live by yourself,” he said curtly.

“I’m almost fifteen, and that’s almost sixteen,” Jason argued. “Sixteen year olds can drive, and have jobs, and live by themselves!”

Bruce raised an eyebrow at him. Jason rolled his eyes. “Fine, if you’re so smart, then who’m I gonna live with, huh?”

“Well, we could find you a foster home through social services, or perhaps your mother’s family could take you in, if we can track them down.”

“Nobody’s gonna wanna adopt me, I’m too old. And what if my mom doesn’t have a family, or they don’t want nothin’ to do with me?” Jason asked. “They didn’t care when my mom died, why would they care about me?”

“There’s always boarding school,” Bruce suggested.

“Nuh uh, no way,” Jason said with a shake of his head. “Only thing worse than school is living at school 24-7.”

“Well, we’ll work something out,” Bruce said. He cut Jason off before he could protest further. “Why don’t we go back inside? It’s late, and we’ve all had a long day.”

To his surprise, Jason let the argument drop. He was used to Dick, he supposed, who tended to argue every point to a stalemate. It wasn’t until they were back inside the well-lit manor that he noticed the dark rings under Jason’s eyes, and realized how truly exhausted he must be. He herded the boy to the stairs, where Alfred suddenly appeared at his side.
“How was your walk?” he asked, arching an eyebrow at the bits of grass in Jason’s hair.

“Refreshing,” Bruce said, with a look that promised they would discuss it later.

“I’ve kept the roast warm, if you fancy a bite, Master Jason,” Alfred said.

Jason shook his head.

“How about I take you to your room, then? Would you like that?” Alfred asked.

Jason shrugged.

“Why don’t you get some sleep, and we’ll talk in the morning,” Bruce said.

Jason nodded wordlessly at him and with a yawn, followed Alfred up the stairs.
I'm so embarrassed that it's taken me so long to write this fic. I will try to finish it soon, I swear. Thanks so much for sticking with me and putting up with my slow ass nonsense.

"Skipping town, Todd? Tsk, tsk," Two Face rasped, the ruined half of his face raw and mutilated and horrible beyond the worst horror movies Jason had ever snuck into.

"Please, just let my dad go. He didn’t do anything wrong! It was all me; I lost the package, ok? If you’re gonna blame anyone, blame me!"

Two Face made a sound like he was grinding rocks deep in his throat, and it took Jason a moment to realize he was laughing. “You don’t get it, do you, kid? This isn’t about some lost package, or a measly hundred grand. You really think I’m that petty?” At the look on Jason’s face, he said, “Don’t answer that, it was rhetorical. Fact is, your dad’s been double-crossing me for a good long while now. I arranged for your package to be stolen, and look what I found inside.”

He produced a slip of paper and shoved it in Jason’s face. “See that? That’s my schedule for the next week. Now what do you suppose a person could do with that, knowing my every movement for the next week?”

Jason shook his head. “Um…”

“I’ll give you a hint. It isn’t to throw me a surprise birthday party,” Two Face snarled.

“Th-they made made do it, Two Face!” Willis stammered. “I swear to God, I would never do that to you, but they threatened me, they…they said they’d kill my boy!”

“Gimme a break,” Two Face snorted. “You’d off the kid yourself if you thought you’d get something out of it. I know you, Todd; you’re a snake in the grass, but your number’s up, today. I hope they offered you a lot of money – I’d hate to think you sold me out for chump change.” Two Face pulled his gun out of his shoulder holster and leveled it at Willis’ chest.

“No, no no do-“ Willis crumpled, the gunfire drowning out his last words.

“Nooo!” Jason shouted, wrenching out of the henchman’s arms and flinging himself onto his father’s body. “No, please, Dad…” he begged, tears blurring his vision and clogging his throat.

“He didn’t get a choice, but I’m feeling generous. So what’s it gonna be, kid, heads or tails?” Two Face said.

Jason stared uncomprehendingly at the hideous, twisted gangster’s face. If he looked closely, he could see worms slithering and squirming in and out of the lumpy, red mess.

“All right, we’ll let Fate decide,” Two Face said. He flipped a thick coin into the air with a practiced flick of his fingers. It glinted in the streetlight before it hit the ground, rolling to a stop at the mobster’s feet. Two Face bent to pick it up. “Looks like it’s your lucky day,” he said with a terrifying grin. A scaly centipede crawled out of his eye and into his open mouth.
“Boss, we gotta go. Bats,” one of the henchmen said.

“Don’t forget your essay, it’s due tomorrow,” Two Face said. Then he got into his car and drove off, tires squealing.

A moment later, Batman descended from the sky like a dark cloud. He grabbed Jason and shoved him down into the pool of his father’s blood. It was all over him, warm and wet and reeking. Batman tore at his clothes with his sharp, taloned fingers, a lecherous leer on his face. Right next to them, Willis’ unseeing eyes looked on accusingly. Jason opened his mouth to scream, but no sound spilled forth, only a mess of writhing red worms.

“Mmm, potroast,” Robin said, as he watched on with a grin of pure sadistic delight.

Jason’s eyes snapped open to darkness. His heart pounded in his ears, abject terror freezing his blood to ice. He laid stock still beneath the covers, certain that Two Face and Batman were lurking in the deep shadows just beyond the gaping maw of the bathroom doorway, ready to tear him to pieces if he so much as twitched a muscle.

Slowly, the nightmare receded, and with it his fear, to be replaced by a yawning gulf of desolation. His father was dead. It didn’t seem real, like he was still dreaming, and would wake up to find himself in his old room, with the thin, lumpy mattress beneath him and the familiar stained ceiling above. He hugged himself tightly against a shiver, and winced when his body protested. How could his dad be dead when there was still evidence of him all over his body? He peered down at a dark purple bruise on his arm. A dead man made that bruise, he thought. He expected to feel something about that, but there was nothing. It was like someone had scooped out his insides, leaving nothing but a hollow shell.

