

Strings Attached

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Strings Attached

by [FabulaRasa](#)

Summary

Bruce and Hal have a comfortable, no-strings-attached arrangement -- until Bruce begins to wonder about the possibility of more. And who better to help him navigate complicated personal relationships than that master of nuance and subtlety, Jason Todd?

Chapter 1

It began because he could not stop looking at Jason.

Most of the time he restrained himself, of course. In truth, most of the time he never had the opportunity – Jason certainly went out of his way to be around him as little as possible. But of late Jason seemed to have reached a kind of rapprochement with his family, if that wasn't too strong a word.

Which word, though, that was the question: rapprochement, or family?

“You wanna stop that?” Jason said to him, as Bruce was staring at him, and Bruce dropped his eyes. Dick went silent, as did Tim. Barbara frowned and shifted closer. To Jason, he noticed; she was trying to calm him by her nearness, and wasn't that interesting. “Seriously, I am getting really fucking sick of this. You wanted the Outlaws to be part of this operation, fine, I'm happy to be of service, but you are gonna cut that shit out. If you don't trust me, have the balls to come out and say it.”

“I trust you,” he said tightly. “You're being childish. Tim, continue with what you were saying.”

Jason just shook his head and turned his back on Bruce. Tim went on with his briefing on the tech they would be facing. Bruce kept his eyes resolutely off Jason, fixed on a point on the far rock wall. He offered no contribution to the discussion that followed, even though Dick glanced at him several times. They were doing fine, covering all their bases. He listened in silence.

“So it sounds like Tim and I need to be the ones to get a handle on this tech,” Barbara said. “Dick, you wanna run some surveillance?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Jason, you with me?”

“Yeah, in a sec,” Jason said, and hung back as the others headed off. He was turning back to Bruce, and looking thoughtful. He waited until the others were out of earshot.

“So say what you wanna say,” Jason said.

“There's nothing I want to say. We're fine.”

“Oh yeah, we're the picture of functional, I don't know why I was worried. Look, you came to me. You said you wanted my input on this, and then you did like you always do – you stare me down like you're the mall cop at Neiman Marcus and I'm the thug fingering the Prada bags. You always do that shit, and it's gonna fucking stop. You think they don't notice, you think they don't know what you think of me?”

“Jason,” he tried. His throat was a little tight. “That's not—you are mistaken.”

“Oh, I'm mistaken. Like you haven't been staring holes in my back for twenty minutes straight. What the ever-living fuck, Bruce, you think I'm gonna boost something? Or are you just waiting for me to have some kind of psychotic break, is that it? Fucking. Stop. It.” He had his knife out, flicking the point at Bruce for emphasis at every word.

“I apologize,” Bruce said, and at that the knife flicked down, clicked shut, and Jason cocked an eye at him.

“You. . . okay.” He clearly had no ability to process that. “Well. . . all right then. Good. Glad we. . . had this little talk.”

He started to move toward the Cave’s back entrance, still glancing suspiciously back at Bruce, like possibly he was concerned about his health. And that was exactly where he ought to have left it. That was precisely the point at which he should have turned back to the monitor and gone about his day, but that voice of reason was always hard for him to find, where Jason was concerned. And then there was the fact that Jason was walking away, and always there was a wild thing that beat in his chest, for the thrum of a single heartbeat, every time Jason walked out of a room. A wild thing that called desperately to Jason, because it might be a hard-bitten man in front of him now, but behind that man and his canny eyes was the boy, and the boy was lying in a box.

And Jason wondered why he stared.

He fucked Hal hungrily that night, trying to obliterate the memory of Jason’s eyes. He didn’t need to worry about it being too rough, not with Hal – Hal got rough right back at him. They didn’t need words for things like that.

“Yeah, that what you want?” Hal would say, his voice a low husk in Bruce’s ear as he fisted his hair and yanked his neck back. Bruce bit a trail up Hal’s neck as he fucked him.

“Fuck,” Hal gasped, humping the mattress underneath him, his hand flailing out for something to grab. Bruce grabbed his hand and yanked his arm back behind him, pinning him, and Hal groaned hard. Bruce rode him harder. Nothing ever felt as good as fucking Hal. Except for being fucked by Hal.

Hal came against the mattress while he was getting fucked, while Bruce had his arm twisted behind him. “Oh Jesus fuck,” Hal moaned, and Bruce could feel the contractions of his body, how it went on forever, as Hal gasped and writhed beneath him. It felt so good. Bruce emptied his balls into that unbelievable body, and it felt like it went on for days when he came. Afterward he lay across Hal’s bed, the room spinning around him. He had possibly forgotten to eat.

Hal flopped down beside him and passed him a water bottle, which he took in silence. He let his eyes drift shut. Hal tended not to mind if he slept over, though mostly Hal was gone in the mornings. He could just sleep right here. There was a massive wet spot – all right, more than one – but it was a big bed, they could manage.

“Hey,” Hal nudged him, a lazy knee knocking against him. “What’s up?”

Bruce rolled his head Hal’s direction. “What do you mean?”

“I mean something’s got you tonight,” he said, and then he reached his hand over and brushed it through Bruce’s hair, and the gesture was so tender that it caught Bruce off guard. Caught him right in his unprotected middle.

“Jason,” he murmured, and Hal nodded.

“He came by today?”

“We’re working together on something. Jason was. . . Jason.”

“With a little bit of Bruce being Bruce, I’ll bet,” Hal said with a wry twist to his mouth. And then because apparently he was not done with the surprising gestures, he lifted Bruce’s hand and wove their fingers together. That was new. They were lying on the bed, holding hands. Watching each

other.

Hal's phone buzzed. He rolled over and answered, propping on his elbow. "Hey," he said, his voice low. "No, nothing much, what about you?"

Bruce listened for a while. It was Barry. He sat up and began rummaging for his clothes. He took his time, but Hal didn't turn back to him. He and Barry were in some heated conversation about their plans for the weekend. Bruce was slipping out the bedroom door when Hal said, "Hold on a sec Bar," and set the phone down.

"Hey," he called to Bruce, and reached for the bottom drawer of his nightstand. He tossed him a power bar, which Bruce caught one-handed. "Fucking eat something once in a while, will you?" he whispered. Then he had picked the phone back up.

"Yeah, I'm here, stop yelling at me. I told you, I don't want to go to the lake because the water is going to be like four degrees Fahrenheit, Bar, April is not summer no matter how much you want to pretend it is. Can we please just do something that does not involve frigid water and the retraction of my testicles inside my spleen?"

Bruce closed the bedroom door quietly behind him, and showed himself out like he usually did.

It was not on anything like a regular basis, was the thing. If anyone had asked him, *hey when did you start sleeping with the Green Lantern and was it preceded by a head injury* he would not have been able to give them a real answer. The first time had been a long time ago, and he had thought it was a one-off. It had been, all things considered, some of the best fucking of his life. Jordan was flexible, unshockable, adventurous, and absolutely absent all expectations of him. It was an irresistible combination. And Jordan probably felt some of the same relief he did, at finding an occasional outlet for sexual desire with someone who required no hiding, no careful cloaking of his identity or his actual personality.

But it hadn't been regular at all – short intense bouts separated by months at a time, or random nights here and there. Most often he would just show up in Jordan's apartment, or in his bedroom. "You realize normal people call, right?" was all Jordan had said, the first time he had done that. To make up for it Bruce had sucked him off so hard and long he had been clawing the sheets and crying for release, and had come gripping the back of Bruce's head and shuddering. Bruce's skills were not inconsiderable.

But of late, he had noticed it was becoming a bit more of a regular thing. He hadn't meant to fall into any kind of schedule, much less a pattern. He probably needed to be careful, and vary that a bit more – maybe spend some time with Selina, or he could always give John Constantine a call. Not that there was any reason for concern, but why create one?

He was puzzling over it later that week, as he was on patrol. When had he fallen into this kind of pattern with Jordan? Had it been as much as six months? Foolish of him to allow that to happen, but it was disturbing to realize he hadn't noticed.

"You wanna keep your head in the game here?" Jason said, and Bruce aimed a scowl at him he wouldn't be able to see, behind the cowl.

"You think I can't see your facial expression, but what you forget is, all of us have spent our entire childhoods learning what each tiny twitch of jaw muscle means. So don't think I'm not onto you, old man." Jason was spooning Mongolian beef into his mouth from the carton, and a stray bit of bamboo shoot was sticking out of his mouth.

“No eating on stakeout,” Bruce said tightly.

“We’re stuck in this car for the next three hours at least, so fuck that. I’m telling you, pretty soon my extra carton of fried rice is gonna start looking pretty good to you.”

“Solo work is starting to look pretty good to me.”

“Yeah, you say that,” he said, rooting around in his carton. “But you need the Red Hood’s contacts for this job, so that means you gotta put up with me. I’m the one doing you a favor here, don’t forget that.”

“You haven’t given me much opportunity to.”

Jason laughed. After a while Bruce reached up and pushed his cowl off. Jason was right, they had hours of this, and the air in the car was getting close. Testily he reached for the fried rice carton, and Jason handed over a pair of chopsticks. They ate in companionable silence for a while. Jason had ordered no broccoli.

“You’re wearing cologne,” Bruce said, when he had finished off the rice.

“Got a hot date later tonight.”

“I don’t know whether to be more disturbed about your work ethic or your love life.”

Jason gave another laugh. He never knew what to make of Jason’s laugh. That laugh had always had an edge to it, but was it his imagination that it was less so around him, these days? That had seemed like genuine amusement. “Anyone I know?” Bruce said.

“Anyone you know what?”

“I meant your date tonight, unless you were speaking metaphorically.”

“Oh I promise you, my dates are never metaphorical. How long has it been since you had one of those?”

“One of what?”

“A *date*, you vinyl-coated turnip. An actual and for real date. And no, I do not mean one of your patented playboy fake-ass dates. I mean an actual date, with someone you give a shit about, and whose middle name you know. Hell, someone whose last name you know, for that matter.”

“Mm.” Bruce reached for another carton, and picked through it with his chopsticks. “Define date.”

“Oh ho ho, is that so. Well, good to know you’re getting served on the regular. Not that that was ever your problem. Hey, check that out.”

They went still as a figure shuffled from the dark of the alley they were watching, and lurched into a doorway. The figure slumped there, motionless. Minutes ticked by.

“Time for everybody’s favorite game,” Jason murmured. “Are you an actual drunk, or are you an evil supervillain?” The wino tipped to the other side and began puking.

“Vomiting is difficult to fake,” Bruce said.

“I hate my life.”

“What do you mean, not that that was ever my problem?” Bruce fixed him with a glare.

“Oh, come the fuck on. It did not take me long to figure out how much sex you have, when I was a kid.”

“You make it sound as though you were raised in some sort of bordello.”

Jason studied the wino, who appeared to have some sort of irritable bowel disease, given how long the puking was taking him. “Nah, you were always very discreet. Well. Not always. The supermodels, the gorgeous actresses – you always let me see those hanging on your arm, didn’t you? Took me a while to figure out that was not where the real action was happening.”

Bruce was silent at that.

“You know what’s funny,” Jason resumed. “When I was growing up, I used to wonder how it was that you were single. Right? Like, a fucking billionaire, and you’re built like. . . that,” he said, with a glance at Bruce, “and how are you not taken? Seriously, when I was a kid I used to think it was weird. This was before I knew everything I now know about your relationship skills.”

“This is not a life to inflict on any civilian.”

“Right,” he said slowly. “That old chestnut. I must have heard that one a thousand times. You could have just told me the truth, you know.”

“The truth?”

Jason was back to studying the wino, who had finally slumped backward into unconsciousness. “Did you ever think that if you had ever had the conversation with me, if you had ever even so much as hinted at the real reason, I might not have grown up thinking I was fundamentally fucked up just because I was queer too?”

Bruce found nothing to say to that. “I mean, I would never have told you,” Jason said. “Not in a thousand million years. I was too afraid of disappointing you. Of not being who you wanted me to be. But maybe if you had ever been honest with me, it might have been easier for me to be honest with myself at some point along the way too. Maybe if you hadn’t treated your own queerness like an unmentionable disease, I might have felt a little less contagious.”

“It was. . . never my intention to—” He broke off, aware how stiff he sounded, how pathetic.

“Ra’s always said you were gonna choke on that stick up your ass someday.”

Words strangled in his throat at that. If Ra’s al Ghul had appeared before him, he would have dug fingers into his throat, squeezed at blood and bone and cartilage and let it ooze between his fingers. Ra’s had mocked him to Jason. A shared laugh over a scotch in the evenings, as the wind whistled around his mountain aerie. He saw himself, back when he had been the one to sit at the feet of The Demon – back when he had been young, impressionable, and worshipping Ra’s with every breath. *Like a son to me*, Ra’s would whisper. *Closer than a son*. On his knees before Ra’s, swallowing his cock like it was a gift. And afterward, when he had stopped thinking of it that way, when everything had changed for him, Ra’s took by force what he no longer offered as a gift. The fingers that choked his throat. It was enough that he had to carry those memories. He could not bear to think what might have been done to Jason. What lies would Ra’s have fed Jason, what filth would he have poured in his ears?

“Ra’s al Ghul is not. . . a trustworthy source of information,” Bruce murmured.

“You think I need you to tell me that? So tell me about you and the not-date. This a one-off, or a regular thing?”

“This is not a subject of conversation.”

“Right, because I’m twelve again. You know the problem with you, Bruce, is that—”

“Game time,” Bruce said, as their target slunk into view at the alley’s edge, and they were Batman and Red Hood again – cowls and masks on, muscles tensed and watchful.

Chapter 2

“I’ve been thinking,” Bruce said.

He had chosen his time as carefully as his words. After sex was probably better than before, and he had made sure it was pretty spectacular sex, even for them. Hal’s versatility in bed was a source of endless pleasure for Bruce; he had rarely been with any male in bed who didn’t eventually reveal a preference for position, one way or the other, but Hal’s baseline preference seemed to be for blinding orgasm – his own, and his partner’s. Everything else was negotiable, and Bruce had taken advantage of that to the fullest tonight. Hal had fucked him slow and deep, until every slow thrust felt like it was pushing air out his lungs. He had gripped Hal’s headboard and come just like that, without a hand on him, just from getting fucked right in the sweet spot where Hal’s cock was thick enough to give him the pressure he needed. And while usually after getting fucked he was very much a game-over kind of person (getting rammed on the prostate after orgasm not being one of life’s more pleasurable experiences) tonight he had let himself go limp and had waited for Hal to come in him before disentangling them. It was an act of generosity that he hoped would put Hal in a receptive mood.

“What about?” Hal said, swigging from his water bottle. His phone buzzed, and he picked it up and squinted at it. “Oh for fuck’s sake,” he sighed. “Barry and this fucking lake trip. I can’t take it. He’s freaking out about finding a cabin. The place we had reserved cancelled on him, and I’m gonna have to crumble Xanax on his frosted flakes, I swear.”

Bruce nodded. Talking about Barry was exactly where he did not want this conversation to go, but showing his impatience would be unproductive. “I have a house on Lake Halliwell,” he said. “You’re welcome to borrow that.”

“Yeah, that might be weird.”

“Why?”

“Because that might be a little hard to explain to Barry, for one thing.”

“I don’t see why. You and I were having a conversation about your weekend plans, and I mentioned the house. He doesn’t have to know the conversation took place in bed.”

Hal whuffed a laugh. “Yeah, well, you and I are not exactly known for our conversations. It’s not really our brand.”

“Well maybe our brand should change.”

Hal tossed the phone aside. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that I’ve been doing some thinking. About our. . . relationship.”

That got him a cocked brow. “Okay,” Hal said warily. “That’s an interesting word you’re using there, but go on.”

“You would prefer a word other than relationship?”

“Arrangement,” Hal said, relaxing into the pillows. His eyes were drifting shut again. Possibly Bruce had miscalculated, and the sex had been too good.

“Very Victorian of you,” Bruce said.

“Well, we’re pretty Victorian, you have to admit.”

“You mean because we are. . . discreet about what it is we get up to from time to time.”

“Sure,” Hal said, his eyes still closed. “Discreet. Another word with some interesting choices in it, but whatever.”

“You think a better word might be closeted.”

Hal’s shoulder twitched in what might have been a shrug. “I mean, there are a lot of words we could use.”

“Yes. I’m not disagreeing. In fact I’m wondering if you might prefer us to be a little. . . less discreet.”

Both Hal’s eyes were open at that. “If *I* might prefer it?”

“What I mean is—”

Hal had started laughing. “Well hold my backpack, Stephenie Meyer, I think all my dreams are about to come true. Bruce Wayne just offered to hold my hand in the school lunchroom. What will the other girls say? Is my whole life about to change?”

Bruce subsided into silence, refusing to let himself be nettled. Hal was still quietly chuckling to himself.

“Seriously, Spooky, you never fail to disappoint. I don’t know whether it’s adorable or just fucking infuriating that lo these many months you’ve been thinking I cherish a secret hope for our True Love. I think you’ve been reading too much of your own press.”

“I might have made a poor choice of words, but the point is one worth—”

“This whole conversation is a poor choice.” There was an edge to Hal’s voice he hadn’t calculated on, and that he was having difficulty configuring into the variables as he had theorized them.

“You will let me finish a sentence.”

“Oh will I,” Hal said, and the edge had become dangerous.

“I think,” Bruce said, and he could feel his jaw tightening as he spoke, “that you weren’t far off the mark when you called us Victorian. I’m just proposing moving into the twenty-first century a little. All I was going to suggest was the possibility of spending a little time together when we weren’t. . . .” He made a vague gesture.

“Fucking each other’s brains out?”

“Exactly.”

Hal was watching him, and it was funny that he had never noticed how penetrating those eyes were, when they wanted to be. “Spending it how,” he said.

“I was thinking, we could go to dinner together.”

“You think that you and I should have dinner.”

“Yes. Not here,” he said, in case Hal was about to mention the carton of take-out in the refrigerator. “Somewhere in public.”

“Where people could see us,” Hal said.

“Yes.”

Hal’s eyes shut again. He folded his hands on his bare stomach. For a minute Bruce thought he was just enjoying the last afterwash of orgasmic endorphins, he was so still. “Do something for me, okay?” Hal said.

