

Chapter One

Bruce

As Gotham's skyline emerged from the horizon, a flood of memories crashed over me. The city stretched out below, a patchwork of history and decay. I spotted the park where my parents used to take me—once full of life, now abandoned, its gates chained shut. Wayne Enterprises stood tall, a gleaming tower of glass and steel, casting a long shadow over the streets. And there, just beyond the clustered rooftops was home, Wayne Manor. Its gardens still immaculate, untouched by the city's relentless march toward ruin and then I saw it.

The Monarch Theatre.

Even from the sky, its faded marquee barely visible through the smog, I knew exactly where it was. I always did. Ever since that night.

18 Years Ago

"Bruce, we are going to be late!" My mother's voice echoed up the grand staircase. "Alfred is waiting!"

"I'm not going!" I yelled from my bedroom, yanking at my collar. "These stupid galas are so boring!"

"Bruce Wayne, we have a responsibility to this city." Her tone softened, but the weight behind it remained firm. "Your father's work depends on these events. We go, we show support, and that's how we help Gotham."

I flopped onto my bed, arms crossed, my tie still hanging undone around my neck. A few moments later, footsteps approached. Then he was there, Thomas Wayne, standing in the doorway, effortlessly confident as always. It didn't matter if he was in a three-piece suit or worn-out basketball shorts, my father carried himself like a man who had the world figured out. And maybe, being the richest man in Gotham, he actually did.

“What’s the problem, champ?” He sat beside me, his voice easy, like he already knew the answer.

“You used to love these things.” His eyes studied me, searching for something. “What changed? Are you suddenly too old to hang out with your dad?”

“It’s not the same,” I muttered, staring at my feet. “Tommy is gone. He moved away, and now it’s just me being dragged around as ‘Gotham’s favorite son.’” I sighed. “It’s not fun anymore, Dad.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “I know it’s hard since Tommy left. But, Bruce, life is change. People come and go. We can’t hold onto the past forever.”

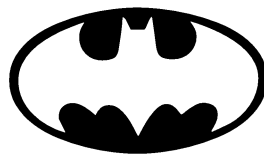
I frowned. He didn’t get it. Not really.

“But...” He leaned in, a small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “If you come tonight, I hear there’s a showing of The Mask of Zorro right after the gala starts. What do you say? We make an appearance, shake a few hands, and then sneak off to catch the movie?” He held out his hand to seal the deal.

I wanted to be mad, but...he knew exactly how to get me. I shook his hand. “Alright, you win. Deal.”

He patted my shoulder and stood. “Good. Now let’s go. Alfred’s been waiting long enough.”

I grabbed my jacket and followed him out, unaware that this would be the last night I’d ever hear his voice.



The gala was exactly as I expected; boring, exhausting, and filled with too many old women pinching my cheeks, marveling at how much I’d grown. I spent most of the night dodging conversations I didn’t care about, forcing polite smiles, and waiting. Waiting for my dad to make good on his promise.

Finally, after two long hours, he leaned down and whispered, “There’s a showing at the Monarch Theatre in twenty minutes. If we ditch Alfred and take the back alleys, we’ll make it just in time.”

My mother was already eager to leave, so we didn’t waste another second. We slipped out the side doors, ducking into the narrow, dimly lit alleys behind the venue. My heart pounded with excitement as we weaved through the backstreets—our own little adventure. By the time we reached the theatre, the trailers were still playing.

The movie was everything I hoped it would be. The Mask of Zorro played out on the big screen, swashbuckling action, heroic triumphs. I was enthralled. By the time we stepped outside, I was still caught up in it, swinging my arm in the air, carving invisible Z’s through the night.

I stopped at the curb, expecting Alfred to pull up any second. But my parents kept walking.

“Alfred doesn’t know we snuck out,” my father explained. “We’ve got to slip back in the same way we left.”

“I don’t know, Thomas,” my mother hesitated. “It’s gotten much later now. Maybe we should just call him.”

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fine,” my father said with his usual confidence. “We just cut through Park Row, down a couple of streets, and ta-da we’re back at the party.” He grinned, as if this was the greatest plan anyone had ever thought of.

But my mother was right.

By the time we reached Park Row, the streets were nearly empty, the streetlights casting long, eerie shadows. It was too late, too dark. My father’s pace quickened. My mother clutched my hand.

Then he appeared. A man stepped out from the darkness. His coat was ragged, his face obscured by the brim of his hat. But the gun in his hand was unmistakable.

“Thomas,” my mother whispered, gripping his arm. “He has a gun.”

My father raised a hand, his voice steady but laced with something I'd never heard before—fear. “We don’t want trouble,” he said carefully. “If you need help, I know someone—Leslie Thompkins. She works just down the block. She can...”

“Wallets. Purses. Watches.” The man’s voice was sharp, cutting through my father’s words. The gun shifted, pointing directly at my mother. “And those pearls.”

My mother’s breath hitched. She hesitated.

The man reached forward and yanked at her necklace. The strand snapped, pearls scattering across the pavement like raindrops.

The gunshot echoed through the alley. My mother collapsed before I even understood what had happened.

“No!” My father lunged at the man. Another shot rang out. He crumpled to the ground.

I couldn’t move. Time stretched, every second dragging like an eternity. The gunman turned to me, his shadow swallowing me whole. Then, he ran.

I don’t know what scared him off, maybe the thought of shooting a kid was too much but I didn’t care. I dropped to my knees. My mother’s white pearls, now stained crimson, lay scattered in a pool of blood. I pressed my hand against my father’s chest. Nothing. No breath. No heartbeat. They were gone.

The night pressed in around me, cold and silent. I clenched my fists, shaking. This could never happen again.

No one else would feel this pain. No one else would be left alone on a cold street, staring at the bodies of the people they loved most. No matter how long it took. No matter what I had to become. I would make sure of it.