He rolled over to look at the glowing digital clock on his bedside table, and suddenly felt something damp in the bed. For a second, the nightmare resurfaced, and he thought that he really was saturated in his father’s blood. But then…then he realized what had happened with a rush of pure horror that had nothing to do with the nightmare.

“Shit, shit, shit!” he swore as he scrambled off the bed and felt around the unfamiliar walls for the light switch. When he finally managed to turn on the bedroom light, he stared at the dark patch in the middle of his bed, his face hot with shame.

He quickly changed from his borrowed pajamas back into the clothes Dick had given him earlier and then stripped the sheets off the bed. After he had all of the soiled things in a pile on the floor, however, he wasn’t sure what to do next. He had no idea where the washing machine was, and what’s worse, the bed still had a big wet spot on it. Even if he managed to wash the sheets, how was he going to hide the stain on the mattress? No, one thing at a time. First, the sheets, then he’d worry about the mattress.

He picked up the armload of bedding and carried it out into the dark hallway. He stopped to listen, and when he was satisfied that he was the only one awake, he continued to the stairs. He had a vague idea of where the kitchen was from earlier, when Lurch had brought food to and from the dining table. He would start there, since it was likely that the laundry room was somewhere nearby.

It took him a while to find the laundry room, and even longer to figure out how to work the machine.
It was the most complicated one he had ever seen, with so many buttons and functions that he wondered if it did other stuff too, like travel back in time. Knowing Batman, it probably did. Finally, when he got the crazy thing running, he sat down and leaned against the humming machine. The tile floor was hard and cold, but he was so tired, he thought maybe he could fall asleep right then and there. He couldn’t though – there was still the mattress to contend with. With a sigh, he heaved himself up. In his search for the detergent, he had found some rags in one of the cabinets that he had made a note of. He grabbed them now and headed back upstairs.

Some time later, when he’d managed to make the mattress much worse by scrubbing at it with wet rags, he finally gave up. He hid the rags in the back of the closet behind the laundry basket and dragged himself back downstairs to check on the washer. This, at least, was a bit simpler to operate. When he had the dryer running, he slumped down onto the floor with some measure of relief. His eyelids were heavy, and soon he was lying down, curled into a ball with his arms around his legs and his back against the dryer. The floor was still hard and cold, but the heat from the dryer was warming his back, and the rhythmic thumping was soothing. Maybe he could take a quick nap. After all, the dryer should buzz when it was done. No more than twenty minutes, he told himself before his eyes slid shut and he sank into a deep, exhausted sleep.

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Alfred woke at 4am as he customarily did. He was about to get up when he remembered that tonight, both his boys were tucked in their beds safe and sound, and wouldn’t be requiring a post-patrol snack. He debated for a moment about whether he should still get up or have a lie in for another hour or so. After all, it was unlikely that even the children would want breakfast before 7am, and it certainly wouldn’t take him three hours to make breakfast. But as he lay there staring up at the ceiling, he decided that he might as well get up. There was no sense in wasting time trying to get back to sleep when he was clearly wide awake.

He got dressed and made his way into the kitchen. It was rare that he had enough time to make cinnamon rolls from scratch, and he smiled at the thought of Dick’s delight in the special treat. And Jason, too, he remembered belatedly. It would be nice to see the boy smile, if only briefly, and besides, Jason could really use the calories. As he approached the kitchen, he became aware of a familiar mechanical hum. He hesitated, suddenly alert. He crept down the hallway on silent feet. Just around the corner, he saw a sliver of yellow light spilling through a small crack in the laundry room door. He slowly pushed the door open and stared in surprise at the boy fast asleep at the base of the dryer. He cocked his head at Jason’s clothes– those weren’t the pajamas he’d given him to wear. With a flash of understanding, his heart sank.

He considered whether or not to wake him. He didn’t want to cause Jason any further embarrassment, but he also wanted to deal with the mattress, which was likely also soiled, so the boy wouldn’t have to sleep in his own filth. Coming to a decision, he stepped into the room with the intention of waking the boy gently, but before he got more than a stride in, Jason jerked awake and sat up abruptly.

“Lur-Alfred!” Jason gasped, scrambling to his feet. “I-I ah…I spilled some…some water…on the bed. I’m sorry. I’ll clean it up, I swear, just…just don’t…” he trailed off, clearly unsure what punishment he should be begging to avoid.

“Relax, Master Jason. I do it all the time myself,” Alfred said. Jason blinked up at him in shock, his face turning a bright red. Alfred gave him a warm smile. “Tea in bed is a very bad habit, but one I’m
afraid I shan’t be giving up anytime soon, despite the ever present danger of spills and stains.”

“Haha…yeah…” Jason said weakly.

“Not to worry, I’ll keep this between us. Wouldn’t want Master Bruce to know how cavalier we are with our beverages, would we?”

Jason didn’t say anything, though he looked immensely relieved to hear that.

“Come, why don’t we put you in a different room so you can get some rest, and I’ll sort this out later,” Alfred offered.

Jason nodded, allowing Alfred to lead him back upstairs. As they were about to head to a different room, however, Dick suddenly appeared in the doorway leading to his bedroom.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Dick asked, rubbing at his eyes and yawning.

“The central heating seems to be malfunctioning in Master Jason’s room,” Alfred lied smoothly. “I’m finding him somewhere more comfortable to sleep.”

“Oh, well, why don’t you just crash in my room?” Dick offered. “The bed’s plenty big enough for both of us.”