“All right.”

“Get the fuck out of my bed.”

Bruce sighed. Hal’s eyes flicked open, and he was staring right at Bruce. “Look at my face and tell me if there is anything there that says I am joking. Go on, get the fuck out of here.”

Bruce rose and snatched at his clothes. That was what he got for trying to have an adult conversation with an irrational man-child. He might have known. He didn’t slam the door on his way out because he was not interested in behaving as childish as Hal Jordan. He didn’t mean to spare a backward glance, but the last thing he saw was Hal, still lying motionless on the bed, hands folded as before, eyes closed.

He was off his game that night, and he knew it. What was worse, Jason knew it too.

“Little slow on the pitch there,” Jason said, after he had taken a blow to the middle that Bruce should have blocked. Bruce knew he should have blocked it. He had missed, was the truth of it.

“Shut up and fight,” he growled. Jason delivered a beautiful upper-cut to the next angry thug bearing down on them, and Bruce dispatched the two that were on their six.

“I’m just saying,” Jason said, grabbing the next attacker by the hair and using him to block the next two. “Seems like you’ve got a lot on your mind, is all.”

“I’m fine.”

“Oh you’re fine, huh? That why you’ve only been able to squeeze two growls out your puckered asshole this whole night, and you’re fighting like you swallowed an Alfie special?”

“Left,” Bruce grunted, but Jason had already been wheeling, and had the next one down in two clean blows. “Good work.”

“Learned from the best. By the by, and just to shoot the shit, but didn’t you ever think that some of those moves were pretty fucking weird to be showing a twelve-year-old? Just to make conversation.”

“You were already fighting by the time I knew you. I just taught you to do it better.” The one coming at him now was moderately more skilled than the others. Bruce had him down in two moves, but it should have been one, even so. Jason had noticed that, too, if the clucking noise behind that infernal mask meant anything.

“You drunk or something?”

“Enough,” Bruce snarled.

“I figured it out,” Jason said, vaulting off the nearest steel beam. On the downward arc he used his knife to slice the rope holding three shipping crates over their northeast perimeter. The shipping crates fell with a crash, and there was one access point sealed off. “It must be your not-date, isn’t it? That’s what’s got you so off your game tonight.”

“This is unprofessional,” Bruce muttered. He took the next four, and was less careful of their heads on the release than he should have been.

“What, are you seriously worried about extending professional courtesy to the Estonian mobsters who are literally smuggling kids in gun crates? Or is it that you don’t want them to know we know each other? Hey, how are you, I used to be Robin, tell all your friends,” Jason said into the terrified face of the next attacker, before dispatching him off the roof. Bruce had already shot the wire over the edge when he heard the sound of the man’s hand clutching a drainpipe.

“See, I knew he’d be fine,” Jason said. They had a few minutes’ breathing room. Jason’s narrowing of the access points meant they had a good vantage on the next wave, forming below them, and they stood in the shadows and watched.

“We could talk about it if you want,” Jason said. “It’s not good to keep everything bottled up inside like that. It will definitely affect your gut microbiome, I can tell you that much.”

“Jason.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

“You want to deny the proven scientific link between emotional and physical health, fine by me, but that is the proven path to a bowel impaction, I’m here to tell ya. Oh hey, look who’s coming to play,” he said, with a nod at the western access point to the shipping yards, and the capo striding among the thugs, AK-47 strapped to his back. Jason sighed.

“I need a drink,” he said. “We get done with this, you’re cracking out the good stuff.”

“Keep your focus,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, I’m not the one who needs reminding of that, am I?” Bruce said nothing to that, because Jason was not wrong, and they both knew it.

He meditated on his conversation with Hal throughout the rest of the week, re-playing it in his head, trying to find out where in that very confusing interaction he had possibly gone wrong. Not that he had been wrong, of course; Hal’s reaction had been clearly irrational, and demonstrative of the man’s basic lack of control in every area of his life, beginning with his emotions. By “wrong,” he meant where Jordan’s misconceptions had begun to de-rail the whole conversation. What was it Jordan thought he had been saying, when in fact he had been saying something else? Like so much about Jordan, it was not an easily solved puzzle.

When a plan had begun to go awry, it was often best to move forward and trust that the plan’s weaknesses would reveal themselves by further action. That was the only way to fix things, in his experience.

It was a matter of very little effort, to track down Barry’s rental plans for the weekend. It did bring to mind something he had been meaning to discuss with the League in general, and that was issues of personal security. Too often he had seen them rely on the relative anonymity of their civilian

identities to protect them, but that placed all the weight of their security on obscuring the link between their public and their private personas. If that link should prove weaker than they had calculated – if someone, for instance, ever put it together that hair gel and 95 bucks at Warby Parker was all that turned Superman into Clark Kent – then the lax security around their personal lives would be something they all regretted. How hard was it to obscure one's tracks when making online rental reservations? Not hard at all. And yet somehow they all found it beyond them, Clark included.

In this instance, of course, it worked to his advantage. So on Saturday morning he drove to the lake where Barry had rented a sadly underfurnished cabin (and that was going to be another lecture, the value of comparison shopping) and managed to arrive shortly after check-in time. He pulled up behind Barry's Toyota just as Hal was getting bags out of the trunk. He had a moment's regret he had driven the Jaguar, as something less flashy would probably have been in order, but it couldn't be helped now. He got out and walked over to where Hal was wrestling an overpacked duffel and fishing gear out of the back of the car.

"Hey Bruce!" Barry called from the porch.

"Barry," he said, with a lift of his arm.

"Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine. I was just in the area and thought I'd stop by."

"Okay," Barry said, looking puzzled. He was weighed down by about twenty pounds of fishing gear, and he was losing the fight to keep the poles from stabbing the screen-door of the rickety cabin. Bruce turned to Hal, who was standing behind the open trunk with one arm on top of it, glaring at Bruce.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing," he said, his voice low.

"You haven't returned my texts all week."

"Correct. I have employed the universal language for 'I don't want to talk to you right now,' what about that was hard to understand?"

"Look," Bruce said. "When we spoke earlier this week, I think you may have misunderstood what I was saying."

"This is my vacation. My vacation with Barry. A vacation you were not invited on. I'm going to go back to my original question, which is what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Trying to communicate like an adult, is what I'm trying to do."

Hal slammed the trunk shut. "You son of a bitch," he said, and it began to occur to Bruce that this had possibly not, in fact, been one of his better ideas, for all that it had seemed logical.

"You are going to get back in that car, and you are not going to track me down like a stray dog who's snapped his leash every time I don't return your texts within forty-eight hours, are we clear?" He glanced up at the cabin as he spoke, and it was that glance that finished Bruce's last reserve of patience, because he saw everything in it – he saw the real source of Hal's anxiety, which was that Barry was going to see them, that Barry was going to start putting two and two together, because say what you like about him but Barry Allen was not stupid.

"Worried you might get outed?" Bruce said, following his glance.

“You’re a fucking hypocrite.”

“Am I? So tell me what bothers you more, that Barry might find out how much you like fucking men, or that Barry might find out it’s me you’ve been fucking?”

“Hey Bruce,” Barry said, bounding down the stairs to the cars. “Why don’t you stay and hang out for a while? The cabin’s got three bedrooms, no reason you can’t stay the whole weekend. I’ve even got an extra pole, if you wanna try your hand at some bass fishing with us. Hal would love it too, yeah?”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Hal said, with eyes that meant only murder.

Bruce gave a thin smile. “Thanks, I can’t. I’ve got, ah. . .” he trailed off. He had forgotten whatever smooth excuse he had been going to say, because all of a sudden, like he was standing somewhere outside himself watching the three of them standing there awkwardly, he had seen the truth. He saw it in several directions at once, actually; saw his own pathetic actions for what they were, in the same breath that he saw the truth of everything with Hal from the very first, and saw as well how he must look to Hal right now, and to Barry. There was a knife of shame in his abdomen, and it had begun to twist.

“Well,” he said briskly. “The truth is, Hal and I have been running an investigation down in Gotham that’s had me stymied, and I thought Lantern’s ring might be able to elucidate some things for me. He was very helpful, but I’ve got what I came for. Sorry to have interrupted the vacation.”

“No problem, man, anytime.” Barry popped open the trunk and reached for the tackle box. “I’m just gonna get the rest of this stuff inside and see if I can go make sense of the boat rental instructions. Hal, you wanna bring that other box in?”

“Sure,” Hal said, but didn’t move.

“Bruce, you sure you have to go? You don’t want just a quick dip in the lake?”

“I’m afraid so. But listen, if you decide you’d rather not deal with renting a boat, I’ve got one on the other side of the lake that you’re welcome to use. I’ll text you the address and all the details. And now I’ve got to get back to work. You two enjoy yourselves,” he said.

“Okay then,” Barry said. He headed up the stairs, glancing back at the two of them, shouldering a tackle box the size of a fourth-grader. It was possible he had never been fishing in his life. It looked like he had walked into the sporting goods store and said, *give me one of everything*. Bruce would have smiled to see it, any other day.

The two of them stood there in silence. Hal was just watching him. “Sorry,” Bruce said tightly, and walked back to the car, his shoes crunching on the gravel. Hal was still standing there, watching him. He kept watching him, as Bruce backed the car out the long driveway. His face was not readable.

Chapter 3

He had started sleeping with Hal because he had lost a bet, the truth was.

It was a stupid bet, and one he hadn't even wanted to make, but something about Oliver always brought out his competitiveness. Bruce had been monitoring Clark as he made external repairs on the Watchtower, keeping an eye on his progress on the live feed, and Oliver had strolled in to stand beside him and watch too. It was a race against the clock, because the thermal cladding on the bay doors had disintegrated to critical, and in less than a minute the Watchtower would be turned to the solar side, and those faulty panels would melt like warm ice cream, probably doing some structural damage to the bay entrance while they were at it. Clark had twenty-seven seconds left and counting. Oliver had stood there with his arms crossed.

"I've got a fifty that says he doesn't make it," he said.

"Seventy-five that he does," Bruce said, irritated.

"A c-note, and you go to my birthday party."

"Fine," Bruce said, zooming in on the section Clark had already finished, where the corner of a cladding panel was coming loose.

"That's gonna bake," Oliver said. Clark's voice crackled on the comm.

"Sorry," he said, and he sounded winded. "This is going to take more time than I thought. You want me to move the sun out of the way for a few minutes, or. . .?"

"Just come inside, we'll get it on the next pass," Bruce said. Oliver clapped a hand on his back.

"Party starts at eight, I'll text you the deets," he said. Bruce sighed.

"Two hundred, and I don't have to go," he said through gritted teeth, but Oliver was already walking out, his braying laugh echoing behind him.

"No way man, this is the best thing that's happened to me all year!" he called.

And that was the story of how Bruce had ended up at a karaoke bar in Star City to celebrate Oliver Queen's birthday, morosely nursing a watery scotch while he watched people in various stages of drunkenness make idiots of themselves in front of other drunken idiots. Oliver was so gleefully drunk that he was immune to anything approaching personal shame or accurate pitch, for that matter.

"How are you standing this?" he said, leaning over to Dinah, who was sitting next to him.

"What, you mean Oliver's horrible singing, or marriage to him?"

"Both."

"He's amazing in bed."

Bruce cocked his head and considered, watching Ollie launch into the bridge section of *Play That Funky Music*. It was 70s night, to add insult to injury. Ollie's dance moves looked like they were going to do serious damage to his core muscles. "He'd better be," Bruce said.

Barry and Hal, of course, were only too happy to goad Oliver to greater heights of idiocy, and they were currently singing back-up. Some helpful soul backstage had found a trunk of old props, and Hal was busy decking himself out in about nine feather boas, with gold chains and a purple beret for Barry. Oliver was prancing around in a faux-leather fringe vest, humping the piano and practically fellating the microphone.

Sometimes when he contemplated exactly whose hands the fate of the galaxy rested in, he knew it was a miracle that any of them were alive.

“Oh my fucking God, are you kidding me!” Hal yelled as the Captain and Tennille came on. He stood atop the piano, seizing the microphone from Ollie and taking the lead on *Love Will Keep Us Together*, which was probably a good thing, because Ollie appeared to have finally passed out, draped across the piano, with Barry close behind him. He didn’t want to think about how much alcohol Barry must have consumed to have approached the point of actual unconsciousness. Jordan was going strong, however, twirling his boa and belting out the chorus at the top of his lungs.

“He can’t remember his Watchtower log-in two days in a row, but he knows every word of this song,” Bruce murmured to Dinah, who laughed.

And then because Jordan would do anything for attention, he decided to make a show of it, and came down into the audience, which hooted and clapped for him. No mystery why, of course – he was wearing a tight T shirt and jeans that didn’t leave much to the imagination, and his voice was (Bruce had to admit) a lovely tenor that suited the song well. Hal paraded himself through most of the women in the audience, dropping into a few laps, offering exaggerated caresses. And then he made a beeline for Bruce.

“Yooouuu, you belong to me now,” he crooned, and Bruce sighed. He looped one end of that boa around Bruce, and that was when he really started having fun. He kept singing lustily and (surprisingly) on-pitch, one arm draped more or less across Bruce at all times, who kept his gaze straight ahead. By the final chorus he was fully straddling Bruce, practically lap-dancing him as he draped him in multiple boas. The audience was cheering him on, and Dinah was collapsed in laughter. Bruce sat there unmoving.

“Enjoying yourself?” Bruce whispered during an instrumental segue, and Hal smirked.

“Oh you have no idea,” he whispered back, before he wound up for his finale. “Look in my heart and let love keep us toge-e-e-e-e-ther,” Hal belted out, and he ground his bulge right into Bruce’s cock one more time before he dismounted and vaulted back onto the stage for his bow.

“I’m guessing since the birthday boy has surrendered consciousness, I’m allowed to leave,” he said to Dinah over the roar of the crowd as Hal took his seventeenth bow.

He ducked out the door that led to the back of the stage, and leaned against the wall in the relative cool and dark. The next number had started, and another group had taken over the microphone. Hal bounded down the little flight of stairs to the back corridor, laughing, still trying to disentangle himself from the boas, which appeared to have multiplied during his last number. Bruce just watched him.

“Aw c’mon, Spooky, don’t look like that.” Hal tossed a boa at him with a grin. “It’s called having fun, you must have had some at some point in your life.”

“Mm,” Bruce said, still watching him. Hal was winded, and he leaned against the opposite wall once he had freed himself from the boas. He was still smiling, and there was a hot pink feather stuck to his sweaty hair. A few more feathers were drifting from his shoulders. He looked like he

was molting.

“Did you like the dance though?” he asked.

“Dance,” Bruce said. “Is that what that little cocktease was called?”

Hal gave a low throaty laugh. “Oh believe me,” he said. “That’s the last thing that was.”

“Because you don’t like cock or because you don’t tease?”

“Which do you think?”

Bruce had a rejoinder for that, but just then the next herd of drunk people jostled between them in the narrow hallway, waiting to go on for their set. Hal stayed leaning where he was, his head tipped against the wall, his eyes watching Bruce. The swirl of people in between them swayed and laughed and pushed past them. Bruce stepped across to Hal.

“Then in that case,” he murmured in Hal’s ear, “take this. It’s the keycard to my penthouse. Show up there in an hour, if you want to. If you don’t want to, throw it away and we’ll forget all about it.”

“Or,” Hal said. “I sell this on eBay and retire a wealthy man.”

“Your choice I suppose.” Bruce let his eyes travel downward – down Hal’s half-open shirtfront, down the cling of T shirt and jeans. It was a gaze that missed nothing, and he took his time. When he traveled back up to Hal’s eyes, there was another one of those smirks waiting for him there. Bruce smirked back. He sauntered off down the hallway, but ducked out a side exit so he wouldn’t have to go back through the bar.

Some eighty percent of him had not thought Hal would show up that night. Fully ninety percent of him thought it was a terrible idea anyway. But the remaining ten percent was his cock, which had stirred to life during Hal’s little karaoke show, and his cock had a way of getting what it wanted. He lay stretched on the sofa in the darkened penthouse, sipping some more scotch – he needed some good liquor to wash out the taste of that bar’s swill – and debating whether he should go ahead and jack off now, or give it a few more minutes. His cock was beginning to ache a bit.

He heard the turn of the door handle and realized he must have drifted off, otherwise he would have heard the ping of the elevator in the foyer. He should have turned on some lights, because he heard Hal open the door and then stand there.

“Ah. . . Bruce?”

“Over here,” he said. Hal made his careful way across the vast expanse of living room to the sofa. Bruce, whose eyes were adjusted to the dark, had the advantage of studying him. “You didn’t bring the boa,” Bruce said.

“Didn’t know you needed a costume to get it up.”

Bruce smiled. “I don’t make a habit of this,” he said.

Hal smiled back. “I don’t believe you.”

Bruce rose. He saw Hal glance at the glass of scotch resting on the carpet. “I see you kept the party going. You too drunk for this?”

“It was only the scotch that kept me from cumming in my pants when you were grinding on me.”

“Well with an opening like that,” Hal said, and leaned in to kiss him. It was a much, much better kiss than he had thought it would be.

“You’re good at that,” Bruce murmured.

“I’m good at lots of things.”

It was a challenge, and Bruce was not one to back down from a challenge. It was, objectively speaking, some of the best sex of his life, but he knew it was also some of the best sex of Hal’s life, which was infinitely more satisfying. He got Hal naked and on his back in Bruce’s bed – and sweet God but the man was beautiful, and not terribly aware of it, which was even more arousing – and his lips around Hal’s cock, and the noises Hal made were worth the whole price of admission right there. Hal was gripping onto the headboard with one hand, and the other hand was tangled in Bruce’s hair.

“Fuck—fuck you have to stop—oh fuuuuuck,” Hal was moaning, as Bruce deep-throated him. He kept his hands bracketing Hal’s thighs, kneading them as he went down on him, because every part of Hal Jordan was lovely, but those thighs were the stuff of epic poetry. The sun-brown flare of his quads was a symphony.

He had started off with a hand job, mainly because he wanted the chance to watch those thighs flex. He had lubed him up until he was so slick Bruce’s hand could almost not find purchase, and he let the slow torturous slide of his hand do its work, until Hal was biting his lip. And then he had bent his head to lick at the tip, and Hal had practically gone wild, so that had decided him. It had not taken long to reduce Hal to his current state of incoherence.