Chapter Two

Present Day

A sudden jolt of turbulence shook me from my thoughts, rattling the ice in my untouched drink. The distant hum of the engines filled the cabin, but it wasn't enough to drown out the voice of the flight attendant leaning toward me with practiced politeness.

"Mr. Wayne, we're beginning our descent. If you could please fasten your seatbelt."

I exhaled slowly, nodding as I pulled the belt across my lap and clicked it into place. The lights of Gotham flickered beneath the thick, rolling clouds outside the window, a sea of gold and red stretching across the horizon. From up here, the city still held an illusion of grandeur, of order. But I knew better. I knew the streets told a different story.

The landing was smooth, barely a bump as the wheels met the private airstrip outside Wayne Enterprises. It was a calculated move, avoiding the press that would no doubt be swarming my usual entry point at Gotham Airport, hungry for a glimpse of the long-lost Wayne heir returning home. Instead, the only person waiting for me on the tarmac was the one constant in my life since that night.

Alfred Pennyworth.

The wind tugged at his coat as he stood by the sleek black car, hands folded behind his back, his ever-stoic expression giving away only the smallest flicker of relief at the sight of me. His gaze swept over me as I approached, luggage in hand, and in true Alfred fashion, the first words out of his mouth were laced with dry wit.

"Will we be heading straight back to the Manor, or would you like to stop anywhere first? Perhaps a barber?"

I lifted a hand to my face, fingers brushing over the rough beard that had taken root in my time away. My hair, longer than it had ever been, was unruly from months of neglect. A small smirk tugged at the corner of my lips.

“It’s good to see you too, Alfred,” I said, my voice lower, rougher than I remembered. “No detours. Just take the long way, I want to see how much Gotham has changed.”

Alfred gave a slight nod, his expression unreadable as he moved to open the car door for me. “As you wish, Master Bruce.”

The car glided away from the airstrip, its tires rolling silently over the cracked pavement as Gotham unfurled before me. From the sky, the city had looked almost serene, a sleeping giant wrapped in the glow of its own lights. But down here, on the streets, reality set in.

Gotham was rotting.

The roads were littered with trash, neon signs flickering and stuttering above doorways like dying embers. Storefronts were either boarded up or covered in graffiti, the remnants of past crimes etched into their surfaces. Shadows stretched long down the alleys, where figures lurked, watching, waiting. Even as Alfred carefully chose a route through the least decayed streets, I could see it the city’s slow, inevitable collapse.

A group of men huddled around a burning barrel on the corner, their faces gaunt and hollow-eyed. A shattered streetlamp cast half of the block into darkness. The distant wail of a siren cut through the air, echoing off the crumbling buildings like a ghostly warning.

“That’s enough, Alfred.” My voice was quiet, but firm. I reached forward, resting a hand on his shoulder. “Take me home.”

Wayne Manor loomed on the horizon long before we reached the outskirts of the city, its silhouette a lonely sentinel on the hill. It had once been the perfect place to grow up—grand, isolated, untouched by Gotham’s chaos.

But after my parents’ deaths, it had become something else.

A mausoleum.

No matter how much time passed, the walls still whispered with their absence, the echoes of their voices lingering in the halls like ghosts.

And yet, as the gates creaked open and the car pulled into the long, winding driveway, I knew one thing for certain.

Gotham was still my home.

And it needed me.

18 Years Ago

My hands were drenched in their blood. Warm, sticky, and seeping into the cracks of my skin.

I couldn't move.

If I did, if I so much as breathed too hard, reality would set in. And I wasn't ready for that.

As long as I stayed here, kneeling beside them, maybe there was still a chance. Maybe my father would take a deep, shuddering breath and sit up, cracking a joke to ease my worry. Maybe my mother's hand would twitch, her fingers reaching for mine, ready to pull me close and whisper that everything was alright.

Maybe someone, anyone, would come and help them before it was too late. So, I stayed.

The city stretched on around me, indifferent to the horror playing out on its streets. In the distance, tires splashed through puddles. A siren wailed somewhere far away, but not close enough to matter. The hum of a flickering streetlamp buzzed above me, casting a sickly yellow glow over the alley.

Then footsteps. Soft, careful steps, hesitating before drawing closer.

A woman emerged from the shadows, the glow of the streetlamp illuminating streaks of gray in her dark hair. Her eyes widened as she took in the scene—the sprawled bodies, the blood pooling beneath them, the boy frozen between them, staring at nothing.

“Oh... oh no...” she whispered, her voice breaking. “What were you thinking, Thomas?”

She dropped to her knees beside me, and I flinched. Her hands were warm when they touched my shoulder, steady despite the tremble in her voice. “Bruce... Bruce, my name is Leslie Thompkins. I run a free clinic nearby—your father used to assist me there. Do you remember me?”

I couldn’t answer. My throat felt tight, raw, like I’d swallowed glass.

But then she looked me in the eyes, and something about her expression, gentle but firm, worried but resolute, made the words tumble out of me in a broken, shaking whisper.

“We were heading back from the movie. My dad didn’t want Alfred to know we snuck out, so he... he thought it’d be faster to cut through here.” My breath hitched, my chest tightening. “A man stopped us. He had a gun. He told them to hand over their things, and my mom, she had this necklace, and he...he grabbed it and...”

I squeezed my eyes shut. The sound of gunfire rang in my ears again, deafening, like the moment had never ended.

“He shot them,” I whispered, voice barely there. “And then he turned the gun on me, but he ran away instead.”

Leslie inhaled sharply, closing her eyes for a brief second. When she opened them again, there was nothing but determination in her gaze. “Bruce, listen to me,” she said, her voice softer now, coaxing. “I’m going to call 911. But I need you to come with me to the clinic while we wait. You shouldn’t be out here.”

She tugged at my arm gently, trying to pull me away.

I resisted. “No. No, I can’t...” I clawed at the pavement, my fingers slipping in the blood. “I have to stay. I have to...”

“Bruce,” she whispered, and there was something in her voice—something that made the fight drain from me. “You don’t have to watch this anymore.”