“I dunno…are you sure?” Jason asked hesitantly.

“Definitely,” Dick answered. “I used to think these big old rooms were super drafty and kind of creepy. My first night here, I ended up sleeping in the closet with the lights on!”

A small, shy smile crept unbidden over Jason’s face. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Dick said with a self-deprecating shrug. “Besides, it’ll be fun, like a sleepover.”

“But not like an actual sleepover, because you will both be getting some actual sleep, yes?” Alfred said.

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Dick said, giving Jason an extremely unsubtle wink. “Good night, Alfred.”

“Indeed, Sir,” Alfred muttered with feigned severity before heading back down stairs. He supposed he’d better get started on those cinnamon rolls, and maybe some quick snacks, too, to tide the boys over until the rolls were ready, since it was unlikely they were going to get any more sleep for the rest of the night.

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Bruce woke relatively early, though he took his time over his morning ablutions. He wasn’t exactly procrastinating; he just…wasn’t quite ready to face what the day might bring. He had gone to bed with his mind in turmoil over the fate of the boy who had so unexpectedly been thrust into his care, and he’d woken in a similar state, no more reassured despite the hours he’d spent contemplating the various available options.

The current front runner in the depressingly short and unlikely list of options was the “kindly relative” scenario – i.e. he was able to find one of Jason’s relatives to take the boy in, and not only would they be kind, warm hearted, stable people, but they would also agree to take on the considerable burden of raising a troubled teenager whom they’d never met.

Second down on the list was finding a group home with a decent reputation that would take him,
because Bruce had to admit that the kid was right, no foster parent was likely to want to take him in for any reasonable length of time. This would have been a relatively workable fallback position, if it weren’t for the fact that the city’s best (read: only decent) boy’s home, funded in part by the Martha Wayne Foundation, had recently been racked by scandal. The headmistress had been convicted of recruiting some of the older boys into a life of crime, much to Bruce’s (and everyone else at the Foundation’s) profound dismay. Still, there were other homes, ones in other states, perhaps. It would be less than ideal to rip Jason away from everything he had ever known, but it was better than putting him in a home with a dubious reputation.

The third option was coercing/intimidating Jason into going to boarding school and not running away the first chance he got. Bruce had given that scenario an extremely low chance of success, but it was still, in fact, an option. Finally, there was Option 4, the last resort, “zombies have overrun the city and the only way to save humanity is to nuke the city off the face of the planet” option, which was to foster Jason himself.

He had to admit that when he’d first brought the boy home, he had entertained notions of keeping him. He’d felt a deep sympathy for Jason, and whilst taking on another child would be challenging, he could see Jason fitting in well here. The boy was intelligent, resourceful, and resilient, and though his kidnapping stratagem had lacked finesse, he had excellent instincts, with an intuitive drive that reminded Bruce strongly of Dick. Removing Robin’s suit had been a good example of that. There was no way he could’ve known what was in the suit, but somehow, he’d known it was the right thing to do. He had so much potential, and given the proper training and education….

But after the events of last night, Bruce now had some serious reservations about that. Dealing with Jason last night had been like walking blindfolded through a minefield; there had been no way to predict what buried traumas would surface at any given moment, causing him to act and react in unexpected ways. In less than an hour, Bruce had probably managed to traumatize him for life – imagine the damage he could do over the course of years! It was a shame, but really, the best thing for Jason would be to find him another home as soon as possible.

Finally unable to put off beginning his day any longer, Bruce made his way downstairs to the breakfast nook. The chaos that greeted him was nothing short of an assault on the senses. From the looks of it, the combination of copious amounts of sugar, a day off school, and a captive audience had completely demolished any sense of restraint that Dick might normally have had. He was quite literally bouncing off the walls - eating and talking and laughing and gesticulating, pausing frequently in the midst of his storytelling to get up to physically demonstrate and/or act out some point he was making. Bruce had never seen him so...happy, if he was honest with himself. Through it all, Jason sat enthralled, hanging on Dick’s every word, fork poised halfway between his plate and his mouth, food forgotten.

Guilt roiled in Bruce’s empty stomach. Dick was going to be so disappointed. “Good morning,” he said.

“Bruce!” Dick sprang from his chair to greet him, dragging Jason with him. “I was just telling Jay about the gym in the cave. Can I show him around down there?”

Bruce’s gaze slid from Dick’s enthusiastic grin to Jason’s cautiously optimistic non-expression. His stomach gurgled. “I need to do some research in the cave this morning. Why don’t you show Jason around the house or the grounds, and you can show him the cave later?” he suggested.

Some of Dick’s enthusiasm dimmed – he knew what later meant - but he covered it well. “Yeah, ok. Come on, I’ll show you my favourite spot on the roof,” he said to Jason. “You can see all the way to Gotham from there. One time, I saw Superman fly over the city, and…”
Bruce deliberately stopped listening with a roll of his eyes. The last thing he needed to hear this morning was a story about what an amazing guy Superman was.

“Good morning, Master Bruce,” Alfred said. He busied himself clearing the table without batting an eye at the mess the boys had left behind. “I saved some cinnamon-”

“Just coffee will be fine,” Bruce interrupted. “Bring it to me downstairs.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

Once Bruce was logged into the cave computer, it didn’t take long to confirm that all of Willis Todd’s relatives were deceased, just as Jason had suspected. With a few additional keystrokes, he was able to find all the information on Catherine Elizabeth Todd nee Spencer that he would ever want to know. From her rapsheet, it was fairly simple to deduce what sort of “sickness” she’d died of, considering the string of misdemeanors for drug possession and theft. He sincerely hoped that Jason wasn’t the one who’d discovered her body, but something in his gut told him it was a vain hope at best.