Bruce slid further down on Hal’s shaft, and Hal gasped and choked.

“For real, I’m gonna cum, stop, oh fuck,” he panted, and Bruce lifted off.

“Cum in my mouth,” he said.

“Bruce,” was all Hal said, a small broken sound. Bruce lowered his mouth again, taking all of him in. Hal shuddered and arched off the bed, and Bruce swallowed every drop of his cum. He licked and nuzzled him through it, and enjoyed the show as Hal slowly swam back to consciousness. The hand was back to carding through his hair. Strange how enjoyable that was.

“What can I do for you, hotness?” Hal murmured drowsily, and Bruce gave a wicked smile. He reached for the lube.

“Don’t move,” he said, and Hal arched a brow.

“Don’t move?”

“Don’t move.” Bruce smeared the lube on Hal’s thighs, greasing those perfect muscles, sliding his hand between and underneath and around. Hal was still stroking his head while he worked. When he was done, Bruce kept his hands on the outside of those thighs, pressing them firmly together. He climbed up on Hal, dragged his cock against those thighs, and bit back a moan at it.

“Fuck you’re gonna make me hard again, watching that,” Hal whispered.

“Good,” Bruce said. He meant to say something else, something about intending to fuck Hal until the sun came up, but he hadn’t calculated how good it would feel to fuck against those thighs, and

his throat closed on a gasp. Hal shifted just slightly, enough to allow Bruce's cock to slide into the sweet spot where his thighs were clenched, and then Bruce did groan aloud. He kept his hands tight around those thighs as he fucked them. He came so hard his vision whited, and he bowed his head to Hal's chest, trying to control his breathing.

"You got me all wet," Hal said, still stroking at his hair, which was clearly a thing for him.

Another spike of orgasm hit him, and he leaked a bit more cum in between those glorious thighs, the thighs he had just drenched with cum. He raised his head and lurched forward and seized Hal's mouth in his. Hal's hands found their way down to his ass, where they dug in and kneaded. "You get what you wanted?" Hal murmured in his ear.

"Not even close," Bruce husked, and Hal laughed at that, and rolled them so he had Bruce pinned. There was cum smearing on Bruce's body, but he didn't care. "My turn," Hal whispered.

Chapter 4

The bang on his door had him awake like a shot, but he lay there, tensed and listening. He knew he wasn't the only one awake, either – they were neither of them what you would call heavy sleepers. Could be it was Crazy Fredo down the hall, who had a habit of mistaking Jason's door for his, and then being pissed that it was locked. Last time he had had to walk Fredo to his own apartment and show him his fucking furniture to convince him that no, *that* was actually his place, and then Fredo had wanted to fight him because he must have moved all his shit. Crazy Fredo was really more High As Fuck Fredo.

The banging happened again, but it sounded more rational and contained than Fredo's wild flailing, so even though it was like nine a.m. on a Sunday morning, Jason rolled over and reached for his pants and pulled them on, because whoever it was, they were clearly not going away. The pile of blankets beside him just burrowed further underneath the pillows.

"Faker," Jason muttered, and stumbled out to the living room.

"Keep your damn pants on, I'm coming," he shouted. He opened the door to a large man slouched in a ratty jacket and a wool cap, and it took even him half a second, because goddamn but Bruce could erase himself when he wanted to. Jason stood there stupidly.

"Who's dead?" he said, but Bruce didn't respond, just kept looking at him, so Jason sighed and opened the door all the way and Bruce stepped inside.

"I'm here to take you up on your offer," he said, and it wasn't all part of his just-another-homeless-guy street wear, because that was the rasping voice of a man who hadn't slept in about twenty-four hours.

"Ah. . . yeah," Jason said. "Well, come in I guess."

"You said that we could talk about it, if I wanted," Bruce continued. "I do. And I need. . . more than that, I think. I need advice. I know I'm the last person you wanted to turn up on your doorstep at nine a.m. on a Sunday morning, or probably ever, for that matter. But you are, I think, the only person who can help me. Will you?"

Jason just stood there, attempting to process. "Ah. . . hold on a sec," he said, and he went into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. He leaned against the door.

"So," he said. "You may or may not believe how 90s sitcom this has just turned out to be, but your dad is here. Our—whatever you want to call him. And when I say here, I mean right on the other side of this door kind of here. This week, on a very special episode of *Full House*."

A dark head emerged from the pile of hoarded blanket. "I'm not imagining that was Bruce's voice?" Dick said.

"You are not."

"What the fuck is going on?"

Jason scratched at the back of his head. "I'm not. . . actually sure. But I think he wants to talk."

Dick rolled over and stretched like the lazy jungle cat he was. For a second Jason's cock stirred, and he considered telling Bruce to go fuck himself and coming back in here to stretch himself on

top of Dick's sleep-warm body and just fuck him into the mattress. To his credit it was only a second – okay, maybe two. Dick was smiling at him like he knew what he was thinking. A shaft of morning sun streaked his golden skin. "So listen," Jason said. "I realize this is your first time sleeping over, and things are kind of new between us so you have no real basis of comparison here, and I swear to fucking God this is not my usual, but gorgeous, I think you need to make yourself scarce."

"You're about to ask me to climb out the fire escape, aren't you?"

"Yes. Yes that is what I am about to do, yes."

Dick rolled over and yawned, swinging his legs over. Jason watched him appreciatively. "I could stay in here with the door closed," Dick said, pulling on his pants. "He wouldn't know. But you happen to know that anyone in here can hear everything that's said out there, and you're not gonna do that to him, are you?"

"Apparently I'm not."

Dick was shrugging on his shirt.

"That's too bad," he said. "Because I thought the deal was, we fuck and get this out of our systems. But the problem is, when you go and do noble shit like that, shit that reminds me what a good fucking person you actually are, it is really goddamn annoying, because it makes it that much harder for me to not want to do this again. And again. And again." On every *again* he moved closer to Jason, until he was pressed against him, whispering in his ear. Jason turned his face and they were kissing. Dick ran a hand behind Jason's neck, tilting his head down to him a fraction.

"Catch you later, Little Wing," Dick said, and in three soundless motions he had lifted the latch on the window, slid it up, and swung effortlessly out onto the fire escape. Jason watched him vault over to the next building, because Dick was a fucking show-off.

Jason came back out to the living room to find Bruce seated in the corner of the sofa. "I'm sorry," Bruce said. He had taken off the cap and nothing obscured those eyes. Jason didn't know what he'd heard, but probably enough to know Jason had not been alone.

"It's okay," he said. "Don't worry about it. You want some coffee?"

"Not really," Bruce said, but Jason fumbled around with the coffeemaker anyway, because evidently he was going to need it. When he had a cup ready and had poured in enough sugar to jumpstart him to diabetes, he came back to the living room and sat down in the rickety chair by the non-functional fireplace. He set a cup of black down by Bruce.

"Who was your guest?" Bruce said.

"Who, him? You probably know him, his name is Mind Your Own Business, and he works at Fuck Right Off."

"I was just making conversation. But I have recently been reminded I am not known for my conversational skills, so I suppose that's fair."

Jason took a slug of his coffee. "B, what the fuck happened?"

Bruce was staring abstractedly at nothing. It was his air of calm serenity that was somehow the most troubling. "What happened," he said, "is that I did like I do. I fucked up. Massively, and, as I think you would put it, in several directions at once."

Jason sat with that for a minute. “I’m sorry,” he said finally, because there was no reason to doubt Bruce’s assessment of the situation.

“Me too,” Bruce said, reaching for his coffee.

“You think it can be fixed?”

“I think there is the barest possibility of that, if I manage not to fuck up further and if I say and do exactly the right thing.”

“Which would be?”

“No fucking clue. That’s why I’m here.”

Jason gave a short laugh at that, but Bruce did not. “Sorry,” Jason said. “I’m just not used to hearing you swear.” Bruce’s brows furrowed like he was worried for Jason’s mental stability, which to be fair was probably an ongoing concern. “No, I mean—look, I’m sure you swear all the time. But you didn’t when I was a kid, for obvious reasons, and then afterward, well, we haven’t spent that much one-on-one time together, so. . . I dunno, forget it, it was just funny, all right, moving on.”

Bruce was still frowning at him, so Jason plowed ahead. “Okay, look, if we’re gonna get down to business I’m gonna need all the variables, so I know what we’ve got to work with. You ready to be straight with me?”

Bruce made a gesture with his hand that probably implied consent. “This relationship you just torpedoed, it’s with a guy, right?”

“Yes.”

“Which is why you’re here. Because you’ve so insulated your life from interaction with any actual queer community that I’m apparently all you’ve got. Yes?”

A small wince on that one. “More or less.”

“Which means yes. Next question. Did this relationship implosion happen because of identity issues? Did you tell him you’re Batman, and did he freak out?”

Bruce was studying a speck of lint on his tattered jeans. “That’s not. . . an issue,” he said.

“What, because you haven’t told him yet? Come on B, that’s a no go. You want my help here, my first piece of advice is going to be that you have to be completely honest with this guy. If you want him in your life, it has to be *your* life, not some sanitized fantasy version of your life because that’s all you think he can handle.”

“I’m not disagreeing. But he already knows.”

“Oh.” Jason was a little taken aback by that one. He’d never known Bruce to disclose his identity to anyone outside the League. The idea that Bruce might have revealed his identity to someone already was. . . unsettling. It meant Bruce was in deeper than he had thought, if he had done that. “So he was cool with it? Was it a big deal, when you told him?”

The wince was pronounced, this time. “He wasn’t. . . it was not an issue. He knew before we were. . . involved.”

“You told him before you were ever involved? I’m not exactly sure what we’re talking about here, B, but if you—”

“We’re talking about the Green Lantern.”

Jason nodded. “Riiiiight. Got it. Okay, hang on just a minute,” he said, and went to the bathroom next to the kitchen. He locked the door. He gripped the sink. He looked at the cracked mirror. “*Oh my fucking God are you fucking SHITTING ME RIGHT NOW???*” he whispered at the mirror. He straightened up and ran the taps, splashed some water on his face.

“You,” he said into the mirror, pointing his finger. “I am very disappointed in you right now that you did not see this one coming. Also that Hal Jordan was apparently down to fuck for *years* and you missed out on that one. *Very* disappointed.”

He dried his hands and his face and re-emerged. Bruce was still sitting in the same place. “Okay,” Jason said, pacing, “where were we? Hal Jordan, right, got it. How long have you two been, you know?”

“Better part of a year, off and on.”

Jason choked a little. “Okay. Just—so you got involved like a year ago, and things have been going okay?”

Bruce was rotating that coffee cup like it was the most fascinating thing he had ever seen in his life. “Involved is overstating it.”

“So you’ve been fucking for about a year.”

“Yes.”

“And – I’m sorry, but how exactly did you manage to fuck that up?”

“By falling in love with him.”

“Which you realized when?”

“About point-five seconds after irrevocably fucking things up. So, situation normal.”

Jason paced back over to his chair. He drained his coffee and went to the kitchen for more. This was definitely going to be a five-cup problem. He downed another half-cup in the kitchen and came back.

“Okay,” he said. “First things first. A, how did you manage to fuck Hal Jordan for a solid year and *not* fall in love with him? Are you fucking insane? I’m like, three-quarters of the way in love with him and I’ve never slept with him, so I’m pretty sure that one night in bed with him and I’d be gone. He can wrap those thighs around my waist any damn time, if you know what I mean. Which . . . you probably do, never mind. I just—Jesus Christ, that body. You probably want me to stop talking now, don’t you?”

“Very, very much.”

“Right. Okay. Focusing. So tell me more about the fucking up. And not just like in generalized terms, but like word for word. I need to know exactly what was said, and where you were, that kind of thing.”

“We were in bed. I suggested that—”

“Wait wait, after sex or before?”

“After.”

He waved a lordly hand. “Continue.”

“I suggested that we might want to change the status of our relationship. That instead of being quite so hole-and-corner about it, we might want to consider. . . something more. He reacted in anger and told me to get out of his bed.”

Jason narrowed his eyes. “That’s it?”

“No, I’m paraphrasing. His actual words were, get the fuck out of my bed.”

“Why do I feel like there’s some missing information here. Go back and tell me *exactly* what you said.”

Bruce sighed. “I said that I had been wondering if perhaps he might prefer us to be less discreet about our relationship. Which he had previously amended to ‘arrangement,’ by the way.”

“And he said what?”

“He made some crack about me agreeing to hold his hand in the school lunchroom, and how all his dreams were about to come true.”

“Uh huh. Any idea why?”

“Because Hal Jordan has the verbal restraint of a howler monkey?”

“Because, fuckhead, you—” Jason scrubbed at his face. Getting angry here would not help. And Bruce had genuinely asked for help. That was the important thing to keep in mind. He had actually asked. But he didn’t need coffee, he needed a fistful of Xanax if he was expected to deal with this level of emotional obtuseness.

“Because,” Jason resumed in a calmer voice, “you assumed that he was the one who wanted something more from the relationship, instead of being honest and saying that *you* wanted it. And then you made it sound like it was some favor you were granting him, asshole. You’re lucky he didn’t boot you out the fire escape.”

“Like you did Dick?”

Jason stood there in silence, just staring at Bruce. This was what Bruce did – he lit people like a powder keg and then sat back and watched, and he was waiting for Jason to explode at him, and then this whole uncomfortable conversation – a conversation he had in fact initiated – would be over, and no one would ever hold him accountable for his feelings again, because he was a fucking vindictive emotionally stunted twelve-year-old. The only reason he wasn’t going to come across the room at Bruce was because it was exactly what Bruce wanted him to do, and not doing what Bruce wanted was pretty much his main life goal.

“You done?” Jason said. “Or can we go back to the subject at hand now?”

Bruce went back to studying his coffee. “All right,” Jason said. “Look, what you’ve told me is bad, I’m not gonna lie. But it’s nothing that’s not fixable. I think you’ve got a clear path forward here,

but you're gonna have to start with some honesty, along with a healthy side of apology."

"That's not the end of the story," Bruce said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we haven't yet arrived at the part where he failed to return my messages for a solid week, and I followed him to his lake vacation with Barry."

Jason covered his face with his hand. "You. . . what now?" he said.

"It seemed logical at the time. I realized he had misunderstood me, in our earlier conversation. He wasn't giving me a chance to explain, and it was easy enough to track down where he was, so I seized the initiative."

"Bruce. You stalked him on his vacation. There is nothing in this that does not make you Crazy Stalker Dude. Tell me you realize why this is muy, muy no bueno. Tell me that much."

"Obviously I see that now," he said with irritation.

"And what did he say, when his Crazy Stalker Boyfriend showed up?"

"He called me a hypocrite and accused me of treating him like a stray dog who had snapped his leash. And also a son of a bitch."

"Huh." Jason rooted around on the mantel for a pack of smokes, and found a crumpled one with one or two left. He dug in the box for matches. "Son of a bitch I'll grant you. Why a hypocrite, though?"

"Because I. . . got angry at him for so obviously wanting Barry to know nothing about our relationship."

"You got angry?"

"A little. Possibly."

"Oh okay, I see, not only did you track him down on his vacation like Crazy Stalker Dude, you tracked him down in order to *yell at him*. How'd that work?"

"Not well."

"Yeah it's weird, I don't know how come he didn't suck you off right there in the bushes." He walked over and cranked both sides of the window open, and tossed Bruce the pack of smokes. Bruce took it without demur, and dug a lighter from one of the pockets on his jacket. Jason watched the practiced way he smoked, and laughed softly. He lit his own and tossed the match out the window.

"A serious question for you," Jason said, still peering out the window. "If Hal were a woman, would you have done that? Would you have acted like that, I mean, with the stalking and the yelling and the crazy-ass bullshit?"

Bruce was studying his cigarette. "I take your point," he said.

"Do you? Because I'm not sure you do. There's this whole set of expectations about respectful dating behavior that you've just chucked out the window because the person you're in love with happens to be a man. And like, you coming here today. That's all because you think there's some

magic formula to doing this with a guy that I somehow have insider access to, right? But that's bullshit, because all you ever have to do is treat somebody like a person, doesn't matter if they're male, female, or insert-your-own-emoji-here. Same rules, same everything, man."

"It's not the same, though," Bruce said, blowing a plume of smoke at the ceiling and frowning at it.

"How so?"

Bruce looked thoughtful. "Do you know why people still die of bubonic plague in developed countries?"

"Because rats are still assholes?"

"It's not the rats, it's the fleas. People die of plague because doctors are no longer trained to recognize the symptoms. We have the right medications, and there's no reason anyone with access to twenty-first century medical care needs to die of plague anymore. But they still do, because we've lost the context that would explain to us the symptoms we're seeing. A little girl in Mississippi died, not too long ago, because despite being surrounded by state of the art medical facilities, no one in those facilities had any training to recognize what the plague looked like. Such an ordinary human condition, and we no longer see it for what it is." He shifted, and stubbed his cigarette out on the bottom of his shoe, half-finished.

"My point is," he said, "you don't look for the symptoms of what you believe to be impossible."

"And falling in love with a guy, that's just impossible."

"It has been, for me. I didn't know what was happening until it was too late."

"Question," Jason said. "Any idea what he feels?"

"Irritation, probably. And justified confusion. After all, I'm the one who tried to change the terms of what was a very practical, functional arrangement, to use his word."

"Yeah, I'm . . . not so sure about that one. I think you might not be the only one in this scenario suffering from plague, if you know what I mean."

Bruce frowned, evidently not following him. "Look," Jason tried. "This goes back to the whole imagine-somebody-else-is-a-person thing, so not your skill set I know, but for whatever reason you've both been pretty closeted in your lives. Maybe his experience of this is not all that different from yours, you know? Could be he's going through some of the same things you are."

Bruce shook his head dismissively. "Wishful thinking," he said. "And I'm not closeted. I've never made any attempt to hide my sexual interest in anyone."

"Oh you're not closeted," Jason said. "Really." He kept his voice low. "You sit there and tell me you're not closeted, but have you ever shown up to any public function, anywhere, anytime, with a guy on your arm? You ever talked in an interview about your bisexuality? You ever made a point of being public in your affection with any guy? Or did you ever once talk to any of your kids about your own sexuality, or hint to anyone in any context that you were anything other than a heterosexual man?"