I didn’t even realize I was crying until my vision blurred.

She helped me to my feet, guiding me away as my legs wobbled beneath me. I barely registered the wail of sirens growing louder, the flashing red-and-blue lights painting the alley walls in streaks of color.

The police swarmed the scene. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I could feel their presence—heavy, intrusive, questioning. Then, through the blur of movement and noise, a familiar voice cut through the chaos. “Master Bruce.”

Alfred.

He was there, standing beside a sleek black car, his face unreadable yet filled with something I'd never seen before. A sadness buried deep behind a practiced mask of control.

I stumbled toward him, my body running on nothing but instinct.

“Master Bruce,” he repeated, quieter this time. “You’ve been through a traumatic experience. Is there anything I can do for you?”

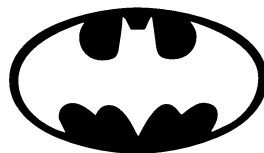
My voice cracked as I whispered, “Take me home, Alfred.”

There was nothing left here for me.

The moment the car door shut, the outside world faded into nothing but a blur of neon lights and rain-slicked streets. I curled into the seat, resting my forehead against the cool glass, watching as the city passed by.

A part of me had died in that alley tonight.

And I knew—no matter how much time passed, no matter what I did, Bruce Wayne would never truly leave that street.



The custody battle that followed my parents' deaths felt like a war fought in hushed voices and polished courtrooms. The Kane family, my mother's relatives, insisted that I belonged with them—that a child needed family, not a butler. But my father had foreseen everything. His will was airtight, leaving no room for argument. If anything happened to both him and my mother, I was to remain under the guardianship of Alfred Pennyworth.

I was relieved. Wayne Manor was my home. And more importantly, Alfred wouldn't stand in the way of what I had already decided, what I had to do.

As the years passed, I threw myself into my own training. Every muscle, every instinct—I wanted them sharpened like a blade. I tested myself constantly, picking fights with the biggest kids at school just to see if I could take them down. I got bruised, bloodied, knocked to the ground more times than I could count. But I got back up. Stronger. Smarter.

At first, my name shielded me from real consequences. The teachers turned a blind eye, the administration whispered about how Wayne money could smooth things over. But even the power of my last name wasn't limitless. My grades slipped, the fights escalated, and soon Gotham Academy had enough.

I was expelled.

Alfred was livid. "Do you realize," he seethed, pacing in front of me, "that I had to learn this from your principal? Over the phone?" His voice, usually so measured, carried a rare edge of frustration.

I didn't flinch. I was still riding the high of the fight I'd won earlier that day, still smug about the fact that I had managed to keep my suspension hidden from him for as long as I had.

Alfred wasn't amused. He grabbed my wrist—not roughly, but with enough force to make it clear I had no choice—and led me through the halls of the Manor, straight into the library.

I stopped short. The towering bookshelves, once crammed with centuries of knowledge, were bare. Every single book had been removed.

"Where did all the books go, Pennyworth?" I asked, smirking.

Alfred turned sharply, his glare cutting through me like a knife. “Master Bruce, I may be your butler, but I am also your legal guardian until you turn eighteen. That is four years away. Until then, you will refer to me as Alfred or Mr. Pennyworth. Not simply ‘Pennyworth.’”

I scoffed, crossing my arms. “Fine. Where did all the books go, *Alfred*?”

“They’re gone because you don’t deserve them.”

That caught me off guard.

Alfred picked up a single book from the table in the center of the room and held it out to me. “We are going to learn how to use our brains instead of just our fists. You will earn back each subject, one at a time, by proving to me that you understand it.”

I glanced down at the book’s title, my lips curling in disdain. *Botanical Alchemy: The Dual Powers of Healing Herbs and Lethal Leaves* by Dr. Jason Woodrue.

“Alfred, this looks terribly boring.”

He didn’t even blink. “It may be boring, but knowledge is power, Master Bruce. And I know you value power.”

I rolled my eyes and tossed the book onto the table. “So, what, I’m supposed to sit here and read until I can recite plant toxins in my sleep?”

“Oh, it gets better.” Alfred folded his arms. “You’ll also be attending therapy.”

I stiffened.

“I’ve scheduled sessions with Dr. Hugo Strange. He is one of Gotham’s top-rated psychiatrists. Your first appointment is tomorrow, and I expect to see you there.”

I stared at him, narrowing my eyes. Alfred wasn’t backing down.

I exhaled sharply, grabbing the book and flipping it open to the first page. “I see, Alfred,” I muttered.

He watched me for a moment before nodding. “Good.”

As he walked out, I let my eyes skim the dense text, the words blurring together as my mind raced.

Alfred thought he was fixing me. But I wasn't broken. I knew exactly what I was doing. And this was only the beginning.

In the days that followed, I realized how right Alfred had been. The books in my parents' library held more than just dusty old words—they were weapons, tools of the mind. With them, I learned how to think, how to manipulate, how to control.

It didn't take long to put that knowledge to use.

Within a week of being enrolled in a new school, I had dismantled the biggest bully without throwing a single punch. A strategically placed plant extract on his towel made his skin break out in rashes. A perfectly timed lock malfunction left him trapped in the locker room. Whispers of curses and bad omens spread through the school until, convinced that some unseen force was after him, he withdrew.

One problem removed. No fists required.

But that wasn't enough. I wanted more. Needed more. I began taking extra classes, consuming every subject I could sink my teeth into. Medicine, criminology, engineering—if it had even the slightest potential to be useful, I learned it.

Then there was Hugo Strange.

Alfred had scheduled my therapy sessions with him, likely hoping it would "help" me process what happened to my parents. But from the moment I met Strange, I knew he was different. The way he studied me, like I was a puzzle he was itching to solve, made my skin crawl. There was something off about him.