More important to the issue at hand, Catherine was survived by a brother, and both parents. A quick search of those individuals, however, turned out to be more surprising than he’d anticipated. Apparently, the Spencers weren’t just your average family from the Narrows. They weren’t quite Wayne wealthy, but they were definitely upper class. A picture began to form in Bruce’s mind of a wayward daughter, seduced by a man from the wrong side of town and plagued by substance addiction. Knowing what the Gotham elite were like, he suspected that her family had written her off as an embarrassment, and more importantly, cut her off from the family’s assets to prevent her from spending it all on drugs. It was a common enough story, especially in the circles Bruce Wayne travelled in. The question was, would they blame the child for the sins of his parents?

He picked up the house phone and dialed Claudia and Nicholas Spencer’s home phone number. It rang several times before the line connected with a sharp click.

“Hello,” a woman’s voice answered.

“Hi yes, good morning,” Bruce said, putting on the overly cultured accent he used when masquerading as Bruce Wayne. “Bruce Wayne calling. I’m looking for Claudia Spencer?”

There was a slight hitch in the woman’s breath. “This…this is she,” she said after a moment. “Is this really… are you sure you’ve got the right person?”

Bruce chuckled gently at her bewilderment. “Ah, well, that depends, I suppose. Is Catherine Elizabeth Todd your daughter?”

There was a slight pause, and then, “What has she done now?” Claudia demanded in a low hiss. “I’m so sorry if she’s caused you any grief, Mr Wayne. If there’s anything I can do to-”

“You misunderstand me, Mrs Spencer. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Catherine passed away two years ago. Didn’t you know?”

This time, there was a significantly longer pause, followed by a muffled sound that may have been a stifled sob. “No, I…I hadn’t realized. We haven’t spoken in years.” Claudia’s voice cracked on the last word, and for a few minutes, he heard nothing. Bruce waited patiently for her to collect herself. Eventually, she unmuted the phone with a soft click, and said in a relatively steady voice, “I’m sorry about that. I’ve been expecting a call like this for years, but it’s still a bit of a shock. One should never have to outlive one’s children.”
“My condolences,” Bruce said sympathetically.

“Thank you for telling me. I…I don’t suppose I would have found out any other way. But…why tell me now, after all this time, and, if you’ll pardon my candor, why are you the one delivering the news?”

“Ah, well, you see, I actually had no idea that you didn’t know about your daughter’s passing. I’m very sorry to have been the one to tell you. The real reason I called was to tell you that Catherine’s husband Willis Todd passed away last night, leaving their fourteen-year-old son sans parent as they say en Français. As to why I’m speaking to you personally, I’m sure you’re aware of my Foundation’s work with shelters for underprivileged children, and that I myself have a penchant for getting involved with the little ruffians. You’ll remember my ward, of course, Dick Grayson? It was in all the papers - such a tragic incident. In any case, I took a personal interest in Jason’s case because the poor little thing just had-

“I’m sorry, did you say Jason?” Claudia interrupted, her tone suddenly flat, and ever so slightly edged.

Bruce felt his hopes begin to wither like new buds in a spring frost. “Why yes, I did. Jason Todd, your grandson,” he lilted with enthusiasm.

“That boy is no grandson of mine,” Claudia scoffed. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Mr Wayne, but that misbegotten whelp is the product of Willis Todd and whatever tramp he was bedding before he met my daughter. As far as I’m aware, my daughter never had any children of her own.”

“I see.” Bruce kept his tone mild, even as he fought down a wave of chagrin. “I don’t suppose you would be interested in meeting your adoptive grandson?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Claudia said with a snort of derision.

Bruce suppressed a sigh. “You wouldn’t happen to know who the boy’s birth mother is, would you?”

“I’m sure I have no idea,” Claudia said, sounding genuinely appalled at the thought. “Thank you again for the information about my daughter, Mr Wayne, and I am sorry that I couldn’t be of more help to you. Please have a pleasant day.”

“You’re welcome, and good day to you, Mrs Spencer,” Bruce said before he hung up.

He heaved an exasperated sigh. Well, that was a bust. Next on his list was Charles Spencer, Catherine’s brother. Sometimes siblings were more tolerant than parents, weren’t they? He hoped…

He had some trouble getting through to Charles initially, but five minutes after they spoke, he threw the phone into the batcave wall, where it smashed into pieces from the force of the impact. Apparently, Claudia had been quicker on the draw than he had, and had already spread the news to her son. That explained why the line was busy the first few times Bruce called. Unlike Claudia, who had at least maintained a certain level of civility, Charles had told him in no uncertain terms what he could do with “that asshole Todd’s bastard kid”.

He shouldn’t be angry with them, he knew. There was no reason for them to feel any attachment to Jason whatsoever. As far as they were concerned, he was the child of the man who had stolen their daughter and sister away from them. If anything, they had a right to their anger. He just couldn’t help feeling frustrated on Jason’s behalf. Of course, if Catherine Todd was not Jason’s birth mother, then
it meant he still had a chance of reuniting the boy with a living member of his family. It was a slim chance, as she may well have died in childbirth, but it was better than nothing.

Bruce logged into Gotham City’s online genealogical records via an electronic backdoor that he’d built in some years back, when Wayne Industries had helped the city to modernize its recordkeeping procedures. The genealogy database listed things like births, deaths, and marriages all the way back to the 1900s, and had become an invaluable resource in his investigations. It wasn’t long before he was looking at the birth record of one Jason Peter Todd, 14 years old, born in Gotham City. He sighed. Claudia Spencer was right. Jason’s mother on the official record wasn’t Catherine, but was in fact a woman named Sheila Haywood.