He flicked his cigarette out the window. "Yeah, that's what I thought. So listen up, because until you can answer yes to even one of those questions, you're in a fucking closet, and let me tell you what the closet does to you, let me tell you about your fancy fucking bubonic plague metaphor you

got yourself there. Love is not the disease, you clueless motherfucker, the closet is the disease, and *that's* why don't have the first fucking clue what's happening to you, *that's* why you didn't recognize love when it's been in your bed for a solid year, *that's* why we're having this entire fucked-in-the-head conversation. Because you're in a fucking closet, and you come here to ask me to turn the light on in the closet for you and maybe rearrange some goddamn boxes? Fuck that! *Fuck* that. Rip the doors off the closet, kick it until it's destroyed, get the fuck out of there and never look back. You said you needed advice, well that's all the advice I've got for you. I'm done, that's all of it right there. Take it or fucking leave it."

He was breathing hard, but goddamn if he had to listen to one more minute of Bruce's self-righteous ignorant smugness, of his infinite self-pity, he was gonna put his fist through something.

Bruce just sat there looking at him with narrowed eyes. He said nothing, but he didn't take his eyes off Jason. And then he reached for his coffee – cold now, probably – and drained it down. He reached for his wool cap and tugged it back on, and rose. "Thank you for the coffee," he said.

"Thank you for the weirdest Sunday morning I've ever had."

"Yes, we should do it more often."

Jason gave a short laugh. He watched Bruce head out the door. He had slouched again, settling into the clothes that rendered him invisible, and unless you saw those piercing blue eyes under the cap you wouldn't know the difference – just another homeless dude who smelled of cigarettes and a faint whiff of Penhaligon. He vanished quietly out the door, and Jason watched him go, because he didn't know what else to say.

"Oh, sorry," he heard Roy's voice say, as he almost collided with Bruce in the doorway. Roy watched the strange homeless guy shuffle off.

"Who was that?" he said, craning his neck to stare after him.

"No one," Jason said.

"Fine, don't tell me. You know what's weird, for like half a second I thought it was Bruce, sweet fuck could you imagine. Hah! You and Bruce, just having a lazy Sunday morning together, my brain is a scary place, man."

"That it is."

"I bring beignets," Roy announced triumphantly, landing a bag of pastries on the kitchen counter.

Chapter 5

“Okay, time to get up! Let’s go, come on, time’s a-wastin, shake a leg.”

Barry cracked an eye to find Hal looming over him, a lifejacket in each hand, grinning like a maniac. He blinked, shifted on the hammock. “Hal, what the fuck?” he croaked.

“Jet ski rental,” Hal said cheerily. “You remember, we talked about this yesterday? Found a place like half a mile from here. Got us signed up for a slot in like twenty minutes, paid for it and everything. Come on man, you can’t sleep our vacation away like this.”

Barry struggled up. “Hal,” he said. “In the last twenty-four hours, you have dragged me on no less than seven hikes. We have fished at dawn, we have canoed, we have swum from one end of this lake to the other, we have played a pick-up game of beach volleyball with some high school youth group where a fourteen-year-old tried to give me her phone number and I had to eat a s’more. And that’s not even mentioning last night when you signed us up for water polo with the senior citizens’ day retreat over at the bait shop. Harold, I love you, but you have worn me right the fuck out. And now you are going to leave me in peace to take a nap, or so help me I am going to tie that life-preserver around your neck and tighten it, are we clear?”

Hal looked so much like a kicked puppy, standing there holding the jackets, that Barry felt bad about it, for a millisecond. “I just wanted us to have some fun,” Hal said.

“Right,” Barry sighed. “Fun.”

“Normally you’re all about the activity. I’m just trying to keep you occupied.”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, I’d believe your whole ‘I’m just trying to entertain you’ thing if it weren’t also such an awesome way to make sure we never have to actually, you know, talk.”

“What the hell does that mean? We’re talking right now. We’ve been talking all weekend.”

Barry gave him a steady look. “Please put those down,” he said. “Please just sit down.”

Hal complied. He looked like a fourth grader whose peanut butter sandwich had just been stomped on. “You know,” Barry said, “when I booked this vacation, I sort of thought it would be more of a two guys drinking beer and just hanging out kind of thing. I didn’t actually think we had to, you know, do anything. I just like hanging out with you.”

“We have been hanging out.”

“But can’t we just. . . talk?”

Hal kicked a life-jacket aside. “Okay, sure. Fine. We can talk. You know we haven’t actually played around with that TV in there, I’m betting we can get a game on or something. You want to crack open some beers and see what we can find to watch?”

“Not really.” He watched Hal’s eyes dart around the porch, the lake. “You know,” he said slowly, “it’s not like I’m going to interrogate you or something. I just want to be your friend.”

Hal's eyes were on him at that. "I know that," he said.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"Talk about what?"

"Forget it," Barry sighed. He went inside and grabbed himself a beer from the fridge, then went back and got one for Hal too, because pissed as he was, he was not actually an asshole. Hal was still sitting in the chair by the hammock, staring at the life-jacket like it was his dog that had gotten run over. Barry settled himself in a rocking chair and watched the late afternoon settle on the lake. Sounds of boaters and splashing, the occasional faint laugh, drifted up from the lakeshore on the other side.

Hal reached over and opened his beer too, and they drank in silence. "We always talk about my shit," Barry said. "Things with Iris, things at the lab. . . I always feel like I'm the one doing all the talking. Sometimes I wonder if that's because you think I'm just too dumb to follow all the space cop stuff."

Hal snorted. "Yeah Bar, you're a real idiot. No idea how it is you got a degree in forensic pathology, much less promoted to head of your department."

"I didn't tell you about that."

"No, I know, Iris did last week. That's gonna put a little dent in your self-righteous 'I always tell Hal stuff and he never tells me anything' bullshit, but whatever."

Barry drank his beer and watched the lake. Hal's temper was quick, and his tongue was quicker, but even so, there was an edge to it this afternoon that he was wary of. "I thought it would sound like bragging," Barry said.

Hal said nothing. "And then it slipped my mind," Barry said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean not to say anything. I have my own bathroom now."

Hal gave a sharp laugh at that. "Couldn't you always have just used your speed to zoom to the executive washroom or something?"

"Wouldn't have worked. Little known fact, you cannot take a piss in the speed force."

"You're shitting me."

"That either."

"What the fuck, this is a serious chink in your defenses here. You're telling me there's a secret to taking down the Flash, and we are only now discovering it? I think this needs to be the subject of a League meeting."

"Oh man, what do you wanna bet Batman is gonna come up with an eleven-point contingency plan for me taking a leak? He will be all over that."

Hal ducked his head back into his beer, and Barry kicked himself. He hadn't meant to do that. Dammit. But the opening was there. "Speaking of Bruce," he said, "how's that investigation going, that you two are working on?"

"Subtle, Bar," Hal said quietly.

“No, I was just curious, he seemed pretty—agitated about it, yesterday, is all, and I—”

Hal hurled his empty beer can off the porch. “Say what you wanna say.”

“I don’t want to say anything. Hal, come on. I just—we can actually talk about it, is all. We can talk about actual things. I just want to be your friend, and I’m here to listen if you want to talk, that’s all.”

“Yes, Bruce and I had a disagreement. What the hell else is new? It’s not exactly a rare event, and I don’t recall you asking if I needed to go visit the counselor’s office before. The man is a douchetastic prickrocket, so let’s forget about it and go ride some fucking jet-skis.”

“This time just seemed a little different, is all.”

“How so?”

“It’s got you wound so tight you’re about to come out of your skin, for one thing. And you’ve got misery coming off you in fucking waves, so excuse me for giving a shit. What the hell is going on?”

Barry could see the muscle in the side of Hal’s jaw clench. “Nothing you would understand,” he said tightly.

“Right,” Barry said. “Nothing I could possibly understand. Because I’m not only blind and deaf, I’m also stupid.”

Hal was studying his hands. His hair had fallen forward over his face, obscuring his eyes. It made him look so young. Barry was aware that he himself was blond and blue-eyed, with a smile that made people do things for him they might not otherwise, but Hal was another order of thing entirely.

“Ollie’s birthday party last year,” Barry said finally. “I saw you guys, afterward. Backstage.”

Hal was clenching and unclenching his hands, just watching them like he would never look at anything else. “It’s just sex,” he said. “A way to blow off some steam. That’s all.”

“Sure,” Barry said. “But. . . why? I realize you guys are very very different, but in other ways. . . really not, you know? I’m just wondering why it has to be only sex.”

“Because it does,” Hal said harshly. “Because anything else would be fucking stupid, that’s why. Because only a fucking idiot would let anything else be true.”

He got up and gave a vicious kick to the life-jacket lying on the floor. He walked over to the edge of the porch and braced himself on the railing. “And that’s what you’d have to be, is a goddamn fucking idiot to think that anything, ever—to think that fucking around is anything other than exactly that, all right, it’s just fucking around, and it doesn’t mean shit, it means *nothing*, and anything else is just not in the universe I’m living in, fuck that, get the fuck away from me with that, you’d have to be a fucking idiot to fall in love with—”

He bent over like he had been stabbed in the middle. His arms were still gripping the railing, he was bent over like he was having trouble breathing, and his arms were shaking, and every part of Barry ached to watch him. It felt like getting his own chest ripped out to see Hal like this.

“*FUCK!!!!*” Hal shouted, loud enough to echo across the lake.

Barry came and sat on the railing, being careful to give him his space. He wanted to pull Hal to him and just hold him, but that would be like trying to hug a tiger, and he'd likely lose a limb, Hal was so tightly wound. Not for the first time he marveled at Hal's control, that even in the grip of strong emotion he'd never once seen Hal use the ring to lash out, not once. Maybe a first time for everything though.

"I am such a fucking idiot," Hal said quietly. "Such a fucking idiot. The hell of it is, I didn't even know it was happening."

"You're not an idiot. Hal, come on, you'd have to be insane *not* to fall in love with Bruce. Everyone's got a little bit of a crush on Bruce. I'm more or less straight, and I would one thousand percent sleep with Bruce. I don't know anyone who wouldn't."

"The crush part is probably just you."

"You think? I don't think so, pretty sure that's everybody. This is probably a bad time to ask what he's like in bed, huh."

"It very much is."

Barry was silent a minute. He didn't want to fuck this up. He wanted to say the right thing, to keep Hal talking to him. "He did follow you all the way up here to the lake," he said eventually. Hal just fixed him with a glare. "Which. . .okay, was maybe not a normal thing to do, but it sure as hell looked like he was trying."

Hal just snorted and shook his head. He was evidently done talking about Bruce, so Barry just sat with him in silence.

"You don't. . ." Hal trailed off. "You haven't asked me about. . . other things. About conversations I have maybe not had with you."

"You don't owe the universe some explanation of your sexuality," Barry said. "And it's none of my business anyway."

Hal bowed his head, closed his eyes. "Sorry for being such a shitty friend this weekend," he said.

"You've been an exhausting friend, not a shitty one," Barry said, and Hal gave a short laugh. "Maybe we can just hang out at the cabin tonight, though, yeah? Not that your camp counselor-on-meth act hasn't been fun, but I could use a break. Let's eat junk food and watch something on the three channels this TV probably gets and drink some cheap beer. Wait, hang on, I have just the thing."

With a rush of wind that ruffled Hal's hair, he had vanished and returned, holding two tubs of ice cream. He plopped the moose tracks on the porch railing for Hal, with a plastic spoon on top, and kept the blue swirl birthday cake for himself. "You just ran to the store across the lake," Hal said.

"I did. But I left a twenty on the counter, so it's all good." He opened up his blue swirl birthday cake and plunged in his spoon. "Let's eat our feelings," he said.

"Our feelings look delicious. Though they'd look even more delicious with some fudge sauce, I have to say, if we've got—"

In another gale of wind, Barry had returned before the sentence was finished, fudge sauce in hand. "Well Bartholomew you have solved all my emotional problems. I am now in love with you."

“Excellent! Let us go celebrate the consummation of our love with high fructose corn syrup and ESPN.”

So in fact the last night of their vacation ended up being Barry’s favorite night, even though they did nothing but lie around the cabin in sweatpants and eat ice cream and watch stupid pet videos, because the TV only got two channels, as it turned out, and one was Animal Planet and the other was HGTV International in which trust fund babies got to pick which Majorcan beach house they wanted, and Hal said that he had had just about fucking enough of rich people.

Chapter 6

Jason probably thought he hadn't been listening, and in fairness he had not been, not really. He had been irritated at Jason's assumptions about him, irritated by the whole conversation. Irritated was the wrong word. It was like being flayed. He had felt like an open bleeding wound sitting there on Jason's no-doubt vermin-infested sofa, and it was not a feeling he cared for. So he had pushed aside most of what Jason had said.

Besides, none of it mattered. It was too late, and he had seen that. Seen it in the same moment he had seen the extent of his problem. So he did nothing, which was the rational thing to do when there was no win. And in this instance, doing nothing was probably the only way to get a win, which turned out to work in his favor: not three days after Hal had returned from the ill-fated lake trip, Bruce got a text.

Feeling like I could use some company, it read. It was from Hal. He stared at it and tried to suppress the strange uncomfortable thing squeezing his chest.

That so? he wrote back. But not too quickly. *What did you have in mind?*

Penthouse, 11:30 or so EST. You on?

Sure, he said. And then considered.

Actually, he wrote. *I need to push that back an hour.*

K, Hal wrote.

He did have investigative work that needed doing, but he could probably have pushed it and made it downtown by 11:30, if he had gone flat-out. But he thought it looked better if he didn't appear too eager. Sometimes what a plan needed was some time to bake, as it turned out. And here he had been despairing that there was no available solution to his little problem. Well. That was what separated a fine mind from a brilliant mind: patience. He had had patience with his problem, and it had come right in the end. He and Hal would be fine. He would be able tonight to explain himself better, and subtly move them in the direction he wanted them to go, and Hal would see his point.

He was feeling pretty good about himself when he arrived at the penthouse at 12:15, exactly fifteen minutes early. He brought take-out, and arranged it artfully on a table by the window. Uncorked the truly excellent Riesling he had set aside earlier today. Carefully considered the music, the lighting. He could have done with another shave, but this would have to do. Besides, he had noticed Hal never minded stubble – the opposite, in fact.

"Well isn't this quite the picture," Hal said, arriving as he was pouring the wine into the glasses.

"Thought you might be as hungry as I am," Bruce said smoothly.

"Oh I'm hungry all right," Hal said. And he stalked closer, leaned in to Bruce's neck, breathed deeply. Bruce smiled, set the wine bottle down. His arms started to come around Hal – and he was wearing that leather jacket, which was appreciated – when Hal seized his wrists, pressed him against the glass wall of windows.

"Mmm," Hal said, his tongue working on Bruce's neck.

"Don't you want to eat first," Bruce whispered.

“Oh I intend to eat.”

That was actually the last talking they did that night. Afterward Bruce lay in the wide bed and stared at the ceiling while Hal slept. After a while he got up quietly, and put his clothes back on, and went out to the living room. There were aches in unexpected places, because it had gotten rough. Because Hal had gotten rough. Bruce hadn't stopped him. He had wanted Hal's pleasure.

So he sat in the quiet and the dark, drinking their untouched Riesling, and had a quiet dark reckoning with himself. It was curious; all these years of fucking around, of treating his bed like a revolving door, and this was the first time this had ever happened to him.

Stop, he could have said to Hal. Could have put a hand on his chest. Could have run his hand up that jaw, could have held him there, cradled his lovely head. Could have said, slow down. Look at me. Kiss me. I'm here. I'm right here.

Hal hadn't done anything different from what they had done a hundred times before. He was the one who had changed, not Hal. He shut his eyes and let the slow knife of it enter him. Let the knife enter so carefully that he could feel every millimeter of it. It was astonishing, the amount of pain. Truly astonishing.

He got up and went to the wide windows, leaned against them and watched the blinking of the lights below. Gotham looked almost peaceful from up here.

“Hey, what's up?” Hal was leaning against the doorway to the bedroom, squinting blearily at him.

“Go back to bed,” Bruce said. “Didn't mean to wake you.”

“You didn't,” Hal said on a yawn. He was still naked. He came down into the living room and took the other glass from the artfully arranged table, plucked a shrimp. “My sleep's all messed up the last few weeks. Too much time off world. What the fuck even is a circadian rhythm any more.”

“You should take some sleep aids. Leslie can probably prescribe you something.”

“Hah. Yeah, that'd be great. Time to save the world, Green Lantern, oh wait, he just took a fistful of Ambien, let's hope the bad guys wait for him to wake up.”

Bruce drank his wine in silence, continuing to study the view. Hal came up behind him, leaning against the window too. He was so near. Bruce could reach out and touch him, and Hal wouldn't tell him no. But he couldn't touch him; not really. He might as well be on another planet still, for all the nearness of that beautiful body.

“Listen,” Bruce said affably. “This is not something I can do any more.”

“Ahhh, okay. What's up?”

“Nothing. I just can't manage it any more, is all. No fault of yours, obviously. I find it's not possible to—” And his throat closed, quite unexpectedly. Just at the wrong moment, too. He swallowed against it, but that only made it worse. The knife in his gut gave a turn. He breathed through that, pushed it down. He turned to face Hal.

“I can't do it, I'm sorry,” he said. “I've stopped being able to fuck you. Or rather, I can, but it's too, ah. . .” He searched for the word. No. More lies. He wasn't searching for the word. He knew the goddamn word.

“Painful,” he said quietly. “It's too painful. I can't be what you want me to be any more. I

apologize.”

“You apologize,” Hal said. His voice was soft at the edges. “Fuck, baby, did I do something wrong tonight? I thought – I thought that was what you wanted from me, I thought I could at least give you that. I thought that—”

“It’s fine,” Bruce said. “Truly.” He turned back to the view. He could take anything but the pity he heard leaking out around Hal’s voice. And then – ah, agony – Hal’s hand resting gently on his back.

“Bruce,” he said, so quietly. “Can we just talk for a second.”