I barely spoke during our sessions, keeping my mouth shut while he rattled off theories about my trauma. He was convinced my nightmares stemmed from "unresolved grief," that I needed to relive the night of my parents' deaths to properly deal with it.

His solution? Hypnosis.

But the more I learned about hypnotics, the more I realized something was wrong. What Strange practiced wasn't real therapy, it was stage hypnosis, the kind con artists used at carnivals. He wasn't trying to heal me. He was testing me. Seeing how suggestible I was.

That's when I decided to test him back. I studied how to fake falling into a hypnotic state, learning every trick to fool him into believing I was under his influence. But I needed more data, more proof. That's when I met Julie Madison.

Julie was kind, a rare light in Gotham's darkness. We became close quickly, talking about everything from school to family. Her home life was crumbling, her family's financial situation had taken a sudden nosedive, the stress of it slowly tearing them apart. She had started seeing Dr. Strange for guidance, trusting him to help her cope.

I trusted no one.

One day, I told her my ambitions, my desire to help Gotham. She laughed, shaking her head. "You? A rich boy in a suit? You think knowing a bunch of facts about plants and DNA is going to change the world?"

Her words stung, but I let it go. She didn't understand. Not yet.

Then, I cracked the code. During one of my "hypnosis" sessions, I subtly turned on the hidden recording device inside my pen. Strange went through the motions as usual, guiding me into a supposed trance. Then came the real test, he started probing.

"Bruce," he said smoothly, "I want you to tell me about your family's finances. Your bank accounts. Access numbers."

And there it was. Hugo Strange wasn't just manipulating his patients, he was robbing them blind.

Using my recording and Julie's statement, I pieced everything together. Her family's downfall hadn't just been bad business—it had been orchestrated. Strange had been siphoning funds from his clients, covering his tracks under hypnosis.

I turned over the evidence to the authorities and within a week, Strange was behind bars.

Alfred was... less than pleased.

"Master Bruce," he said, his voice steady but heavy with something unspoken. "I am proud of what you have learned and that you are finally realizing that problems can be solved without your fists. But exposing an embezzling ring at sixteen years old? That is not the work of an ordinary teenager."

I met his gaze, unflinching. "I made a vow, Alfred. A vow sworn over my parents' bodies in that alley. I will protect those who cannot protect themselves. I will bring justice back to Gotham." I straightened. "Hugo Strange was just the first. He won't be the last."

Alfred's jaw tightened. His eyes darkened with something I couldn't quite place.

"Master Wayne," he said, his voice lower now, edged with warning. "You cannot start a war on crime by yourself. War changes people, it hardens them. And when that happens, you lose the ability to feel anything at all."

I scoffed. "What would you know about war?"

Silence stretched between us. Then, quietly, Alfred spoke.

"If you truly do not know, Master Bruce, then that shows how much you still have to learn." He exhaled slowly, rubbing a hand over his face before meeting my gaze again. "I served in the Royal British Army as an infantryman. I saw things, did things that I do not wish upon anyone. The bloodshed... it got to me. I transferred to being a field medic to save lives instead of taking them. And it was there, in a relief effort, that I met your father."

I stiffened.

"He saved my life," Alfred continued. "We became friends. I left the army, pursued another life, and he returned home to marry your mother. When you were born, he offered me a place here, and I accepted. It was an honor to serve this family, to help raise you. But that war..." His voice trailed off; his eyes distant. "The men I killed, the faces of those I could not save... those haunt me to this day."

I swallowed hard, clenching my fists. "If you cared so much about my father," I snarled, my voice shaking, "then why did you let him die in some backwater alley?"

The words hung between us like a blade, sharp and unforgiving.

Alfred didn't follow me as I stormed out. I expected him to call after me, to chase me down with another lecture about morality or restraint. But as I passed the window on my way to the garage, I saw him.

Slumped in a chair, staring at nothing. Defeated.

He didn't understand. He couldn't. But I did. For the first time, I truly understood what I needed to do.

That night, I forged Alfred's handwriting, withdrawing from school under the pretense of "studying abroad." I sold my bike, my expensive clothes, anything that could be traced back to me for cash.

Then, with nothing but the clothes on my back, I boarded a ship to somewhere Bruce Wayne did not exist. I didn't need a name. I needed to become something else.

Chapter Three

Present Day

The car glided into the garage of Wayne Manor, its tires barely making a sound against the polished concrete. The familiar scent of oil and metal hung in the air, mixing with the faint musk of a space that had once been full of life but now felt hollow.

Alfred put the car in park and turned slightly towards me. “We’ve arrived, Master Wayne.”

The weight of those words settled heavily in my chest. Wayne. As if the name meant anything anymore.

I reached for my bags, but Alfred was already moving.

“Don’t worry about those, Alfred. I got them.”

Before I could intervene, he had already pulled the duffel bags from the trunk with the same precise efficiency he had always possessed. For a man who claimed to have left behind his soldiering days, his movements were still sharp, practiced, disciplined.

“Master Wayne,” he huffed, lifting the weight with ease, “just because I haven’t carried luggage in ten years doesn’t mean I’m suddenly a decrepit old man who needs assistance.”

A smirk tugged at the corner of my mouth. “You were never a decrepit old man, Alfred. I just wanted to help someone who means a lot to me.”

“If you reach for these bags again, sir, I may have to remove that hand,” Alfred quipped, his eyes narrowing slightly. “I don’t care how many years you spent becoming a ninja.”

I chuckled under my breath, shaking my head. “I wasn’t becoming a ninja, Alfred. I was honing my craft, expanding my perspective. It was something I couldn’t gain by staying here.”

“My mistake, sir,” Alfred said dryly. “It won’t happen again.”

We climbed the grand staircase, the silence between us thick with unspoken words. When we reached the second floor, Alfred pushed open the door to a familiar room.

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to move into the master bedroom?” he asked, pausing just inside the doorway. “You are the man of the house now.”

I stared into the room. My room. The same one I had left behind all those years ago. It was smaller than I remembered, but it felt right.