A bit of Googling found several articles about her and the work she did as a doctor in a women’s clinic in downtown Metropolis. His hopes dared to rise, although somewhat cautiously, given his last encounter with the Spencers. He dialed a few contact numbers (home, mobile, work) before he finally managed to get ahold of her.

“Hello, is this Dr Sheila Haywood?”

“Yes, can I help you?” she answered. Her tone was pleasant, if somewhat impersonal.

“I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but my name is Bruce Wayne. Can I possibly beg a moment of your time?”

“Bruce Wayne? What…I mean…how can I help you?” she stammered, clearly flustered by his fame, or more likely, his infamy.

“As you might know, I run the Martha Wayne Foundation, and we fund a variety of humanitarian aid projects in Gotham, including shelters for women and children in need. I sometimes take a special interest in the children – you may have heard of my ward, Dick Grayson?”

“Oh, yes, of course, I seem to remember that, yes,” Sheila said, with that hesitant air of someone quite mystified as to where this was going.

Bruce thought he’d better get to the point before she hung up on him, Bruce Wayne or no. “Well, I’m calling because I recently met a boy who appears to be your son. His name is Jason, Jason Todd?”

There was a sharp intake of breath, and then “I…no, I’m sorry, you’re mistaken. I don’t have a son,” Sheila said.

“But his birth certificate-”

“No, I’m sorry, but you’ve got the wrong person,” she said firmly.

“But I’m quite sure-”

“I’m sorry but I really don’t have time for this. You’ve got the wrong person, so just…please don’t call me again!” she said, her voice rising to an almost panicky pitch before she abruptly terminated the connection.

Bruce had no choice but to replace the phone in its cradle to silence the disconnect tone. He sighed. What was he going to do now? He couldn’t tell Jason about any of this. The boy had suffered enough already without turning his whole world upside down yet again, and for what? Just so Bruce can introduce this selfish, unfeeling lot into his life? No, he decided, he really had no choice but to keep his discoveries to himself, and move on to Option 2 or 3, finding a reputable children’s home or
boarding school.

The recent downfall of Fay Gunn’s School for Boys was unfortunate, as it would have been the perfect combination of boarding school and boy’s home, and located right in Jason’s backyard, to boot. Bruce supposed it was the reason the school had been so successful…and also why it had been so spectacularly unsuccessful. It was an unfortunate though valuable lesson – if they really wanted to rehabilitate these boys, many of whom were repeat juvenile offenders, they really needed to remove them from the negative influences of Crime Alley.

Bruce quickly wrote a search algorithm that cross-referenced boarding schools, juvenile rehabilitation facilities, and positive reviews within a hundred mile radius of Gotham City. It took only minutes for the supercomputer to churn through the possibilities and spit out a list of top five schools that fit the search criteria.

Apparently, such schools were called “therapeutic boarding schools” and they specialized in educating “at risk” teens with emotional, behavioural, and substance abuse problems – who knew? Granted, Jason didn’t seem to have any particularly severe emotional, behavioural or substance abuse problems, but with his background, he could certainly be categorized as “at risk”. Bruce quickly decided that any one of the schools on the list would be more than adequate, and he would let Jason decide which one he would rather attend. He printed out a few brochures from the schools, each with pictures of broad green lawns and laughing boys on the cover, and tucked them into a file folder. He could show them to Jason this afternoon, and perhaps by as early as next Monday, Jason could be moved in and ready to start classes. Problem solved, and Option 4 neatly averted. Now all he had to do was convince Jason.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn’t take long for Jason to tire of the manor tour. To be fair, without the batcave, it was mostly just a bunch of dusty old rooms, which would bore anyone. So when Jason began to show signs of flagging, Dick was quick to suggest a movie in their home theatre. As he suspected might happen, fifteen minutes into the film, Jason all but passed out in his recliner. Dick could only imagine how tired he was – after all, he was tired himself, and he hadn’t endured half the things Jason had in the last 24 hours. So he turned off the TV, carefully drew a blanket over his sleeping friend, and headed downstairs to get a snack, and see what Bruce was up to.

Halfway down the batcave stairs, he met Bruce on his way up.

“Dick,” Bruce greeted. “I was just coming to find you. Where’s Jason?”

“He fell asleep while we were watching a movie, so I thought I’d let him nap for awhile,” Dick said. “I don’t think he got much sleep last night.”

“I would be surprised if he had,” Bruce said.

“What’ve you been up to?” Dick asked, eying the sheaf of papers in Bruce’s hand with interest.

Following his gaze, Bruce simply handed the papers over to him. “See for yourself.”

Dick flicked through the pages as Bruce lead them back up into the manor.

“Boarding schools? Seriously?” Dick said with exaggerated dismay, even though he’d known something like this was coming. “Come on, Bruce, you know those places are no substitute for a real home.”

“I did my best to find some relatives to take him in, but they weren’t terribly cooperative,” Bruce said. “I don’t think he’s aware of it, though, so I think it’s best if we don’t mention it for the moment,” Bruce said. “He’s been through enough for one week.”

Dick frowned. “No kidding. Poor Jay. All dis, no aster,” he said. “There’s gotta be something we can do to help him.”

“We’re already doing everything we can,” Bruce said, with a gesture at the printed brochures. “I’d be happy to pay his tuition at whichever of these schools he chooses until he graduates.”

Dick raised an eyebrow at him. “After everything he’s been through, don’t you think he deserves better than to be dumped off at some lame boarding school?”

Bruce’s expression didn’t so much change as tighten. “After everything he’s been through, he needs the kind of professional counseling and support that institutions like those can provide.”

“He could get that here,” Dick pointed out. “I saw a grief counselor for awhile too, remember?”
“Yes, I know, but your situations are not the same. Jason has fundamental issues that go way beyond grief counseling.”