“No,” he said, and he could feel his armor settling around him like steel cladding again, all its welcome protection. He could finally get some air. “No, I’m pretty sure I was clear. I realize you think your cock is a gift to all mankind, but when someone says they’ve had enough, it’s time to stuff it back in your pants. Now put some fucking clothes on and get out.”

He could feel Hal standing there, behind him. Could feel the beats of his breath.

“Go fuck yourself,” he said. It was the same quiet voice. Bruce shut his eyes. He kept them shut, leaning there against the window. He didn’t open them until he heard the penthouse door click shut. The knife in his gut was back, like a stitch nestled up against his ribcage. Like a slow bleed.

He glanced over at the table, and all his pathetic artful arrangement of it. His stupid confidence of earlier this evening. He set his wine glass back down. Or he thought he was. It turned out he was in fact sweeping the table clear, yanking the cloth so it all rolled onto the floor, plates and forks and glasses and food. He gave the table a sound kick, and it too rolled over. He walked through the rubble of their uneaten dinner on his way to the kitchen, and had the satisfaction of hearing a plate crunch under his shoe.

It was just after dawn when the banging on his door started. Fortunately Jason had not yet been to bed, though bed had begun to seem like a possibility. He had washed off most of the bloodstains, left his clothes to soak in the bathroom sink, and pulled on a clean(ish) pair of sweats. He sprawled on the sofa with a blunt, to see if he could relax enough for maybe a few hours’ sleep, and his eyes had begun to slide shut. That was when the banging started.

His piece was in the bedroom, which was a good thing, because if it had been within reach he might just have blasted a few holes in the door without opening his eyes. Roy would bitch though. He was always bitching about things like having to replace the door because it had bullet holes in it. Which was a complete overreaction on his part – that had been the bathroom door, after all, not even the front door. It was a one-bathroom apartment, and Roy knew better than to lock the door when he was in the shower. That was just common courtesy. Jason had really needed to piss, and he wasn’t going to use the kitchen sink. He wasn’t an animal, for Christ’s sake.

Bang bang bang went the heavy fist on his door, and Jason sighed, hauled his aching bones off the sofa.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he said, opening the door. Bruce was braced on the door frame. He had definitely not been to bed.

“Well you wouldn’t think I could have made it worse,” he said hoarsely, not looking up.

“That’s exactly where you’re wrong,” Jason said. “Come the fuck in, why doncha.”

Before he had got the locks relatched on the door, Bruce had ensconced himself on the sofa, right in Jason's spot, because Bruce was the motherfucker who would do shit like that. Jason had to settle himself on the chair, which had a broken slat. "It reeks of weed in here," Bruce said.

"Why yes it does. That would be on account of the weed I've been trying to smoke in peace, and which you are in dire need of. Seriously, you need to take the edge off. Can I roll you one?"

"No thank you," Bruce said, his mouth doing that disapproving thing, and Jason laughed.

"Right," he said, taking a long drag. "Because you never participate in illegal drugs at all, tell me another. I know what kinds of things Bruce Wayne gets up to in Gstaad, or on somebody's yacht off St. Martin's. I bet if we lined up all the coke you've done in your life, it would stretch from here to the bodega two blocks over, is what I think. Suck my cock, Officer Krupke."

Bruce gave a snort of amusement, and Jason savored the last of his blunt, then set it aside. "Okay," he said. "I'm ready. I am prepared to be amazed. How, in the name of sweet bleeding Jesus, could you possibly, ever, in a million years, have made things worse?"

Bruce was studying his hands. "He texted me," he said.

"Okay. That's good. So clearly your little stalker stunt at the lake was not a dealbreaker."

"Yes. That's what I thought too. He came to the penthouse last night, and things were. . . much as they had ever been."

"Okay. Okay, so far so good. Did you guys talk at all?"

Bruce winced. "No. Every time I tried to suggest we talk about anything, he. . .deflected."

"Deflected how?"

"He wanted sex, and that was all he wanted. All he wanted from me. And afterward, I told him I couldn't do that any more, that it was too painful for me."

"No no, that's good," Jason said, leaning forward. "Bruce, that's great, that's exactly what you needed to say. That was you being honest. That was good. What did he say?"

Bruce had gone back to studying his hands. "He. . . was kind."

"No no, I need to know exactly what he said. Tell me exactly."

"He. . . put his hand on me. And he said. . . he asked if he had done something wrong. He said he thought that was what I wanted from him, and that he could at least give me that."

"This is actually fucking fantastic, Bruce. See? You were honest with him, and he was honest back at you, and you did it, you really did it, you didn't make things worse, what the fuck are you talking about? This is all really, really good stuff."

"And then I told him to get his clothes back on and get the fuck out."

Jason was silent. He put his head in his hands, sighed deeply. Then he raised his head. "Wait," he said. "Hal was naked this entire conversation?"

"Yes."

"Okay, lemme just. . . I need to get a visual of that for a second."

“For God’s sake.”

“No no, I’m just, I’m trying to construct a scenario in my head in which anyone, ever, would tell Hal Jordan to put his clothes *back on* and I, I just, I got nothing.”

“Do you mind,” Bruce said.

“Right, right, I’m with you now. Okay, let’s review. So you took the step of being honest and allowing yourself some emotional vulnerability, and he responded with honesty and caring and maybe some vulnerability of his own, and you. . . told him to get the fuck out? Is that right, so far?”

“So far,” Bruce said, and Jason started laughing. Probably it was the weed, but still. Still. How could this be anything other than fucking hilarious.

“Oh man,” he said, through the laughter. “It’s like watching someone douse himself with five gallons of gasoline and light the match. You just cannot help yourself, can you? Cannot fucking help yourself.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I mean, I was enjoying myself before you showed up, but if I’m going to have my executive time so rudely interrupted, it’s nice to get something out of it, yeah.”

“Then it might amuse you even more to know that I didn’t just tell him to get out. I told him that he might think his cock was a gift to all mankind, but when someone had had enough, it was time to stuff it back in his pants.”

“Wow. When you do a job, you do a job, huh?”

“Apparently.”

He no longer wanted to laugh. It was like watching the guy doused in gasoline who was already on fire leaping into a river of lava. At a certain point, you stopped laughing and just wanted to cry.

“So, ah, you mind if I ask why?”

“Why?”

“Yeah, why. Why did you say that to him? Did it just seem like the thing to do? Was the prospect of happiness on the horizon just too unbearable, or what?”

“I thought. . . it occurred to me he might be pitying me.”

“Pitying you.”

“Yes.”

“You’re aware that’s not at all what was going on, right?”

“Of course I’m aware,” Bruce snapped. “I am aware because my peculiar gift is figuring out what someone means about twenty minutes after they have said it. It’s perfectly clear to me now.”

Jason sighed. He had no idea what the fuck Bruce expected him to say. It’s not like this was fixable. Surely Bruce didn’t think this was fixable. But who knew what went on in Bruce’s head. Jason got up and went to the window, stretching his back. There were cramps starting in his lower back, and cramps already knotted in his shoulders, and the night was beginning to take its toll. But

who was he kidding, it would be hours before he could sleep. Maybe he could call Dick. Mainly he just wanted to call Dick so Dick could come over and Jason could hold him and whisper *tell me we're not like him, tell me that's not us, tell me we're nothing like him* into Dick's neck.

Poor fucking bastard.

Dawn had taken the city now, smudged and gray out the fire escape window. Jason tilted his head to see the laundry across the street, the old woman rolling up the corrugated metal over the doors and windows to open for the day. "Hey tell me something," Jason said. "When you started out as Batman, you seriously thought it would kill you, right?"

Bruce said nothing, so he turned around to look at him. "For real," Jason said. "You thought it would maybe last a week or two before they gunned you down, right?"

"I don't remember."

"Liar. That's why you did it, isn't it? You did it in order to get dead as soon as possible, and it seemed as good a way as any. Your fucked-up East Coast Boston Brahmin blue blood WASP sense of ethics couldn't handle offing yourself, so you decided to make other people do it for you, and maybe take out a few of the bad guys along with you, right? I mean, I'm asking because I don't guess I realized until now how fucking profoundly you hate yourself. For real. Only someone who really, really hated themselves could fuck up this hard, this often, and on purpose."

"I don't hate myself," Bruce said wearily. "And I'm not Batman out of a decades-long suicide plan, for God's sake. You're baked out of your mind."

Jason considered. "Yeah, that's a solid possibility," he said. He came and collapsed on the sofa beside Bruce. "I wish I knew what to tell you man. I really do."

"I know," Bruce said.

"I don't. . . I don't have some play in mind here. I don't think there's anything you can do with this one."

"There's not."

"Did he say anything to you, after you told him to get out?"

"He did."

"What was it?"

"He told me to go fuck myself."

Jason didn't laugh. He sat there for a minute, and then reached across Bruce to his rolling papers and stash on the little end table, and rolled two blunts. He lit them both, and handed one to Bruce. Roy was going to so fucking pissed at the smell. They smoked in easy silence, and Jason enjoyed watching the easy way Bruce held his blunt, low in his fingers, like he held his cigarettes. Jason knocked a knee against Bruce's.

"Hey," he said. "I forgot to tell you about this little side sting I'm running."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. So in addition to our little joint operation with the gun-runners, I've been working pretty

hard at getting the purer forms of meth off the streets recently, which you may or not be aware of.”

“Aware,” Bruce said.

“Right, so guess where it turns out the biggest concentration of pure meth is, in the Gotham metro area.” He started laughing, tipping his head back onto the cushions. “Get this. So some socialite over in the West Bay has started a fitness boot camp business, like all her little hot yoga buddies are into it, and she’s selling this powder mix on fucking Instagram, posting pics of herself and all her friends and their brainless golf husbands who whaddayaknow are looking super trim these days, and of course unbeknownst to West Bay Becky the shit is cut with pure meth, right, like the absolute highest grade, and there’s a fucking *reason* they’ve dropped three pants sizes in six weeks, what the fuck did they think was in that shit?”

He gave himself over to the laugh, and Bruce laughed too – warm and rich and low, the way Jason had loved to hear him laugh when he was little. “Oh man,” Jason sighed. “Gotham never gets old. So I tip off the GCPD and they execute a raid last night, and you should have heard the wailing. She runs after the evidence truck — and I mean flat-out runs, right, and let me say this bitch can move, she’s about eighty-five pounds cranked on high-test speed, so she’s fucking *fast*, and she’s yelling after them the whole way, ‘My ketones! My ketones!’”

Bruce’s laugh overtook his, and Jason laughed, remembering, but also laughed to see Bruce laughing, his eyes a little less haunted, the early morning light shadowing all the lines on his face. Easy to forget how good-looking he was, when he wanted to be. But more than the looks, there was something compelling about him, something you could see when his face was this naked. Something you couldn’t put your finger on. This was what people were always failing to understand about Bruce, was how ordinary people would just up and die for him. How something in him made you want to die for him.

“I’m telling you what,” Jason said, still chuckling. “When those cops knocked on her door and said *ma’am we have a warrant to inspect your merchandise*, she looked like a kid whose birthday cake had just been pissed on. I’m gonna be thinking about that one for years.”

“Birthday,” Bruce murmured.

“What are you—”

“That’s it,” Bruce said, getting up quickly. “Oliver’s birthday is next week. Thank you, sincerely.”

“I’m not sure what I—”

“No you’ve been very helpful. I think I see what to do now. In fact I see exactly what.”

“Okay,” Jason said slowly. “But what you gotta ask yourself is, have any of your instincts been correct so far?”

“Absolutely none. Which means it’s time for the game to turn my way.”

“Okay, see, I’m not at all sure that’s what it means. Maybe you should sit down and we should talk some more, maybe you can run by me what you’re hoping to—”

But Bruce was out the door. Literally out the door. It banged behind him. That motherfucker. “Wow,” Jason sighed. “I really hate you.” He reached over and picked up the blunt Bruce had discarded, and stretched full length on the sofa. After a while he dug his phone out and dialed the number he had been telling himself he wouldn’t.

“Hey, everything okay?” said Dick at once, even though it was like six in the morning, and no decent human being should even be awake. Or maybe Dick hadn’t been to bed either.

“Yep. Just real quick though, I need you to recite all the ways in which I am completely and totally not like Bruce, at all, in any way.”

There was silence on the other end. “I . . .” Dick began, and stopped.

“Okay, great, excellent, I’m gonna go leap off the fire escape now, good-bye and fuck you forever,” he said, clicking the phone off and tossing it on the rug. He closed his eyes and settled in for his well-deserved nap.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Because I just got back Earthside like six hours ago, Bar, and I haven’t slept in three days, and no, I am not moving out of this bed, that’s why.”

“Come on, you can’t break tradition this way! It’s not gonna be fun if you’re not there.”

“Bar.” Hal rolled over in bed and pulled his blanket tighter around him, wedged the phone against his ear. “Oliver is not even gonna know if I’m there or not. He always pre-games his birthday by like three days, and I guarantee you he’s been drunk since Tuesday. There is no way he is even gonna notice if I’m there tonight or not.”

“Well, I’ll notice. Come on, don’t ditch me like this. Plus, Dinah went to a lot of trouble organizing this, and it would be rude not to show up.”

“It’s a sports bar. How is it going to a lot of trouble to reserve a table in a sports bar?”

“Okay, actually this is a pretty awesome bar though. They have indoor basketball. And skee ball! And apparently shuffleboard too, according to the website. I dunno, it looks pretty cool. Could be fun.”

Hal yawned. “Bar, if I go, I am just gonna fall asleep.”

“Well I bet they have some really comfy chairs. If you fall asleep I’ll let you drool on my shoulder. Come on Hal, please. Seriously. When do I ever ask you for anything. Please?”

“Why are you doing this to me,” he groaned.

“Look, I . . . I didn’t want to talk about this over the phone. But things with Iris are. . . they’re not great. And I just. . . I just need to get out tonight, and it would mean a lot to me if you were there.”

Hal sighed and stared at the ceiling. “How not great?”

“I dunno, what’s the degree of not great that will get you out of bed?”

“No, I mean, did you guys have a fight about her parents again, is this about your hours at work, is it just—”

“I moved out last week.”

Hal lay there in stunned silence for a minute. “Jesus, Barry,” he said after a while.

“Please can we just go out and have fun tonight,” Barry said, and there was something taut and brittle in his voice that broke Hal’s heart.

“Yeah,” he said. “Of course. You got it, man.” He kicked off the blankets and started struggling up.

“Awesome. Thank you. Pick you up at 8:30?” Barry’s voice was sounding remarkably chipper again.

“Uh. . . sure. Okay.”

“Great, fantastic. See you then!”

Hal stared at the phone after Barry hung up. Maybe Barry was having a psychotic break of some sort. Mood swings were not really characteristic of Barry, but then again, if things with Iris had really gone downhill that fast, his personality was probably fraying at the edges. Hal had had no idea things were that bad, although. . . yeah, he could see it. Iris and Barry had kind of perfected the whole living separate lives thing, but he had always thought that was the sort of necessary thing married couples did. Not that he knew much about being a couple, married or otherwise.

The bar was as nice as Barry had described it, though a bit too loud for Hal’s comfort. It was definitely going to make it hard to sleep in a corner somewhere. Dinah had reserved them a big table over by the windows, which was nice, and of course Oliver was already drunk enough to greet them both with a hug that squeezed the air out of Hal’s lungs. As long as he had known him, Oliver’s enthusiasm over his own birthday had been one of his most endearing traits. For most people, along about eleven or twelve, the thrill of their birthday kind of wore off, but that was when Ollie had dug in deeper. There was going to be a huge society gala later in the week, the sort of benefit he always threw for his own birthday, but the party with just his friends was always the most memorable.

“Hal!” Ollie exclaimed, clutching at him like it had been six months since he had seen him, and not a week. “My God, man, I’ve missed you. Fuck me, how is it you get better looking all the time? Oh no wait, that’s me I’m talking about. Who cares, kiss me anyway!” And he landed a wet smooch on both sides of Hal’s face.

“Hey,” he said, suddenly serious, “what did you get me? It’s okay, you can tell me, I won’t tell anybody. What’s my present?”

“Ollie, I did not get you a present. You’re a billionaire, what could you possibly need?”

“Love, man,” he said, and he was getting weepy now, gripping Hal’s shoulder. “I need love. That’s all I ever needed from anyone.”

“Well don’t worry, I’m pretty sure Dinah’s got a blow job with your name on it later tonight.”

“Aw man, you always know just what to say,” Oliver said, choking up, pulling him back into a strangulating bear hug.

“Okay, easy there big guy, okay,” Hal said, disentangling himself with difficulty and trying to sit down at the table to swipe some of the fried mushrooms before Barry ate them all. And that was when he saw Bruce, sitting at the other end of the table, leaning in to say something to Dinah, who was laughing.

Fuck.

He glanced over at Barry, but Barry was busy not looking at him and ordering himself the left side of the menu – two grilled bacon cheeseburgers with onion rings and chili dogs, and three fudge milkshakes. And it wasn’t that big a deal – after all, it was a crowd tonight. Diana was there, which was awesome, and Clark too. So Hal settled in between Barry and Diana, at an angle that put Bruce just far enough away, and figured he would steal whatever food Barry let drop to the floor. He could probably go the whole evening without a word to Bruce.

“Hey princess,” Hal said, leaning in for a kiss on the cheek, and a quick dive at her cheese fries.

She slapped at his hand, which was actually exquisitely painful and possibly broke several small bones. “Clark, how the hell are you, man, how come Lois let you out of the house?”

“On assignment,” he said.

“Oh yeah? Off to some war zone?”

“Yeah, pretty much. She’s headed to DC.”

“Damn, man. Thoughts and prayers. Come on, your highness, bar food is for sharing, why you gotta be like that.”

“Order your own,” she said, snatching the basket out of his reach. “Besides, you should be eating healthier things. My body can sustain higher levels of saturated fats than yours can. I am really just thinking about you.”

“Very noble, you’re like one of those people who shames me for buying non-organic milk at the Trader Joe’s.”

“But you should buy organic milk,” she said earnestly.

“You don’t think that’s kind of a waste, to wash down my Choco-Loco Marshmallow Monkey Puffz? Hey Barry, scoot that pitcher down this end of the table, Oliver has clearly gotten too much of a head start on us here. Oh yes, score, Ollie coughed up for the expensive beer, I like this bar already, let’s line ‘em up.”