“That’s my parents’ room, Alfred,” I said, my voice quieter now. “This is my room. And it stays my room.”

Alfred studied me for a long moment, then gave a single nod. “As you wish, sir. Supper will be served shortly.”

Once he was gone, I unzipped one of my duffel bags and emptied its contents onto the bed. A few changes of clothes, some with dried bloodstains still on them. A toothbrush. A set of lockpicks. My old combat gloves, the purple faded with use. Every item told a story—of battles fought in alleys, of wounds stitched in dimly lit rooms, of training that pushed me past my breaking point and rebuilt me into something stronger.

I had spent years learning how to break bones, how to disappear into the shadows, how to tear down a man’s entire empire without leaving a trace. But none of that would matter if I couldn’t fix Gotham. That was my true mission.

The city had decayed beyond recognition, its lifeblood poisoned by organized crime and corruption. The Gotham City Police Department had become a shell of what it once was, its officers bought and paid for like cheap commodities. That was my first objective—root out the bad seeds, restore the people’s faith in the law.

The second step? Burn the filth out of Gotham completely. Traffickers, pushers, enforcers, I would dismantle them all. Not with a boardroom. Not with contracts. But with fear.

The dinner bell rang, pulling me from my thoughts. The scent of roasted meat and fresh bread drifted through the halls, and my stomach twisted with hunger. It had been years

since I had tasted real food, something that wasn't scavenged or hastily prepared in some forgotten corner of the world.

When I reached the dining hall, I hesitated. Alfred had set the table, the grand table, with my place at the head.

I exhaled through my nose. "Alfred, we've talked about this. I won't be eating here. And I certainly won't sit at that seat."

Alfred turned from the sideboard, his hands clasped behind his back, his brow raised in challenge. "Your attempt to avoid taking responsibility for this house is astonishing to me, sir. You speak of honoring your parents, yet you refuse to stand where they once stood. That will not be allowed to continue."

I frowned. "Alfred"

"You will attend a shareholders meeting tomorrow," he interrupted smoothly, as if he had already anticipated my argument. "The board is anxious to hear what the sole heir to Wayne Enterprises intends to do with his father's legacy."

I picked up my plate and walked toward a seat closer to him. "I don't see why they can't continue doing what they've been doing. Wayne Enterprises hasn't suffered a major loss in years. From what I hear, Lucius Fox has been running things admirably."

Alfred's expression didn't shift. "While Mr. Fox has done well, the company is not Fox Enterprises, sir. It is Wayne Enterprises. Hence, your involvement is necessary."

"I'll be too busy for such trivial things as business," I said, my voice flat. "Wayne Enterprises is only a finite part of my plan."

Alfred took a measured breath. "Do tell, sir."

I met his gaze. "I'm going to restore Gotham. The city is rotting from the inside out. It took me years to gather what I needed, to learn everything I could. I'm ready now."

Alfred studied me carefully, then his gaze flicked toward the study. “That would explain the rather large crate that arrived this morning,” he mused. “I had it wheeled in there for you.”

I nodded, finishing my meal in silence. When I was done, I slid out of my chair and made my way toward the study.

Inside, the crate stood against the far wall, its wooden surface marked with shipping labels from half a dozen countries. I ran my fingers over the rough grain before prying it open.

Inside lay everything I had collected during my travels. My reinforced tactical gloves, their padding stiff with wear. A climbing harness, its fibers stretched from a thousand ascents. Combat wear, heavy boots, and gear designed for the shadows.

These weren’t just tools. They were pieces of me, of the blood, sweat, and pain I had endured to become something more than Bruce Wayne.

I clenched my fists. This wasn’t about vengeance. It wasn’t about rage. This was about justice. And my war was just beginning.

10 Years Earlier

As the boat that I had stowed away on left the shores of Gotham, my plan was finally going into to action. I would need to train from the best and hone my craft so that I became one with each of the skills necessary to wage my war on crime. My first stop was Paris, France.

When I arrived in Paris, I was determined to refine my combat skills. My first stop was under the tutelage of the world’s greatest swordsman, a master known only as Le Sabreur. I trained rigorously in the art of swordplay, pushing myself to perfect precision, speed, and discipline.

But my journey took an unexpected turn when I crossed paths with a masked vigilante known as the Gray Shadow, a legendary figure who dismantled the criminal underworld through deception and agility. Recognizing my potential, she took me under her wing, and taught me the importance of strategy, patience, and unpredictability in combat.

My training was interrupted when Henri Ducard, a renowned manhunter, tracked me down. Alfred had secretly hired him to find me. But, instead of returning to Gotham, I found myself entangled in Ducard's pursuit of a serial killer terrorizing Paris. Together with the Gray Shadow, we followed the killer's trail through the labyrinthine streets of the city. After successfully stopping the murderer, Ducard saw something in me, a kindred spirit. I left the Gray Shadow's side to learn the craft of manhunting from him.

Under Henri Ducard's tutelage, I learned the skills of tracking, interrogation, and psychological profiling. His methods were ruthless, emphasizing efficiency over morality. He taught me how to track prey through the most remote terrains, how to disappear into a crowd, and how to extract information through fear and deception. But as I honed my skills, I uncovered a grim truth, Ducard didn't just hunt criminals; he executed them.

When he finally expected me to take a life, I refused. Our partnership ended in a violent confrontation, and I barely escaped with my life. From that moment on, I vowed never to cross that line. Justice without morality was just another form of crime.

After escaping from Ducard, I journeyed to China, where I sought out the legendary Shaolin monks. High in the mountains, I spent years mastering martial arts, learning to control my body and mind with unparalleled discipline. The monks taught me various styles, from Shaolin Kung Fu to pressure point manipulation. They also refined my sword fighting skills, blending them with hand-to-hand combat. My training wasn't just physical but spiritual. I learned to conquer fear and pain, pushing myself beyond human limits.