“Like what?” Dick demanded. “I spent almost 24 hours with him; I didn’t notice anything like that, and I’m a pretty good judge of character.”

“I got a sense of it last night when we…spoke,” Bruce hedged.

“Why, what happened?” Dick asked.

Bruce’s expression turned pained. “I don’t want to get into it. Suffice it to say that he would benefit from professional therapy, and a more structured and stable environment than any I could provide.”

“What he needs is people who love him unconditionally, who treat him with respect and build him up instead of beating on him and telling him he’s stupid all the time,” Dick said.

“That would be ideal, but I think we need to be realistic here. If we can find him a home where he’ll be treated well, where he can get an education, and grow up away from the crime and poverty of the Narrows, then I think we’ll have done the best we can for him.”

Dick frowned. He knew he was losing the battle, that Bruce was grinding him inexorably down with his irrefutable logic, but there just had to be something he could say to change Bruce’s mind. He’d made a promise to Jason, and whilst sending him off to boarding school did sort of satisfy the minimum requirements of that promise, it wasn’t really in the spirit that it was made. After the awful hand he’d been dealt, Jason deserved a chance to be happy, not just ok because he wasn’t getting used as a punching bag on a regular basis anymore. Maybe Bruce thought one was just as good as the other, but having spent a couple weeks in the foster system while Bruce’s lawyers sorted things out, Dick knew that they were as different as night and day.

Of course, there was a selfish component to all this as well, which Dick was self aware enough to at least acknowledge, even if he didn’t accept that it constituted much more than 10% of his motivation (15 at the outside). Simply put, he was lonely. What few friends he had at school knew nothing of his extracurricular activities, and friends from the team knew nothing of his life outside Robin. Except for Wally, he had no friends his age who knew the whole him, and even Wally never really got to see the whole picture because Bruce didn’t trust him (or anyone, really) enough to let him. Jason was his only chance to finally have the friend, brother, and confidante that he’d been yearning for, just like he used to have with his group of friends at Haley’s.

This was likely to be his last opportunity to sell Bruce on his idea before he gave those brochures to Jason, so he decided to go on the offensive. “You know what I think? I think you’re just making up excuses because you’re afraid. Jay might need some extra counseling for all the crap his dad put him through, but he doesn’t need a shrink. There’s nothing wrong with him that friends and a family wouldn’t fix,” Dick said. “I know you’re worried something’s going to happen to him, or me, but nothing’s going to happen.”

“You don’t know that,” Bruce said.

“No, I don’t, but sometimes, you just have to do the best you can, and trust that everything’s going to work out,” Dick said. “I know trust isn’t something you do, or at least not very well, but just this once, have a little faith. If you can’t do it for Jason, then do it for me.”

Bruce made a pained noise to match his pained expression.

“Does that mean you’ll think about it?” Dick said hopefully.
“Go wake him; it’s time for lunch,” Bruce grunted in lieu of an answer, though when Dick glanced back over his shoulder on his way up to the second floor, he saw him staring thoughtfully down at the brochures in his hand.

Dick turned and hurried up the stairs, an irrepressible smirk sliding its away across his face.

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Jason startled awake, and it was several long, panicky moments before he remembered where he was. Batman, Bruce Wayne, giant freaking house – check, check, and check. He looked down at the blanket clutched in his sweaty fists, and was momentarily touched by the casual kindness and consideration that it represented. But then he flushed, remembering that he’d also fallen asleep while he was supposed to be hanging out with Dick – not exactly very considerate on his part. He pushed the blanket aside and got up to find Dick, already practicing apologies in his head.

When he got to the top of the grand staircase, however, he heard voices filter up to him from the vast marble foyer below. He instinctively shrank back against the wall and away from the bannister so they couldn’t see him. Then he realised - there was no reason to hide from Bruce and Dick. He shook his head at his own silly reaction and was about to head downstairs to meet them when he heard Bruce say, “After everything he’s been through, he needs the kind of professional counseling and support that institutions like those can provide.”

Jason froze, his breath sticking in his throat. Were they talking about him? Surely not...

“He could get that here. I saw a grief counselor for a while too, remember?”

“Yes, I know, but your situations are not the same. Jason has fundamental issues that go way beyond grief counseling.”

Jason’s stomach dropped into his shoes at the realisation that not only were they talking about him, they were talking shit about him. He missed what Dick said next, but Bruce’s reply struck him like a physical blow.

“I got a sense of it last night when we…spoke.”

At the mention of what happened in the garden, he flushed hot all over, tears of humiliation pricking at the corners of his eyes. Bruce obviously thought he was mental after the way he freaked out over nothing. He hadn’t meant to - it’s just that the situation had felt so familiar. He hadn’t been totally honest last night when he said that he hadn’t done that sort of thing before. There was this guy, Joey Falduto, one of Two Face’s distributors. Jason used to deliver packages to him on a semi-regular basis. Joey was in the habit of giving him little things, like candy or cigarettes. He seemed like a nice guy, until one day, when Jason made a mistake. He forgot that the drop location had been changed at the last minute, and delivered the package to the wrong place. Joey figured out what went wrong, and fixed it before anyone could realize, at great risk to himself. Jason was beyond grateful, and when Joey had demanded quid pro quo, he hadn’t felt like he could refuse.