The truth was, the evening ended up being not so bad after all, even though Oliver as usual took up all the oxygen in the room, talking and laughing and singing off-key to the old-fashioned jukebox in the corner that he kept feeding quarters to. “You know that’s not a karaoke machine,” Barry pointed out.

“What the fuck are you talking about, this is old school karaoke, back in my day this is all we had.”

“Back in your day,” Hal snorted. “You’re eighteen months older than I am, Ol.”

“Yeah, how come you never invite me to your birthday parties, man?”

“Because normal people don’t throw their own birthday party?”

But Oliver was too busy dragging everyone off to skee ball in the back, loudly challenging everyone in the bar to a match, slapping hundred dollar bills on the bar and proclaiming himself defending world champion. He was getting into an argument with a huge bearded guy at the other end of the bar, and Hal seized his chance to hotbox Barry.

“Hey,” he said, pulling him into a corner that was marginally quieter than the rest of this nightmare of a place. “Hey, you wanna tell me what’s going on with you and Iris?”

“Hm?” Barry said, looking genuinely puzzled for a second. “Ohhh, me and Iris. Right. Yeah. That’s. . . yeah, it’s. . . it’s pretty sad, I guess.”

“Pretty sad, you guess? This is the destruction of your marriage we’re talking about, and it’s pretty sad?? What kind of sociopathic bullshit is that?”

“Well I don’t know man, what do you want me to say? But it’s okay, I think it’s gonna work out all right. I think we’re getting back together.”

“You—wait, what? You just told me—”

“Yeah I know, but she texted me. I think we’re gonna be okay.”

“You moved out, but she texted you, and now you’re gonna be okay? What the fuck is even wrong with you, Bar, this is your *marriage* we’re talking about, this is *Iris*. What even happened that made you move out in the first place? Because tell me you did not fuck around on Iris.”

“What?! No! I did not fuck around, come on. Look, it’s fine, don’t even worry about it, Iris and I are good.”

“Barry. Are you on drugs? I think you are on drugs. Or really, really drunk.”

“I am not! One beer, I swear. Come on, come play skee ball with me, mano a mano. Let’s have some fun!”

“Barry, I do not want to play fucking skee ball. I want to *sleep*, all right, but I’m here tonight because you told me that—”

“Fun!” Barry announced, dragging him out of the quiet corner and tossing a skee ball at him, and it was only his pilot’s reflex that kept that thing from hitting him in the head, and those balls weighed like fifteen pounds.

So he played endless rounds of skee ball with Barry, who had for sure had more than one beer, and at some point Bruce strolled over to where they were playing, and leaned against one of the walls to watch. Hal’s jaw tightened, but he kept on. After a while Barry went to get them refills on their beers, which left Hal alone with Bruce.

“Care for a match?” Bruce said.

“No I really don’t,” Hal said, turning to him for the first time this evening. “And I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing here either.”

“I came to wish Oliver a happy birthday,” he said, and his face was that bland smooth mask it always was, the one that made Hal want to punch it.

“Bullshit,” he said, going back to his skee ball. “Since when do you show your face in a bar like this? Or give a shit about Oliver’s birthday, for that matter.”

“Well I went to his party last year.”

That made Hal’s pitch arm stutter a bit, but he didn’t break form. “Oh I see. You hoping to get lucky again, is that it?”

“I was actually hoping for—”

“Great, refills, awesome Bar, thank you,” he said, grabbing his beer out of Barry’s hand and making his way back to their table. He wedged himself in the corner nearest to Ollie, and ignored the other end of the table as much as possible. He was beginning to suspect something about Barry getting him here tonight that made a cold hard fist of anger knot in his stomach, only he wasn’t sure if he was angrier at Barry or at Bruce or – more than possible – at himself.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Bruce get up and go to the jukebox, put some quarters in, and then sit back down. “Hey Hal,” Oliver was shouting, even though Hal was right next to him, “tell us more about the time you had that alien orgy with the little purple critters, you know, the

ones with the wings and shit? You know, the ones where they could take their dicks and shit and stick ‘em on their foreheads? Or am I thinking about that movie we watched – Di, what was the name of that—”

“You have a plan to tranq gun him, right?” Hal said, leaning across Ollie to talk to Dinah. “Before we all end up with our identities on the 11 o’clock news?”

“Look Hal, I am not new here, I never go into the birthday zone without a contingency plan. It’s okay, I figure we’ve got at most another forty-five minutes of consciousness left.”

“Come on baby, dance with me,” Oliver said, dragging Dinah to her feet and spinning her around their end of the bar to *I Think I Love You*. He was singing along loudly, and clearly not that particular about who he was dancing with, since Dinah was able to pass him off to Clark after a few minutes. And then the song changed.

Yooooouuuuuu, crooned the juke box. *You belong to me now*, and it was Tennille’s voice crooning at him. He sat back, jaw tight, telling himself it was just coincidence. Bruce was deep in conversation with Dinah anyway, and probably hadn’t even noticed. Hal fiddled with a mozzarella stick, and waited for the song to end, but Jesus, how had he never noticed that this song went on for fucking ever? The knot in his gut only got worse. And then as Dinah was leaning in to say something in Bruce’s ear, and he smiled and nodded, his eyes flicked up to Hal’s, and the knot in Hal’s gut was a knife.

“Fuck this shit,” he muttered, and he grabbed his jacket, extricating himself from behind the table, pushing his way out, headed to the front door, wanting to be only somewhere away from all of them, and most of all away from Bruce’s eyes that sliced right through him, just away, away, away. He could get a cab a few blocks over, who the fuck even cared, he just needed out of there.

“Hal,” said a voice behind him, and of course, of fucking course, Bruce had followed him out.

“What,” Hal said through gritted teeth, spinning around. “Fucking *what*. Tell me what the fuck it is you want, what the fuck was so important you had to fuck my life over to get me here tonight, and who knows what the fuck you told Barry, who knows what else you—”

“I told him the truth,” Bruce said.

“What truth was that, Bruce? What the fuck was that, huh? That you really needed to get laid tonight? Because I am having a really hard fucking time believing I am your only option. There’s gotta be a list as long as my arm of places you can get your cock sucked.”

“Five minutes,” Bruce said. “Please. Just give me five minutes. And after that you can walk away, and you and I never have to have another conversation again, I swear to you. But please listen, for five minutes.”

“Okay fine, go,” Hal said, and Bruce just stood there, like maybe he was surprised that Hal had agreed.

“You’re right,” Bruce said. “I did call Barry, and I did ask his help. I asked his help because I have fucked this up three times now, quite spectacularly even for me, and there was no margin for error. And somehow now I’ve got five minutes—”

“Four minutes forty-seven seconds,” Hal said, glancing at his phone.

“—to tell you the thing I have been trying unsuccessfully to say for weeks now. I’ve been doing little else but thinking about what I would say, if you gave me the chance, and I came up with

several elegant explanations and some very compelling reasoning, which is a gift of mine if I do say so, but none of that is likely to be of interest to you, so the only thing I can—”

“Four minutes thirty.”

“—ask is a question, which is why do you think so little of me?”

That took him aback. “Why do I think so *little* of you?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. Because clearly at some point along the way you began to assume that fucking was all I was capable of. At some moment in time you must have decided that I was a decent enough lay, but not someone capable of anything more, really. Was it before you had even kissed me? Or was it after? Because I would very much like to go back to the moment in time when you decided that, and try to change your mind. If I can.”

Hal was silent. He leaned against the column on the bar’s porch, crossed his arms. “Look,” he said. “I went into this with my eyes open. Fucking is just fucking, it doesn’t always have some deeper meaning.”

“I am aware of that. But this does, for me. You do. That’s what I meant, when I said that continuing to sleep with you was painful, because I knew that I wanted something that you did not.”

“I never said that,” Hal pointed out. “And I never said that because you never fucking asked. Not once did you ask me any fucking thing. You decide we should be more. Then you decide what it is I want from you. I never got asked, about any of it. So fucking ask me. Why don’t you ask someone, for fucking once in your life, what it is that they want.”

That silenced Bruce. “I have a feeling I might not like that answer,” he said, after a bit.

“No, you might not. But I’ll give you your answer after you answer my question, the question I asked you to begin with, which is what the fuck did you tell Barry? You tell me that, and then you’ll get your answer. Go on.”

Bruce was leaning against the opposite pillar, just studying Hal. He was wearing a trenchcoat, because that was the kind of freak shit Bruce would do, wear a Burberry trench coat to a shitty sports bar. Also it was like eighty degrees. Hal watched him struggle, weigh various answers, reject them. He wasn’t inclined to help him out.

“I told him,” Bruce began. “I told him that I was in love with you, and had failed three times now to tell you that. I told him I had failed to tell it to myself, for far too long. That’s another gift of mine. I asked him please, could he make sure you were here tonight. That’s it.”

Hal looked at the grimy concrete of the porch in order not to look at Bruce. His chest was pounding. “Okay,” he said, though his throat had gone dry. Jesus fuck, that had not been what he had expected. “So did you just get lucky, finding some Captain and Tennille on the jukebox there?”

Bruce looked hesitant. “Not exactly,” he said. “I . . . made sure it was there.”

“How?”

“How did I make sure?” The hesitant look had increased. So this was what it looked like when Bruce was trying not to lie. “I bought it.”

“You bought the song?”

“Not as such. I bought the jukebox.”

Hal’s eyebrows skated up. “You bought it,” he said. “A whole jukebox, just for one song? Jesus Eff. How much do jukeboxes even cost?”

“You mean, in general?”

“No, that specific one. It looks vintage.”

“Ah, it is.”

“So how much?”

“About twelve thousand.”

“Okay. You get how fucking certifiable that is, right?”

“I do.”

“So you buy a jukebox, show up at the bar one day, and what, the bar just let you install it wherever you wanted?”

“No, not really. The owner was what you might call resistant to the idea.”

“Yeah, can’t imagine why,” Hal said, with a glance through the windows at their table. Oliver was on top of the jukebox now, singing along to something they couldn’t hear, but which apparently involved a lot of flailing around of his head and gyrating of his hips. Oliver’s idea of dance resembled an unfortunate medical condition.

Bruce gave a twitch of a smile, following Hal’s glance. “You bought a whole jukebox just so you could play that fucking song,” Hal mused. “Okay, I will admit, that’s pretty good. So tell me, how the hell did you get them to let you put it in?”

“They didn’t. The owner was adamant.”

“But I notice there’s a jukebox in there.”

“Yes. Well. I was. . . persuasive.”

“Bruce. Tell me what you did.”

“This is not the important part of what I’m trying to say,” Bruce said. “I think if we could go back, and instead focus on—”

“No, I actually think I want to know about this. How did you get them to let you put a jukebox in there?”

Bruce licked his lips. “I. . . bought the bar.”

Hal just stared at him. “Say that again?”

“Well, it’s an investment property really. There’s no reason not to—”

“Wait wait wait. You *bought* the fucking *bar*?”

“Yes.”

“You—I don’t even—” He looked at the bar, then back at Bruce. “How are you a real person? You bought a whole shitty bar so you could install a jukebox just so it could play *one song*? That was your plan? That’s the shittiest plan I’ve ever heard of. Like, in the history of shitty plans, that is the number one shittiest plan of all time. That plan is calling up other shitty plans and laughing at them, is how shitty it is. I don’t even *like* that song, and all you did was piss me off when all you needed—the fuck, man. The ever-living fuck. How much did you pay for it?”

“For the bar?”

“Yeah, for the bar. I want to know how much a conversation with me is worth to you.”

“Well,” Bruce said. “The thing is, he’s owned it for a very long time, and he cleared his mortgage some twenty-five years ago. He’s looking to retire, but he didn’t need the money per se, so my point is—”

“How much?”

“I got soaked.”

“To the tune of?”

“One point five.”

Hal thought about that one. “One point five,” he said. “That’s. . . one point five *million*? Dollars, American?”

“The thing to keep in mind is, this area of town is very much on the rebound, and as an investment property it’s not such a bad—”

Hal gave up and let the laugh take him. He leaned back and laughed aloud, who even cared any more. He almost couldn’t stop, once he got started. It was just so fucking ridiculous. Bruce was just so fucking ridiculous. The laugh undid the knot in his gut, unstrung the taut wire that felt like it was wrapped around his lungs. What was even better was Bruce looked mortally offended.

He glanced inside the bar again – *Bruce’s* bar – and noticed that Ollie’s painful dance moves seemed to have stopped, and they were all back at the table now. Hal was still laughing quietly to himself. “One point five million dollars,” he said. “Un-fucking-believable. Hey you know what I do when I want to have a conversation with someone, is I do this.”

He held up his phone, and typed in a message. “And sure, my Verizon bill is some ungodly amount I don’t even pretend to understand, but it’s all good because I’ve got unlimited data so technically that didn’t cost me a goddamn cent.”

“Would you have answered?” Bruce said gravely.

“Yeah, prolly not, but I figure there’s bound to be a middle ground between free and one point five million, and maybe you should consider aiming for that? What the hell am I saying, since when have you ever found the middle ground in anything?”

Bruce’s phone pinged, and he pulled it out to read the message Hal had just sent, which read *I love you too*. Bruce stared at it, looked up at Hal. Hal pulled out his phone again and typed *you fucking idiot*.

“So maybe just ask me next time,” Hal said. “Might save you some money.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Bruce said, a little hoarsely. And then Hal crossed over to the pillar Bruce was leaning against, rested his hand against the wall there.

“I’m going to be bad at this,” Bruce said. “People are. . . difficult for me. This. . . is difficult. What I say is not always what I intend to say.”

“Yeah baby, we’ve met,” Hal whispered. “And I don’t exactly know how this goes either. Do you wanna go somewhere else with me, maybe?”

“No,” Bruce said.

“No?”

“No,” Bruce said again, with a glance at the windows, where they were of course perfectly visible to anyone who chose to look their way. Perfectly visible, in fact, to anyone at their table. He slid his hand around Hal’s waist, and Hal had to shut his eyes at it, because it always felt like that – Bruce’s touch was electric, and like it weighed too much somehow. Other people’s touch brushed at him, glanced off; Bruce’s touch felt heavy, warm, alive. Like it was rearranging all the molecules on the surface of his skin. It had felt like that, since that first night. Since before, maybe. And it was just Bruce’s hand on his waist.

“Will you kiss me,” Bruce murmured, and Hal leaned in, slid his hand around Bruce’s waist too. He heard the stutter of Bruce’s breath at it, and wondered if it was the same for him.

“Yeah,” Hal said. He brushed his lips against Bruce’s, and felt Bruce’s hand slide up his back, pull him in closer. It was a gentle kiss, barely more than a nudge of lips, but it had Hal’s legs weak. Bruce was giving him that same slow heavy-lidded look that had so unstrung him this night a year ago, the way his eyes had skated down Hal and then back up again.

Bruce was pulling him in harder, both hands on his ass now, and this kiss meant business, and Hal gave into it, let his body lean into Bruce’s, into his lover’s beautiful mouth.

“Okay, now do we get to go somewhere? Because fuck,” he panted, when he had breath again, and he pressed his body enough against Bruce’s so he could feel the stiffening in his bulge. They had their arms wrapped around each other now, and this was after all a public place, but he was three seconds away from a long slow grind – or maybe not all that slow.

“Well,” Bruce murmured. “I don’t think the owner’s going to call the cops.”

“Aw come on,” Oliver said. He was craning his neck to look out the window, where Hal and Bruce were talking. Clark and Diana had left, and Oliver was clearly getting bored, and a bored Oliver was one who would start trouble. “Why are they just standing out there? It’s my birthday party, they oughta be in here with me. Someone needs to go bust that up before they start whaling on each other or something. Come on, let’s go get Hal.” And he started to get up from the table, pushing back his chair.

“No,” Barry said, and his hand clamped down like a vise on Oliver’s wrist, pinning it to the table.

“Hey!” he protested. Barry leaned closer.

“Oliver Queen,” he said, and his voice was low and menacing. “I swear to God, if you get up from this table I will slice your hand off at the wrist. You think I’m fucking around? Try me. You and I

both know I can do it.” And he started just enough vibration in the molecules of his hand so that Oliver would be able to feel it.

“Ow man, the fuck! What the hell is wrong with you?” He tried to snatch his hand back but Barry held it fast.

“I am a man on the edge,” Barry ground out. “You have no idea what I’ve been through tonight, but by God you are not going to fuck this up, I don’t care if it is your birthday. You are going to let them talk, do you understand me? And if I see so much as a muscle twitch in the direction of that door, I can’t promise what I will do, but it might not be your wrist I slice off. Now sit *down*.”

“Jesus, you’re a mean drunk,” Oliver said, settling back into his chair. “I just wanted to see what they were talking about, is all. I don’t see why you had to get so—”

And then Oliver glanced up and saw that Hal was advancing on Bruce. “See, now look, Hal is about to get his face punched, and it’s gonna be all your fault, ‘cause you wouldn’t let me go out there and rescue him when all I wanted was to see what. . . what. . .”

And then he fell silent, his mouth a little agape, and they both watched Hal lean in to kiss Bruce, then watched the kiss become quite a bit more. “Well fuck *me*,” Oliver said slowly. He kept watching. “Actually that’s kinda hot,” he mused. “Weird as fuck, but hot. Still, it’s no fair, because it’s my birthday. How come they get some, and I don’t? Come on, kiss me, Barry.”

“Dinah, come get your boy,” Barry called, and Dinah leaned over with the fresh pitcher of beer she was bringing back from the bar.

“I’ll take him off your hands,” she said, landing herself more or less in his lap. Their kiss was messy and wet and sadly not at all a turn-off.

“All right,” Barry said. “I guess nobody needs me any more. My work here is done. I’ll just show myself out then. Don’t anybody worry about me. I’m just fine, here by myself.”

“Oh, come here, you,” Dinah said, grabbing his shirtfront and pulling him in. Oliver began landing sloppy scratchy kisses all up and down his face while Dinah laughed.

“Ugh, I hate you all, I just want new friends,” Barry sighed, surrendering to an especially mustache-y kiss right on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

The jukebox is [this one](#), if you're wondering what gift might be an appropriate thank you for some BatLantern emotional porn.