After the monks, I was in search of a master in stealth and illusion, I sought out Giovanni Zatara, a world-renowned escape artist and magician. Zatara instructed me in sleight of hand, perception, and misdirection. Skills that would later make me Gotham's greatest illusionist in the shadows. I was fascinated by Zatara's techniques. However, my stay was complicated by my growing affection for his daughter, a woman with secrets of her own. My feelings for her endangered the mission. So, though I felt a deep connection with her, I ultimately left, knowing my journey was far from over.

On my next stop, I traveled to Paektu Mountain in Korea, where I sought out Master Kirgi, a legendary martial artist. Training atop the freezing peaks, I learned to move with absolute silence, mastering techniques of stealth and evasion. Master Kirgi taught me patience, how to strike unseen, and how to utilize my environment as a weapon. It was here that I truly became a ghost in the night.

From combat, I shifted my focus to mastering vehicles, believing that speed and maneuverability could be crucial assets. I found Don Miguel, an eccentric but brilliant street racer in Brazil, who taught me high-speed racing, precision driving, and advanced vehicular combat techniques. By the time I left, I could handle any machine on wheels with lethal efficiency.

In Moscow, I sought out Avery Oblonsky, an infamous former spy known for her ability to disappear in plain sight. Oblonsky drilled me in the arts of disguise, voice modulation, and social manipulation. She taught me how to forge identities, alter my appearance convincingly, and even mimic personalities to blend seamlessly into any crowd.

I then traveled to the Swiss Alps, where Luka Jungo, an expert marksman, took me in. Though I had no intention of ever using guns, I believed understanding them was vital. Jungo trained me in firearms, archery, and projectile weaponry. While I became a near-flawless shot, I solidified my vow never to use guns as a means of justice.

Seeking further mastery in stealth, I traveled to the Hida Mountains of Japan. There, I studied under an ancient lineage of shinobi, learning the art of moving unseen, infiltration, and untraceable takedowns. It was here that I learned to disappear into the darkness entirely.

I finally turned my attention to technology, knowing that brute force alone would not win my war on crime. In Berlin, I studied under Sergei Alexandrov, a former weapons engineer turned recluse. Alexandrov taught me how to build, modify, and adapt cutting-edge technology for my needs. I learned to craft tools, gadgets, and even prototype vehicles, all of which would later aid me in my war on crime.

Before returning to Gotham, I made one last stop, Philadelphia, where I sought out legendary boxer Ted Grant. Unlike my previous masters, Grant was no secretive warrior but a straightforward fighter. He drilled me in close-quarters combat, teaching me the resilience and endurance of a true fighter. His brutal training regimen forged my iron will, ensuring I could take a beating and still stand.

Grant was different from my other mentors. He didn't talk about philosophy, honor, or discipline. He only talked about the fight in front of me. He knew things, though, things that made me wonder about the man he used to be. There were old newspaper clippings in his gym, yellowed with age, featuring grainy photos of masked figures standing side by side. He never spoke about them, and I never asked, but the way his eyes lingered on them told me all I needed to know. Grant wasn't just a fighter; he had been something more. Maybe, once, he had been part of something bigger, something built on justice long before I ever considered it.

One night, after an exhausting training session, I asked him why he trained me. He shrugged, wrapping his hands with the same tape he'd used a thousand times before. "World's a rough place, kid. Always has been. You either stand up to it, or you let it knock you down. And I don't train people who stay down."

I carried those words with me. When I finally left Philadelphia, I knew I was ready for whatever Gotham had waiting for me. With every lesson ingrained into my mind and body, I returned to Gotham, no longer the broken man who had left years ago. I had become something greater, a weapon against the darkness that plagued my city.

There was just one thing left to do, and it was maybe the hardest thing that I had done in the course of my ten years of training abroad. I picked up the phone and called Alfred.

"Hello, Wayne Manor. This is Alfred Pennyworth. How may I assist you today?" Alfred spoke through the line, always so proper.

"Wow is that how you answer the phone every time Alfred. We have got to work on that?" I told him, the humor trying to mask the uncertainty of the phone call. Ten years ago, he had

hired Ducard to come after me but after that failed, he never tried again. I wonder what he thought of me after all these years. I was answered by the tone of his voice, when he replied.

“Master Bruce, sir is that you?” Alfred said, his voice mixed with an air of skepticism and optimism.

“Hey, Alfred. It’s me, Bruce.”

“Master Bruce, where are you? You have been missing for ten years. You were declared dead. No one had heard from you.” He said back, his voice almost reached a yell, but his manners got the best of him.

“Well, I have been around the world but right now I am in Philadelphia, and I think its time to come home. I would love it if you could get a plane out here to pick me up. My days of hitch hiking and being a stowaway are done.” I told him.

“Yes, Master Bruce. Right away. I will see you at the Gotham airport.” Alfred said, then he hesitated like he wondered if this was a dream or if he would actually get to speak to me again. But after a few seconds, he hung up the phone and I headed to the airport. It was time for me to begin my war on crime.

Chapter Four

Present Day

That is what shaped the parts of me that were jagged and raw into the man I am today. I slipped on the gloves and boots and placed the utility belt and harness over the grey combat wear. I was finally ready, after 10 years of training I was fully equipped to take on the black heart of Gotham's corruption.

I grabbed some listening technology from a drawer inside the trunk and placed a pair of grungy street clothes into a backpack. Next, I headed to the garage and picked out the dirtiest, grungiest bike we had. That was expertly hard considering Alfred kept everything in such working order.

I took the bike and rode off, heading straight into the heart of Gotham. I thought the filth would be harder to see at night, but the corruption of Gotham lit up the night like a neon sign. I rode just past Gotham City Police Station and parked it in a place where it wouldn't get stolen. Then, I opened my backpack and pulled out my listening devices. I turned them on and set them to listen into the conversations happening inside GCPD. I sat in the darkness observing Gotham's finest at work.