Last night, when Bruce offered to help him in exchange for his cooperation, everything had kind of clicked, like why Bruce was being so nice to him, and the food and everything. Maybe he’d panicked a little, but who’d want to be put in that situation again? He often thought back on that first time with Joey, and wished he’d just faced his father’s wrath instead of letting Joey help him cover it up. His dad probably would’ve kicked the crap out of him, but then it would’ve been over, instead of dragging on for months and months. It was a hard lesson, but he’d learned it. Nobody did anything for free, so it was better to face the known consequences, no matter how painful, than to owe
Bruce must have guessed at the truth, despite his lies. To be fair, it didn’t take a genius to figure out. He wanted to yell down at them, defend himself from their judgment, but even as he pictured doing it, he knew there was no defense. Bruce was right. Everyone knew that kids who got the bad touch were seriously fucked in the head. There were enough kids at his school seeing the school counselor for that sort of shit for him to know.

“Why, what happened?” Dick said from down below.

“I don’t want to get into it. Suffice it to say that he would benefit from professional therapy, and a more structured and stable environment than any I could provide.”

Professional therapy? Were they… Jason clapped his hand over his mouth to smother a gasp. Institution, that’s the word Bruce had used earlier. They weren’t talking about counseling; they were talking about shipping him off to a straight up mental institution!

Cold sweat trickled down his back, making him shiver. Maybe he was fucked in the head, but he didn’t want to be locked away in a loony bin! The very thought made his stomach churn. And Jesus, what if they put him in Arkham like…like the Joker? Because that’s what Batman did, he put people in Arkham!

He had to get out of there, like right now, yesterday.

He hurried back to Dick’s room, where the window faced a tree. He knew he could use it to climb down and escape because Dick had told him he’d done it when he first came to live there.

He slid open the window and climbed out onto the narrow ledge. “Fuck me,” he muttered when he clocked the distance between the window and the tree. How on earth did Dick…oh right, Dick was an acrobat. Of course he was. Well, Jason didn’t have any special skills, but the fact remained that if Dick could do it, and at a younger age than him, then it was possible. Totally mental, but possible.

He took a deep breath and exhaled sharply. One…two…THREE!

Jason launched himself at the closest branch, and hit it dead on, much to his satisfaction. But that, as it turns out, was the easy part. The branch slid through his fingers faster than he could grab it, and then he was falling. He crashed through the tree’s branches and by some small miracle, managed to latch onto a smaller branch as it whipped past him. Unfortunately, his surge of triumph was short lived, because it promptly snapped under his weight. With a muffled curse, he plummeted the rest of the way to the ground, crash landing on a perfectly landscaped bush, which mostly broke his fall. He rolled to his feet with a soft groan as each one of the bruises on his body screamed in protest.

Ignoring the pain, he broke into a run, cutting across the shortest section of the open lawn and then disappearing into the tree line at the edge of the property.

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“Why would he run?” Dick said as he stared at the broken branches of the tree opposite his bedroom window.

Bruce grimaced. “He could have heard us talking in the foyer, and assumed we would force him into a boarding school.”

“Not we, you,” Dick said reproachfully.
But the criticism rolled off of Bruce just like everything else. “How long would you estimate he’s been gone?”

Dick checked his watch. “Assuming the worst case scenario, and he was faking being asleep, I’d say he’s had a 45 minute head start. If he really did hear us talking, then I’d say no more than 20 minutes tops.”

“As fast as he runs, he could be in Gotham within the hour. We have to find him while we still can, because once he reaches the city, he’ll blend in, disappear, and the next time he turns up, it’ll be in cuffs or on the coroner’s slab,” Bruce said.

“Well then we’d better find him!”

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Bruce scanned the forest with his thermal imaging goggles. There was a lot of signal to noise ratio on this unseasonably warm and sunny Autumn day, making it more difficult to pick out the true heat sources. Lucius had built these goggles with the most advanced daytime filters known to man, though, so he should still be able to see Jason quite clearly, if he managed to get within line of sight of the boy. The problem was, it was slow going traipsing through the forest on foot. The most efficient search would have been aerial, but he couldn’t risk anyone seeing the batplane circling over Wayne Manor in an obvious search pattern. There was no way that wouldn’t have ended up in the papers, and managing that PR storm was just more trouble than it was worth.

He took off the goggles to concentrate on more conventional tracking techniques. Jason wasn’t bleeding or anything so obvious, so all he had to go on were the subtle signs of his passing – bent grass, broken twigs, faint sneaker prints in the leaf littered forest floor. He knew he was on the right track, but it was difficult to tell how far behind he was. Dick was on the other side of the forest, where it thinned out and sloped off into a floodplain through which the Gotham River snaked. It was his hope that if he was too far behind to catch Jason, Dick would intercept him as he emerged from the forest on the other side.

When he was sure which way Jason had gone, he put the thermal goggles back on and continued on. About twenty minutes later, he was starting to think he’d lost the trail after all. He came to a small stream, but there was no sign of Jason’s crossing there – the soft mud on the banks would have made that obvious. So he chose to travel upstream for a bit to see if he could find any sign of crossing there. He could just have easily traveled downstream, but the trees were thicker upstream, and he figured Jason would instinctively choose more cover. He was just about to double back when he suddenly saw a flash of red through the trees in the distance.

He immediately crouched down low and changed his angle of approach, so his quarry wouldn’t see him until it was too late to run. He took off the goggles and inched closer. As he skirted some dense brush, he saw that the boy was sitting beneath a large oak tree, eating what looked like a cinnamon roll wrapped in a napkin. Bruce had seen him pocket it from the breakfast table this morning, just before Dick had taken him up to the roof. It saddened him to think that Jason might have been planning his escape all day.

He tapped out a quick text message to Dick to call off the search, and then carefully approached his target, sneaking in close on silent feet.

“Jason.”

Jason didn’t even turn around, he just dropped his roll and bolted, or tried to, before Bruce grabbed his arm and hauled him back from the edge of the stream.
“Sit down,” Bruce said sternly, “I want to talk to you.”