Also since there seems to be some confusion on this issue: there are two more chapters, guys. Story’s not over yet!

Three Couples

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Ow,” Ollie whispered through cracked lips. “Can you not. . . do that.”

“Do what babe?”

“That. . . loud. . . thing.”

“You mean breathing?”

He raised his head. A thousand knives pierced his skull, and he gave a small whimper, and his head fell back onto the pillow. “Ow,” he croaked again. “Not loud. Wrong word. Bright. Stop the. . . bright thing.”

“Babe. That bright thing is the sun, and I’m not the one doing it to you, that’s the rotation of the earth. Oliver. Love of my life, sweetheart, light of my eyes. Is it possible you are just a little bit hungover this morning?”

“No,” he growled, rolling the other direction from the scouring brightness that threatened to sear the flesh off his bones. “I don’t get hung over.”

“Oh I see.” The bed sank as Dinah crawled onto it. She landed a kiss on his bare shoulder. “I don’t guess this is a good time to have the conversation about how as we age, our bodies’ reaction to the metastasis of alcohol changes significantly?”

“I hate that,” he said. God, why was his mouth so dry? He could barely get words out, and it felt like his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. “I hate it when you do that. You always say ‘our’ when you mean *your*. You mean I’m getting old.”

She reached across him and grabbed a water bottle. “Here,” she said. “Drink this. And if you can unpeel those eyelids, you’ll see I put some Advil on the bedside table. Take those.”

“Need a little scotch,” he grumbled. “The hair of the dog that bit me is what I need some of.”

“That is exactly what you don’t need. Do you remember any of last night?”

He dutifully swallowed the water and the Advil, and rolled over. It wasn’t so bad if he could just keep his eyes shut, but it still felt like the sun was burning right through his eyeballs. He didn’t remember their bedroom being so bright.

“Parts of it,” he said. “Not. . . everything. Wait. Did I make out with Barry?”

Her low rich laugh shook the bed. “Yes, babe. Yes you did. But it’s okay, I did too.”

“Oh. Okay then.” The fog in his brain cleared a little. “Wait,” he said. “No, hang on, that’s not okay. Wait. Shit. If you’re about to tell me Barry’s in our bathroom. . .”

She laughed again. “I promise, it’s just us. Disappointed?”

He reached for her hand. Missed a little, but got it on the second try. “Only disappointed if there was fucking I don’t remember.”

“Oh really now.”

“With you,” he amended. “That was the part I was trying to say. I meant with you. It was supposed to be romantic.”

“Well it landed on disturbing. Drink more of that water.”

“Fuck,” he gasped, as the knives came back. “I cannot fucking believe I am hung over. I don’t get hung over.”

“Mm hmm. You know, far be it from me to suggest it, but it might be time to consider scaling back these birthday party celebrations.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Also we could just go ahead and buy me one of those toilet chairs so I don’t even have to make it to the bathroom, and maybe get some round-the-clock nursing staff in here. Maybe I could wear one of those medic alert bracelets in case I fall or something.”

“Babe.” She put a hand on his chest. “Getting older is nothing to be afraid of. There are lots of things you’re going to enjoy about being older.”

“Like being closer to death?”

“There’s lots worse than death.”

“Okay, thanks Dumbledore, I feel better now. Oh my God, how long is this going to last?” he moaned, clutching at his head.

“Well, they do say that one of the signs of age is when the second day of a hangover is worse than the first. Hey speaking of, we’ve got that benefit tomorrow night, so let’s hope your recovery is a fast one.”

“Uggghh, who the fuck thought that was a good idea? Let’s see if we can push it back, or—wait,” he said, and his eyes flew open. “I’m remembering things from last night. Did I—no, that can’t be right.”

“I mean, it probably is. Come on, your existential crisis is boring. Get over yourself and play with me,” she said, and she took the water bottle, setting it aside, and leaned in for a kiss. He let his hands tangle in her hair, let his tongue slide against hers.

“Mm, someone sneaked a cigarette,” he said.

“I would never. Come on, focus here,” she said, and climbed on top of him. He ran his hands down her perfect back, tugged her nightshirt off and tossed it aside.

“Goddamn baby,” he whispered, letting his hands run up her smooth golden skin. And then he paused. “Wait,” he said again. “Did I really see Hal making out with Bruce, or am I making that part up? Jesus Christ I hope I’m making that up.”

She bent to kiss him again, and she was still laughing. “Oh I’m going to enjoy this,” she whispered.

“I think I’m still not understanding why you asked me not to go to the party,” Iris said. She was curled up against his chest, and the Saturday morning light was streaking their bed. Barry was stroking her head.

“Right,” he said. “About that.”

“Well that sounds ominous.”

“No no, it’s not a big deal, it’s just. . . well, it’s complicated. I had to tell Hal some. . . ah, not strictly true stuff.”

“Does any of that not strictly true stuff explain the very weird and rambling voice mail he left me?”

“Oh no,” Barry said, shutting his eyes. “You’re kidding.”

“It’s all about how he’s just really *concerned*, and concerned for you, and concerned for me too, and how I should maybe think about forgiving you? I mean, how wild was this party? What exactly am I supposed to be forgiving here?”

Barry started laughing. “Oh no. Hal, I cannot believe you. I’m sorry, hon, I didn’t really think he would do something like that. All that happened was, I really needed him to get to Oliver’s party last night. He was exhausted, he’s been off-world for a solid week and I think slept maybe three hours total, so he was really not planning to go to the party, and. . . I needed to come up with something good to make him.”

She raised her head, narrowing her eyes at him suspiciously. “And the something good was?”

“The something good was, you and I were. . . having trouble. And he felt all sorry for me, and agreed to go to the party, but then I couldn’t exactly show up to the party with you, so ah . . . yeah, that’s why.”

Her eyes were still narrowed. “So you ditched me in order to take Hal.”

“No! No, that’s not what happened at all.”

“Except for how that’s exactly what happened.”

“That. . . okay, I can see how it looks like that. But no, I didn’t ditch you for Hal, come on. It’s not that I *wanted* to go with Hal. I needed to bring him there as—as a favor for someone else. Like I said, it’s complicated. But no, come on, I would much rather have been there with you.”

She put her head back down on his chest, and he carefully settled his arm back around her. They lay there in silence for a while. “Why do I feel like I still have no idea what’s going on?” she said quietly.

“Okay, see, it’s just that. . . okay, not all parts of this story are mine to share, is all, and I don’t know how much Hal is comfortable with me telling somebody, or how much this *other* person wants me to tell people, and I just. . . I mean, I don’t even know if it worked. I mean, I *think* it worked. They left together, so you know, things are looking pretty good.”

“That’s the explanation that was supposed to make it better?”

“Okay, not *better*, but understandable maybe.”

She was silent. Barry stared out the window. “Hey Barry,” she said after a while.

“Yeah,” he said.

“There are so many fucked up parts of this I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“We could start with how you and I *were* actually separated for a while there, and you *didn’t* tell Hal when it was really happening, but then you turn around and use that as an excuse the minute you needed it. Like that’s your go-to. You turned it into a joke, when you needed to.”

“That’s. . . not what I meant to do.”

“Yeah. I get that. But this whole trashfire is just one more way that your life is always happening in some room I’m not in. You get that, right?”

“Yeah,” he said again. They fell back into silence. “I’m sorry,” he said eventually.

She rose then, got up, pulled her robe around her. “It’s not a big deal, you said. Well in case you hadn’t noticed, Barry, it’s a big deal.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“I’m gonna spend some time at the office today.”

“It’s Saturday.”

“Yeah,” she said, gathering her clothes. “It is.” She clicked the bedroom door quietly shut behind her. Barry lay there with his eyes closed for a bit, listening to her move around in the apartment. After a while he heard the front door click shut too.

He turned and pounded the pillow beside him with his fist. “Fuck,” he whispered. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

It would be really, really goddamn nice if he had someone to blame other than himself.

Hal felt the bed dip beside him, and he raised a bleary head. “Oh,” he croaked. “Oh no. Oh no, shit, I didn’t mean—fuck. ‘M so sorry.” He put his face back down in the pillow. He probably had blanket-creases on his face, and had for sure been drooling.

“Shhh,” Bruce said. There was a warm hand resting on his back. “I’ve got to go put in one of my all-too-infrequent appearances at the office, to sign some papers Lucius is refusing to deliver to me. Shouldn’t take me more than a few hours. You keep sleeping.”

Hal squinted up at him. He was remembering everything now. They had come back to the penthouse, they had been making out, Bruce’s kisses had been so wild and passionate and hungry and everything had been like a page ripped out of a goddamn romance novel, and then – then that was the last thing he remembered. “Tell me I didn’t fall asleep literally on top of you,” he said, and Bruce smiled. Fuck, he was beautiful. He was wearing a suit, and in this light. . . and the look on his face.

“It’s fine,” Bruce said. “But you’re so exhausted you’re going to make yourself sick if you don’t get some rest. Any chance you can just stay here and sleep, and we can pick up where we left off when I get back?”

“Mkay,” Hal murmured, wrapping himself deeper in the blankets. But he rolled a bit, and landed his head on Bruce’s lap, burrowing there. Bruce began a gentle weave of his fingers through Hal’s hair. There was a thumb that stroked his forehead.

“Stay,” Hal said.

“Wish I could. But I can be back here by noon, if you feel like waiting around. Is there anyplace you have to be today?”

He tried to think. His brain felt so fogged, and all his limbs felt heavy. “Don’t think so. Back at Ferris on Monday. Other than that I’m good.”

“Stay the weekend, then.”

“Kay.” His eyes were drifting shut again. The hand had not stopped stroking him.

“I should be back before too long, and that’s the last thing I have to do. This investigation is on autopilot right now, and unless something comes up I’m free all weekend as well.”

“Mmm. Maybe I can help.”

“Gotham’s not your beat.”

“Wellllll technically this entire sector of the galaxy is my beat.”

“Wellll technically stay the hell out of my city.”

Hal gave a low laugh, because the hand had not stopped petting his hair. He stretched and yawned, and Bruce came into better focus. Christ, he really did look gorgeous in that suit. “You sure you have to go?” he said hopefully.

“Tragically. There’s not much to eat here, I’m afraid, but we can forage when I get back. Maybe tonight we could go out, if you’d like. Eat some adult food, instead of whatever stale canapés Alfred has stashed in the penthouse kitchen.”

“Oh, this is the whole ‘going out to a restaurant’ deal you were talking about before, is it?”

“Hal, I didn’t—”

“Shh, I know, I’m just bothering you,” Hal said, reaching for the hand that was stroking him and pulling it to his face. “I know, baby,” he murmured, giving the palm of the hand a kiss, nuzzling it. And the funny thing was, he did. He did know. He could see everything more clearly now; himself, Bruce, all of it. Like standing on the roof of a building you had been scaling, and then you looked down and could see everything at a glance.

“Sorry I fell asleep, though,” he said.

“I’m not,” Bruce said quietly, bending to brush a kiss on his forehead. It was funny – it was like all the tenderness they had been saving up for months and had been too wary to show each other was spilling out here and now, in small caresses, gentle touches, with Hal’s head on Bruce’s lap and their hands entwining. *God I fucking love you so much* beat in his chest until it felt like it would burst, and he pressed Bruce’s hand to his mouth again, breathed his love into it.

“Maybe not dinner, though,” Hal said. “Paycheck doesn’t hit till Tuesday, so party tray leftovers and Netflix sounds good to me for tonight.”

“Ah,” Bruce said. “Well I was hoping you would let me buy you a nice dinner.”

Hal whuffed a laugh. “Yeah, that’s. . . not gonna happen. Look man, hanging with the poors is gonna put a crimp in that Wayne style, so better get used to it.”

“Hal. It’s just dinner.”

“Mm hmm, with my balls for dessert.”

“This is a conversation we’re going to re-visit.”

“That’s gonna be fun,” he said on another yawn, stretching again.

“Hmm,” Bruce said, studying him. “Now that you mention it, I am a bit concerned about the state of your balls. I think I’d better perform a quick check.” And his hand slid down Hal’s chest to rest on his groin. Hal was still wearing all his clothes, because he was the shit who had fallen asleep before they had even gotten any clothes off, but maybe that was actually better than falling asleep after they had arrived at naked. Bruce must have wanted to murder him. But maybe he had gotten over it, because now Bruce was cupping him through his jeans, and Hal groaned lazily and arched, spreading his legs. Bruce’s hand got adventurous. Hal was half morning-stiff anyway, and the hand felt so good rubbing at him.

“Fuck, don’t stop,” Hal whispered, and Bruce was tugging at his tie like it was strangling him, unbuttoning his shirt, all with his left so he could keep his right hand on Hal’s tackle.

“You like that?” Bruce said.

Hal made a bit of a choking noise. It was just the heel of Bruce’s hand, just rubbing him, and he was getting so fucking hard. “Lie still,” Bruce whispered in his ear. “If you move I stop.”

“Bruce—”

“I mean it,” he said, and he lifted his hand. “Be still.”

Hal groaned, which Bruce maybe took as a yes, and he lowered his hand again. Set up a steady rub. Hal kept his hips still. But his chest was heaving with every rub of Bruce’s hand, and the bedroom was loud with his breathing.

“God, look at you,” Bruce murmured. And then his deft fingers edged down the zipper on Hal’s jeans. He slipped a finger inside to rub at Hal’s shaft, and Hal felt the leaking start, the wet leaking onto Bruce’s finger.

“Can you be still?”

“Yes,” Hal husked.

Bruce popped the button on his jeans, ran his hand down inside Hal’s underwear to rest on his fully hard cock. Ran his thumb around Hal’s balls. Set up the same slow rub as before, but on naked skin now. Hal’s cock was so wet. He wanted to thrust so bad. He wanted to thrust into that hand so bad.

Bruce’s finger was circling the head of his cock now, just gently, and Hal cried out, a small weak sound. But he held himself still. That wicked finger set up a steady light rub just under the head of his cock, and Hal’s cry was louder.

“Fuck—Bruce I’m gonna cum.”

Bruce lifted his hand, rested it back on the sheets. Hal was lying there shaking, his cock quivering. His breathing fast. “Please,” he whispered.

Bruce bent to his ear. “Do you know,” he whispered back. “Do you know what you look like, right now? Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are?” and he returned to his light rub of Hal’s cock, but two fingers now. Just a tiny bit more pressure, but so intense it was like an electric current.

“Don’t cum,” Bruce said.

“I—can’t—”

“Yes you can.”

His hand drifted back down to Hal’s balls, cradling them, squeezing lightly. “I said please,” Hal moaned. “Fuck, Bruce, come on.”

The finger was back to teasing his cock, and his whole body was practically shaking. But he kept himself still. “Mmm,” Bruce said. “If you cum, could you stay still during it?”

“I—come on, I—”

“You can. I know you can.” Bruce’s mouth at his ear began to lick and nuzzle at his jaw, and fuck, Bruce’s mouth felt so good. “So gorgeous,” husked that voice again. “Every inch of you.”

The fingers pressed harder, harder, and the rub got faster, and Hal’s cry was broken and hoarse. He held himself still though. Every muscle in his body shook like a seizure as the cum dribbled out of him, soaking his cock and Bruce’s hand. He gasped for air.

“Christ,” Bruce whispered, and his voice sounded as hoarse and broken as Hal’s. The room was spinning. He might actually and for real pass out. It was just that it was so intense – all his orgasm concentrated at the point of Bruce’s finger running up and down his shaft, and he had not been able to stop it. Pleasure so intense it was like pain. Bruce’s whole hand was lightly rubbing his shaft now, bringing him slowly down.

“Fuck,” Hal panted. “Oh fuck. Damn. That was. . . holy shit. Nothing like a good morning edge, baby.”

Bruce’s laugh in his ear was low and warm. “Oh you think *that* was an edge, do you?”

“Oh no I said the wrong thing.”

“I think when I get back we will explore the true meaning of the word.”

“Oh God send help,” Hal laughed. But even in the warm drowsy wake of his post-orgasm endorphins, he felt a sharp stab of arousal at the thought of it – at the thought of Bruce really unleashed on him like that, torturing him for hours maybe. And then – even sharper – the thought of Bruce like that, green cuffs around his wrists and ankles, shaking and sweating and begging him for release, that magnificent cock purple and dripping and aching just for him. . . .

“Mmmm c’ mere,” Hal said sleepily, reaching his hand around for the back of Bruce’s neck. He pulled him down for a kiss. “Hey, you need to get those clothes off, climb in here with me and let’s see what feels good to you, beautiful.”

“Not possible, I’m afraid.”

“Why, because you seriously have to go to work? Come on, you can be a little late.”

“No, because I showered. Just a few minutes ago, in fact.”

Hal reared back to look at him, and the world was in better focus now so he could see that Bruce’s hair was in fact wet at the edges. “Wait,” Hal said. “You fucking did *not* beat off in the shower.”

“May I point out you were very, very asleep. And had been for about eight hours. After falling

asleep on top of me.”

Hal struggled up onto an elbow. “Yeah but—”

“Literally on top of me, Hal. Any idea how many of those hours I was hard?”

“Okay you make a fair point. But come on, you can get hard again before too long, I know that much. Come on, baby, stay for a little bit,” he said, but a yawn overtook him in the middle of it, and Bruce laughed.

“Go back to sleep. I’ll be back before you’re even awake again, but if I don’t show up for this meeting with Lucius he’s going to fire me. And you need more rest,” he said, with another brush of a kiss on Hal’s forehead.

“Mmmph,” Hal said, which was meant to be more protest, but the afterglow and the exhaustion were reclaiming him already. His cock was still hanging out of his jeans, and he was a mess, but he was too tired to care. Bruce was pulling the covers back up around him. Hal heard Bruce’s quiet step on the lush carpet. He shot out a hand from the covers.

“Hey wait,” he said, half-awake. He had grabbed Bruce’s hand as he was walking away. He didn’t know what he was going to say. But something. Something like, *this isn’t what my life is supposed to look like*. Something like, *what sort of fucking miracle landed us here, and do you even know how much I love you, and also what the fuck do we think we’re doing, this is insane and I have genuinely and completely no idea what I’m doing here*. “I. . .” he started. He swallowed, because he had no idea how to say those things.