The usual bustle of cops was present hustling from one place to the next. I saw Gotham's police commissioner, Gillian B. Loeb, smoking a Cuban cigar, one he certainly couldn't afford on his salary. As I continued to observe one man stood out to me.

This man was unassuming, he didn't make everything about him. He wore a long trench coat and had a mustache that was perfectly maintained, like he had pride in knowing that was one thing he could control. Some officers came up to him, so I fine tuned my devices to listen in to their conversation.

"Hey boys!" One of the cops, a blonde-haired idiot, motioned to the surrounding cops, "Gordon here thinks your all corrupt. Imagine that." He waved his gun in the air, as the other cops let out a laugh.

The man with the mustache, Gordon, they called him spoke back, “I don’t mean to insult but you and your friends certainly don’t hide your payoffs very well.” He points to the blonde cop and continues, “I mean come on Flask, we are just supposed to believe that you can afford a Porshe.”

The blond cop, Flask was his name looked angry, “Hey! I saved up a long time for that.”

“Sure, we all believe that. Anyways, I’m going up to the roof for a smoke.” Then Gordon pulled out a pipe as he walked away.

Flask got one last comment in before Gordon was gone, “You even smoke old, old man.”

Gordon made his way up to the rooftop and let out a puff of smoke from his pipe. I waited patiently in the shadows as he did. He stood next to a broken spotlight covered in cobwebs and started talking to himself.

“Some change you got her. Chicago to Gotham. Supposed to be a fresh start. A place to do some good.” He took another puff from his pipe, shaking his head as he looked out on the Gotham skyline.

I stepped from the shadows, “I can help you do some good.”

Gordon in an instant had his gun raised and pointed directly at me, “Don’t move. Your trespassing on police property.”

That was not how I planned for this to go, so I threw down some homemade smoke pellets and made my escape. Gordon was good, though and managed to follow me through the smoke. I had to get away, so I made a daring move, jumping across a rooftop to escape.

The roofs were farther apart than I judged, and I slammed into a fire escape on my way down. I heard a loud crack as I fell sustaining some injuries, but thankfully my training taught me how to deal with such pain. I made it back to my bike, where I changed out of my stealth gear and into a hobo disguise.

I hobbled down a street of Gotham, notorious for its adult activities. I saw two men outside of a truck, they had large knives strapped to their belts and they were wheeling out pallets of what looked like meth.

I thought to myself, "This is what I trained for, this is what I am here to stop." I took a few breaths and centered myself, getting ready for the fight that was to come.

I took the first man down by hitting a pressure point on his wrist that made him drop his knife and he turns toward me, only to see my fist collide with his face. He crumples to the cries of agony filling the street.

"Hey! That guy just took out Johnny." One of the goons said. "Get him!"

I pulled a pair of ninja stars from my pockets and started throwing them. This allowed me to bring down the first two goons that were charging me. The others though started to corner me, so I took them down one by one as they approached.

Then, I felt a whip hit my back and wrap around my leg pulling me down. I hit the ground and saw a woman scantily dressed in black leather stand over me.

"Hey, boys, you dropped something." She said the heel of her shoes digging straight into my ribs.

"Get out of our way, girl. Your pimps not here to protect you." One of the goons said, shoving her aside.

Then the whip cracked and wrapped around his neck, "Do I look like I need protecting?" She said choking the man out. "I thought I would help you boys out and make get a cut but no you can't have girl helping you now can you."

I stood up getting my breath back, I was going to have to deal with this woman now too. As I stumbled to my feet, the woman without taking her eyes off the goon delivered a kick straight to my face. I caught it and twisted. But she managed to roll with the flip and kicked me with her other leg, breaking another rib in the process. Then she kneed me in the gut.

I got back up again, fighting against the pain. That's when I noticed her and the goons must have come to an arrangement because she had stepped aside, and I was facing a shot gun. I attempted to dodge out of the way, but I still caught some buckshot in my side. As the goon reloaded, I threw a ninja star into the barrel causing it to backfire. I made a hasty retreat, as I limped back into the shadows.

I made it back to the manor and I stumbled into the study room, where a large portrait of my parents stood gazing down at me, as I lay against the wall bleeding out from injuries.

"I'm sorry" I took my head in my hands not able to face my parents' portrait, "I thought I could do it. I thought I could protect this city. I wanted to help the people of Gotham not live in fear. I spent all those years training to be the best and I was taken down by some common thugs."

I looked up, locking eyes with my father, his portrait staring back at me with cold, lifeless eyes. Just like the lifeless eyes he had that night in the alley.

"I'm so injured, I could just let go and join you. Everything I spent my life on is useless. I wanted to honor you and protect this city you loved. But maybe it was just a foolish boy's dream, one that will die tonight."

I looked over to a button that activated the intercom service in the house, "I can push this button, Father, and Alfred will come running and he will fix me up. But if I don't Alfred won't find me till the blood loss has taken me."

I looked back at his portrait, pleading in my voice "Please, Father. Telling what I should do. Give me a sign that I am on the right track."

At that exact moment, a bat came crashing through the window of the study. It perched on the mantle below my parents' portrait and stared at me with black beady eyes.

"Yes, Father", I said locking eyes with the bat, "I will become a bat and strike my fear of them into criminal's hearts." I reached for the intercom button and pressed the buzzing

sound ringing through the manor. That was the last sound I heard before, everything went black.

Chapter Five

I awoke in bed, bandaged and tucked in. Next to me was a bell and a note that said, “Ring when you are awake.” I took the bell, rang it and soon after Alfred walked in with a tray of tea and cucumber sandwiches.

“Alfred, what...” I was still a little unsure of how I got here, my last memory was me laying on the floor in the study.

“Excuse me, sir. It is my turn to speak.” Alfred said with a level of curtness I had never heard before. “First off, do you know how hard it is to get blood stains out centuries old hardwood floors.”

I opened my mouth to speak but he wasn’t done.