“Fuck you!” Jason snarled. He glared at Bruce, his hands balled into fists at his sides, as if he might actually have a chance in a physical confrontation.

The kid had guts, Bruce had to give him that. “Jason-“

“You ain’t lockin’ me in no loony bin,” Jason interrupted. “I’ll tell everyone who you are, don’t think I won’t! Even if they think I’m crazy, someone’ll listen. Someone will come here, and then they’ll dig around and-”

“No one is putting you in a loony bin,” Bruce said, preempting the hysterical rant that Jason seemed to be working himself up to. “I was going to offer to put you up in a boarding school of your choosing. You would get a top flight, private education, and during holidays you could visit Dick, or travel – whatever you wanted.”

Jason frowned. “What?”

Bruce reigned in a sigh. “Boarding school, Jason. Remember, like we talked about? I couldn’t find any family members to take you in, and I know that the foster system leaves much to be desired, so I thought I might pay for you to attend boarding school.”

“Why?” Jason demanded. “Did Dick put you up to this? I know he feels bad about what happened with my dad, but I don’t need your pity, or your money, all right? I know you think I’m fucked up, but I’m not your problem to fix. Just turn me over to social services. Job done.”

Bruce considered which part of that speech, littered with erroneous assumptions, he should tackle first, but in the end, he decided to take a different tack. Half formed ideas and aborted impulses had been percolating in his brain for the last 24 hours, but now, here, in this forest, with the boy in front of him radiating fear and pain and grief despite his valiant struggle to keep it all contained, everything crystallized into one clear plan of action. He knew what he had to do – what he’d always meant to do, even if he’d doubted himself along the way.

“You didn’t let me finish,” he said. “I was going to offer to put you up in a boarding school, but I changed my mind. I want you to stay here, with Dick and me, for…well, for as long as you want to stay.”

Jason stared at him for a long beat as wild hope and abject terror warred for dominance on his young face. Then with a soft, pained noise, he stumbled away from Bruce. “Shut up,” he said roughly. “You’re lying!”

Bruce resisted the urge to follow him, letting him have some space. He was aware that his looming presence was often not conducive to clear thinking, a fact he’d used to press his advantage in many situations. This, however, was not one of those times. “I’m telling you the truth,” he assured the boy.

Jason shook his head. “No way. Nobody does nothin’ for free, and I ain’t got nothin’ you want. You made that pretty clear. So what…what d’you want me for?”

Bruce thought of all the things he could say, but discarded them all as either overreaching or too weak to convince Jason of his sincerity. In the end, he simply said, “I want you to be my family.”

It seemed to be the right thing to say, because it gave pause to the legion of swarming doubts in the boy’s eyes. But even that, it seemed, wasn’t enough to combat his innate distrust. Bruce could relate. He could relate so completely that it scared him how similar they were despite their vastly different backgrounds. It occurred to him that in some ways, he saw himself more in Jason’s fear, anger, and
distrust than he ever had in Dick’s faith and boundless optimism.

Jason paced slowly toward the edge of the stream and stopped to stare down at the water, murky and turbulent from the rains of the past few days. “Family, huh? You wanna adopt me, like Dick?” he asked.

“That’s the idea,” Bruce said.

Jason snorted. “Yeah, right. Me, Bruce Wayne’s adopted son. Are you kidding me?”

Bruce shot him a wry smile. “Would it surprise you to learn that Dick grew up in circumstances about as polar opposite to this as you could possibly imagine? He didn’t think he would fit in here either, but as you can see, he’s managed to adapt.”

“Yeah, but I’m not Dick.”

“No, but you will adapt too,” Bruce said.

“No, I mean...” Jason huffed in frustration as he struggled to put his thoughts into words. “Dick, he’s... a good guy, you know?”

“And?” Bruce prompted.

“And... well... if anyone deserves this, he does.”

Bruce frowned. He moved to stand beside Jason, though he was careful not to touch him. “What is it you think you deserve?”

Jason bit his lip and looked away. “Not this,” he mumbled finally.

“Why not?” Bruce pressed.

“Cause I ain’t no good, right? And I ain’t never gonna be. Everyone says so – my dad, my teachers, that cop last night, everyone.” He swiped angrily at the tears welling in his eyes. “It’s like you said – it’s built into my DNA.”

Bruce knelt down in front of the boy so that they were on a level. “Jason, listen to me. I see the good in you. I see love, kindness and compassion, bravery, intelligence, and loyalty to a fault. I don’t care where you came from or who your parents were; you have the power to be who you want to be. Nothing in this life is pre-ordained, and there is no such thing as fate, do you understand me? We forge our own futures through each and every choice we make. You have a choice now, a chance to change your future for the better. What choice will you make, right now, today?”

Jason finally looked him in the eye, for the first time since they started this conversation. His red-rimmed eyes flicked back and forth, searching Bruce’s face presumably for traces of deception. “You really think I could be a good guy? You’re not just saying that?”

“I never just say anything,” Bruce said gravely.

“And you really want me in your family?” Jason asked, as though he still believed the rug could be yanked out from under his feet at any moment.
“Yes, Jason. I really want you. We – Dick, Alfred, and I - all want you to be a part of our family.”

Jason glanced back in the vague direction of the manor. After a long, tense moment, he suddenly declared, “Well all right then, what’re we waiting for?”

Chapter End Notes

Boy, I hate writing endings! Eep! I know it ends a bit abruptly, but I hope it lived up to everyone's expectations. Thanks for sticking with me through this admittedly protracted process.

I've started the next part to this fic, but no ETA yet on when I will feel ready to post it. If you'll recall, I originally imagined this as a trilogy covering pre-Robin, Robin, and Red Hood storylines. But, we shall see how far I get!

Thanks again for all of your support and kind comments!

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