But Bruce was looking at him like he had heard them all anyway. There was something in the way Bruce was looking at him – like he had before, Hal realized, but that had been when his hands were down Hal’s pants. Good to know he could look at him that way with his pants zipped, too. And everything he was saying, he knew Bruce was saying back to him. Hal tightened his grip on Bruce’s hand, and Bruce tightened his hand right back, and they rested there, looking at each other. Hal grinned at him.

“Hey, so if you’re not gonna use that jukebox, can I have it?”

“What?” Bruce frowned.

“That jukebox you bought. If you don’t want it, can I have it? Because that would be awesome in my apartment, you gotta admit.”

“You won’t let me buy you dinner, but you want me to give you my jukebox.”

“Listen to you, *your* jukebox. You didn’t even want it until I said I wanted it. Come on, don’t be getting cheap on me now.”

Bruce laughed, and that was all the victory Hal wanted. He released Bruce’s hand, and burrowed back into the covers, pulling the blankets up tighter around him and settling in. He heard the bedroom door click shut, and he had just started to drift off again when the bedroom door slammed back against the wall, and Hal’s head came up like a shot.

“What are you—”

“Goddammit,” Bruce growled, and he was throwing his tie off into the corner, unbuttoning his shirt, tearing off his jacket. He practically had his pants unbuckled by the time he was crawling back onto the bed with Hal. “Fuck the office, fuck everything,” he said, and Hal was the one who

laughed, and Bruce landed heavily into his arms, arms that wrapped tight around him and held him fast.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter, guys! Hang in there with me.

Chapter 9

So against all odds, against all available evidence, and in spite of his own disastrous efforts, the universe had somehow decided to give him this gift of Hal Jordan naked and in his bed and sleeping peacefully in his arms. And not the simulacrum of Hal, not just part of Hal, but everything, all of him. He had seen that, when Hal had reached for him like that, had seized his hand and looked at him, just looked at him, and it had knocked the wind out of him, that anyone could look at him that way – that *Hal* could look at him that way. It had all but knocked him to his knees. Beautiful, mercurial, smart-ass Hal, whose eyes sliced right through him, who had smashed through every one of his defenses while laughing at them. Hal who could have anyone he wanted, anyone at all, and somehow he wanted him. The universe was, after all, a place of endless mystery.

He slid carefully out of Hal's arms, brushing one last kiss because he couldn't help himself, and padded silently out of the bedroom. There were bridges he needed to repair with Lucius, who was likely going to be unimpressed by his excuses. He should take pictures of Hal stretched naked in his bed and text them to Lucius by way of explanation, but somehow he didn't think that would do the trick.

The hard truth of it was, there were even more important calls to make than the one to Lucius, and it felt like the day for some hard truths.

He weighed a text to the first person on his list, but that would be ungracious – and after all, when he had asked his help, that had been a phone call, not a text. So he called, and Barry actually answered.

"Hey there," Barry said.

"Hey," Bruce said. "I just wanted to say thank you, for everything you did last night."

"Oh. Sure man, no problem. Happy to do it. Hope things worked out okay."

"They did, entirely thanks to you."

"Well, not sure how true that is. But yeah, happy to do it."

There was something off about Barry's voice, but he couldn't place it. A tightness, maybe. But if it were a bad time, surely Barry wouldn't have answered. He should leave it, really. Barry was Hal's friend, though of course he had always respected Barry immensely, and liked him too. But of course Hal wouldn't leave it. Hal might not want him to leave it.

"Barry," he said. "Is everything all right?"

"Ah, yeah, everything's fine."

Bruce stood at the windows, looking down on Gotham, enjoying the unexpectedly sun-drenched day and the way it had washed everything in a kind of golden haze. The park looked glorious. Maybe he could wake Hal up and they could go for a stroll in the park. It was ridiculous, all the simple things he wanted to do with him. "Well," Bruce said. "All right then. Listen, I'd like to thank you properly though. I don't know what your schedule is, but maybe you and Iris could join us for dinner in the next few days, if you'd like."

Barry made a noise that might have been a laugh, but wasn't quite. "Ah, yeah, okay. It's just, Iris is going to be out of town for the next few days."

“Well when she gets back then.”

“Sure,” Barry said. It was of course a mistake to lie to Bruce, who as a professional liar could always spot amateurs.

“I see. And when is she coming back into town?”

“Ahh. . . not really sure about that one,” he said, and the tightness in his voice was brittle and cracked at the edges. The pain was audible, and Bruce bowed his head.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Hal and I are thinking about going out to dinner tonight, and we’d love to have you join us. There’s a new place downtown that’s getting rave reviews, and every so often I like to remind myself of my own importance by calling up hard-to-get-into restaurants and demanding a table. Come with us, please.”

“I—I don’t know. I’ll—I’ll think about it, if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” he said. He could always get Hal to call and seal the deal. “And Barry. Thank you, sincerely.”

“Anytime, man. For real.”

“Let me know about tonight?”

“I—sure. Yeah. Okay.”

“Talk to you later then.”

He stood there after he had hung up with Barry, enjoying the view over the park, and the promise of summer ahead. Gotham would look like a different world tonight – sunk back in its own filth and corruption and violence, but under the sun’s gilding all of that could be obscured. And then he pushed the number that he knew would not answer, but he could at least leave a voicemail.

“Hey,” Jason said, and Bruce was so startled at the sound of his voice that he stood there in silence.

“B? You there? I’m putting you on notice, if the next words out of your mouth are about to be, *I just made it worse*, I want you to hang up this phone and go re-consider your entire life. And then I want you to stop torturing this poor man and leave him the hell alone. But not before you give me his number.”

Bruce whuffed a laugh. “No, that’s. . . that’s not what happened,” he said. “In fact the opposite.”

“You’re kidding. You *didn’t* make it worse? How is that even possible?”

“I have no idea,” Bruce said honestly. “But the truth is, that wasn’t what I was calling to talk about.”

“Okay,” Jason said, and he could hear the wariness in his voice.

Bruce took a deep breath. “Some time ago, you asked me why I tend to stare at you. You assumed it had something to do with my lack of trust in you, which it does not. Nothing could be further from the truth, actually. But I never told you the real reason.”

Jason’s silence was probably all the permission he was going to get, so he plunged ahead. “I watch you because sometimes I can’t quite believe in your reality. Because sometimes I can’t quite get enough of seeing you again. That’s the reason, if you really want to know.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, and he heard him sigh, and a grunt that sounded like a stretch. It occurred to him that it was three in the afternoon, but Jason might be just now waking up. “Well, I gotta tell ya, I figured it might be something fucked up like that. I kinda thought after Damian—I mean, I thought you might get over your whole big emotional deal with me, once it had happened to you with your own son.”

Bruce leaned his head against the glass, and shut his eyes. “Jason,” he said hoarsely. “You are my son.”

Jason was silent on the other end. Bruce swallowed against the rock in his throat, pushed down the iron claws rending him. For Jason, he would say these things, he could. “Do you understand what it means,” he tried, stumbling over his words. “Do you know what it means, to lose the thing you love most in the world? What I loved most was taken from me, and then through some miracle it was given back, and it’s hard to—I can’t really believe it, most days. It’s all I can do to look away from you, at times. Sometimes I wake in the night, and I reach for my phone, telling myself that if I call, I might hear your voice. Sometimes I argue with you longer than I need to, just to hear your voice some more. Jason, do you understand—”

He swallowed hard, tried to steady himself. “You are my son,” he said. “Can you understand what I’m saying?”

“No,” Jason said. “Not really. Because I’ve never been through that, is why. So I really can’t. But I would hope, if I actually and for real loved someone like that, that I wouldn’t take the worst, most unimaginably agonizing years of their life and make it all about my own pain. I would sincerely hope that.”

“I’m not. . . trying to make it about me,” Bruce said.

“Look B, I’m sorry for everything you suffered, truly I am. But you wanna know the truth of it? The truth is, I don’t feel all that sorry, because the thing you love most in the world, Bruce, is and always has been you.”

“Oh I see,” Bruce said. “And I suppose you wear custom leather jackets and spend forty minutes on that ridiculous hair every morning because you think so little of yourself.”

The phone exploded in laughter on the other end, so loud and raucous Bruce had to hold it away from his ear. He began to be mildly concerned for him, it went on so long. “Holy fuck, that’s better,” Jason finally said. “That’s a little more like you. Jesus Christ, you had me worried there. Thought for a minute getting seriously laid might have done damage to your actual personality, but good to know that’s not at all the case.”

“Glad to amuse,” Bruce said, nettled.

“Endlessly, old man. Fucking endlessly. All right, I gotta go, some actual good in this city to get done. And hey B, about the other thing, the thing you didn’t fuck up.”

“Yes?” he said tensely.

“Good work,” Jason said, and Bruce relaxed, let some of the warmth of the day creep back into him.

“Thank you,” he said. He clicked off his phone, and rested there against the window. He was surprised to note he was shaking, slightly. Just a trembling in his hands. And then there were arms sliding around him.

“Hey,” Hal whispered, his voice gentle, and Bruce turned into his arms then, let Hal cradle him. He rested his head against Hal’s.

“He hasn’t answered a call from me in four years,” Bruce said. Hal kissed the side of his face, his forehead, pulled him back against his chest. Bruce rested there.

“I thought Ra’s had taken him from me. He took everything else from me,” Bruce said after a while. Said it so quietly he thought Hal might not even have heard, but for the arms that tightened around him.

Hal slipped his hand to the back of Bruce’s neck, and Bruce gave in to his kiss, sank into it really. He could taste his own cum in Hal’s mouth, and a little bit of last night’s liquor. Bruce had had a lifetime of fairly spectacular sex, when viewed on a global scale, but fucking Hal this afternoon had been hands down the best sex of his life, and it hadn’t even been anything that athletic or extraordinary. They had been so quiet, and not like they had the whole penthouse to themselves. Quieter than their usual. Quiet as he listened to Hal’s breathing get louder. He had reached his hand to Hal’s, and their fingers had laced together.

“Fuck, please,” Hal had whispered, and Bruce had fucked him faster then, hard enough to give Hal the pressure he knew he wanted, and Hal had gasped then, and he had felt every shiver in Hal’s long body, stretched face-down underneath him. When Hal had come Bruce had not been able to stop himself – he had emptied his balls on a long stuttered groan, the contractions of Hal’s body wringing air from his own lungs. Hal’s hand had reached around to his ass, pressing him in hard enough to bruise, holding him there through the last shudders of Hal’s orgasm.

“Holy fuck,” Hal had husked in his ear, after Bruce had collapsed beside him, and Hal had crawled back on top of him, arms tight around him. “Baby, that was so good.”

“Mmmngh,” Bruce had managed, and Hal had laughed, kissed at the corners of his eyes.

They stood there at the window now, and together they watched the afternoon slide across the sky.

“We should put on clothes,” Bruce said eventually.

“Why though,” Hal said, and there was no arguing with his reasoning there, it was really flawless.

Jason rolled back over and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, as hard as he could. Until his eyes spangled. “Fuck,” he whispered. Dick tugged at his arm.

“Hey,” he said. “You did good. You said what needed to be said.”

“Dick,” Jason said. “You know the trouble with you is, you think the things that need to be said to Bruce can be said in like, a paragraph. I said like three mildly difficult sentences to him and you’re all, oh good work, you really did it, way to go. Bullshit. Fucking bullshit. And you know the thing about Bruce’s little epiphanies or whatever, is they never come with an apology attached. You ever notice that? We’re just all supposed to be so impressed he worked up enough emotional awareness to correctly register reality that everyone falls all over themselves when he can muster the—when he can manage to—fuck!” And he kicked off the sheets, sat up, swung his legs over the bed. And now Dick would be able to hear the shaking in his voice.

“He loves you,” Dick said quietly.

“And I’m supposed to be grateful for that, huh.”

“You love him too.”

“Not voluntarily.”

“Some love is like that.”

He should get up and pull his jeans on, make some coffee. Dick should have been gone hours ago. Roy would be back any minute now. He didn’t need Roy up in his personal life like this. Didn’t need Roy’s comments about who was in his bed. “Thanks for the wisdom,” he said. “It’s like reading the placemat at Cracker Barrel. And what the fuck would you know, Golden Boy. Everybody loves you. You walk into McDonald’s and the fry cook volunteers to give you a blowie. There are ATMs out there that would probably fellate you. Your Roomba’s probably got a boner for you.”

“Well, punishing me because I am also related to Bruce is a fun if predictable part of today’s entertainment.”

“Fuck you.” Jason got up and pulled on his pants, then a t shirt. He dug around for a cigarette and opened the window. He needed a smoke. Over on the bed, Dick folded his arms behind his head and watched him. He wanted to say *put some clothes on*, but Dick was like that. He would just wander around naked. Because everybody loved Dick.

“You ever read the Bible?” Dick asked.

“Is this where we’re pretending my education was less expensive than yours?”

“No, I mean, there are some stories in it you might not know. One in particular. You know the prodigal son, right?”

“Yes Dick, fuck you, I know the prodigal son, and fuck you for thinking that story is anything like me, all right, as though all I have to do is just fall back into Bruce’s emotionally maladjusted arms and cry like he’s my daddy and everything will be fine, as though I—”

“Shut up,” Dick said, and something in the low menace of his voice silenced Jason. “For once in your life shut up. You ever think about the other son in that story? You ever think about that at all? The son who did everything he was supposed to? The story talks about how pissed he was when his father threw a party when Fuck-Up McGee came back home, but it doesn’t talk about what he might have felt all those years his brother was gone. What it would have felt like to watch his father tear his heart out, to watch. . .” He shut his eyes. “Forget it.”

Jason smoked in silence. “Sorry,” he said, after a while. Dick just continued to watch him. “Which I say to point out how not like Bruce I am. Because unlike him I can actually squeeze out a semi-annual apology.”

“That really bothers you, doesn’t it. The thought of being like him.”

“I think that ‘desire to be like Bruce’ is a fairly good barometer of emotional health, so yeah.”

“Well don’t tell Tim that,” Dick said, and Jason gave a low wicked laugh.

“Ah, Timmy’s not so bad, there’s hope for him yet.”

“I didn’t answer the other day, when you asked if you were like Bruce, because I wasn’t sure you would want to hear it. Wasn’t sure how to say it, really.”

“Can we please talk about literally anything else.”

“Mm, not just yet,” Dick said easily, and he got up, stretched like a cat, grabbed a smoke from Jason’s crumpled pack and perched himself on the window too. There were a couple of bruises there that Jason hadn’t given him. Must have been a hell of a fight. Dick shook out his match and tossed it out the window.

“You’re like him in that thing he has,” Dick said. “That thing that makes people do things for him.”

“The size of his cock?”

“I mean, dumb ass, the thing that makes people just want to be around him. Like there’s this. . . glow, or something, and you can catch it if you just stand close enough. You know what I’m talking about, or maybe you don’t, because you have it too. People fucking kill for you, and that’s not a metaphor, is it? You don’t even see how much you’re like him. And you make jokes about me and the fry cook – Jesus Christ.” Dick laughed a little, blowing his smoke out the window. Jason tried not to be impressed with what he looked like, curled up naked on the windowsill in all his golden skin and floppy hair and irritatingly gorgeous smile.

“You drag me all day long for being like that,” Dick said, “and look at you. Fucking look at you. So maybe you can be a little less self-righteous about Bruce’s engagement with reality, I’m thinking. But you know, what do I know, I’m just a fucking placemat.”

They smoked in silence for a while. Jason studied the cigarette in his nicotine-stained fingers. “I’m sorry,” he said again, and meant it this time. “It was a shitty thing to say. He. . . messes me up. I get. . . off-center, when I talk to him. He’s probably convinced I hate him or something, because I never answer his calls. Truth is he just messes me up for the rest of the day, when I talk to him, and that’s why I don’t. But whatever, fuck it, I’m sure in his head it’s all about him anyway.”

“He’s a good man,” Dick said, “but he doesn’t always know he is. Kind of like someone else I know.” And he pitched his cigarette out the window, unbent from the sill, and ran a hand through Jason’s hair. The hand stroked his jaw. “You did a good thing there, helping him out with Hal.”

“Hey, you weren’t supposed to know about that.”

“Yeah, it’s weird. It’s almost like I’m a trained detective or something.” Dick leaned to kiss him, and the kiss became a tug at his shirt. “C’mon,” he said. “Come back to bed. Who gives a fuck about Roy. Come on.”

Jason let himself be led, let Dick peel off his t shirt. “You know,” he said, “at some point we’re gonna have to talk about how really probably not at all healthy this thing is, between you and me.”

“For sure,” Dick said. “Right after we’re done fucking our brains out. Then we’ll talk about it, I swear.”

“Sounds good,” Jason murmured, as Dick climbed on top of him, because what kind of fucking idiot said no to Dick Grayson’s perfect body grinding naked on him?

Afterward Dick drifted back to sleep (as he had a tendency to do, after orgasm) and Jason lay there, staring at the ceiling. Roy was moving around in the apartment, making passive-aggressive amounts of noise to protest the irritant of Jason’s closed door. Jason sighed and reached for his phone.

The thing is, he texted. I get a deal on the jackets, on account of I took care of a little problem for the designer. And my hair really is just this fabulous by nature, I dunno what to tell you. Also are u

even kidding me, Mr. Custom Italian Shoes??

He set the phone down and rolled back over, wrapping himself around Dick's sleep-warm body. He didn't expect there to be an answer. He had started to drift back off when the ping roused him. He fumbled for his phone and squinted at it.

Good arch support is always worth the investment, was all it said. Jason started laughing and for some reason could not stop. It wasn't even that funny, it was just that he could hear it in Bruce's earnest gravelly voice and he could not stop laughing.

"Shut up I'm sleeping," Dick murmured, and Jason tucked his head over Dick's shoulder, spooning around him, laughing quietly to himself. They would figure out their weird thing later on. Or maybe they never would. But it had worked for Bruce and Hal, so why not for them? Crazier things had happened. Crazier things were probably boning in Bruce's penthouse right now. After all, in a universe in which Bruce fucking Wayne had managed to shit a healthy emotion out his impacted asshole, anything could happen.

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