“Master Bruce”, he continued, “you are a grown man. So, I trusted in your ability to make good judgement calls. But instead, I find you in the study, unconscious, your finger holding down the buzzer.”

He checks one of my bandages and then continues, “You had gunshot wounds, broken bones, broken glass on the floor, and to top it off a bat was perched on your unconscious body.” A twinge of pain shot through me as he touched my wounds, cleaning them before reapplying a bandage.

“Your lucky that you have one of the best field medics in the Queen’s army helping you. Even I was worried, you might not pull through.” He took a prolonged breath and grabbing a cup, he sipped his tea. His mood calming slightly. “I knew that while you were gone, you were learning these skills to become a warrior for Gotham. But you actually haven’t learned anything. You still that young boy who rushes headlong into a fight, the same way you did as a kid.”

Alfred nodded, motioning that I could respond. “Alfred, you know how you can read so many books and become an expert but until you apply it you don’t know anything. That’s

how it was for me when I went out, I had all the knowledge, all the skills. But the actual street is different than a sanitized dojo, it moves and changes in ways I didn't predict."

At that moment, I tried to move out of bed. The pain surged through me again, "How long have I been out, Alfred?"

"3 days, sir." Alfred said, taking another sip of his tea. "I took the liberty of crashing one of your motor bikes for you."

"Alfred, you didn't need to do that. This is my mission, not yours." I told him, a scowl crossing my face.

"It may be your mission, but this is mine." He said motioning to me in bed, all bandaged up. "Mine has been the same since your father started me here, even then your father's biggest concern is that you wouldn't have someone to watch out for you. I promised I would always be there for you and so here I am. I may not agree with you and your mission, but I am here to support you, Master Bruce."

"If that's what you want, Alfred." I told him before taking a breath and explaining what was next. "That bat you found on me, was a sign. I know what you're gonna say, but as I bled out on the floor, I asked the portrait of my father to give me a sign to keep going. That's the exact moment the bat came in through the window. It told me that I need to strike fear into criminal's hearts, that I needed to do more than just attack them straight on."

Alfred stood up, placing his cup on the tray, "Where do we start, Master Bruce?"

"I am going to become a bat. So, to do so we must distance our operations completely from the Wayne name. I know you understand this since you crashed one of the bikes as cover."

"I do, and I am guessing you don't want to continue to use the study for your activities." He said.

"That's correct. Do you have a place in mind?" I asked him.

“There is an old cave system that runs beneath the manor and most of Gotham. I remember Thomas telling me that they were once used by the Miagani tribe and when they were driven out of Gotham. Those caves could potentially work as a base of operations.”

“Is it possible to access these caves from the manor? Like through a secret tunnel or elevator.” I asked him curious about the prospect of the caves.

“Yes, I believe the caves reside just underneath the foundation of the study. We can use sonar mapping to map out the caves and build an entrance to the caves.”

“Lets get to work then.” I said pulling myself out of bed and to my feet.

The project that followed was nothing short of monumental. Our first challenge was gaining access to the caves, which we managed through an old, long-forgotten entrance at the edge of the property. We had only discovered its existence while combing through my grandfather’s journal, he had once attempted to clear the caves of bats but had failed.

Once inside, we meticulously mapped the cave system, identifying its various levels and determining its exact location beneath Wayne Manor. Using this map, we constructed a staircase that connected the first level of the caves directly to the study. The entrance was cleverly concealed behind a grandfather clock, which only moved to reveal the passage when a secret code was entered.

With the entrance established, the next step was bringing power into the caves. We installed a massive generator, providing electricity that illuminated the darkness and made the space usable.

To ensure a secure and functional base, I also set up an air-gapped laptop, a custom Wayne Enterprises design. This allowed me to log and analyze the events of each night while ensuring that no information could be leaked. Additionally, the system granted me access to GCPD’s case files and information network, giving me a crucial edge in understanding the city’s ongoing investigations.

With each step, the foundation of something greater was taking shape. The cave was no longer just an abandoned space, it was becoming a command center.

The next step was to get my gear into working order, it needed to strike fear into the most hardened criminals. It also needed better protection against gunfire and falls. An image started to form in my mind of the perfect suit that would feature everything I needed.

I started by fitting my combat gear over a sleek, form fitting Kevlar bodysuit. This helped to provide protection without minimizing mobility. To increase the fear factor, I spray painted a giant bat across the chest and for added protection, I attached a cape of black Kevlar fabric that could be used to mask my appearance and protect from large volleys of bullets.

Next, I cut the harness from the utility belt and instead created a spot to attach a climbing hook and rope. This was attached to the belt to help assist me in quick getaways, with a recoil option that could pull my weight towards the anchor point.

I also created a cowl to hide and protect my face. I attached ears to it, so that I could that could my listening devices and provide me with immediate updates through GCPD's channels of communication.

After I finished what Alfred had dubbed the 'Batsuit', I put it away into storage and moved to the next project. Proximity alarms and emergency alerts were added to the manor's security to protect the caves secrecy. It was imperative that no one wandered and accidentally came across my base of operations.

I also secured a cave exit away from Wayne Manor that allowed me to leave the caves but not be traced back to the cave. The bike was retrofitted and allowed me to reach high speeds while staying completely silent.

Chapter Six

After weeks of work, I was ready to go back out and give Gotham the justice that it deserved. I suited up into my new gear and got ready to head out for my first night, when Alfred came down carrying a tray of cucumber sandwiches.

“Quite frightening, sir.” Alfred said as he sat down the tray. “But please do be careful, I’m all booked out for the night and won’t have time to bring you back from the brink of death.”

“Funny, Alfred. This time will be different. I won’t let others dictate the rules of engagement; I will be controlling the situation, and when they run, they will be running in fear.” With that said, I jumped on my bike and rode away heading towards Gotham.

I arrived in Gotham with a mission, ready to face whatever the city threw my way. But brute force alone wouldn’t be enough. I needed intel, who was pulling the strings, who controlled what, and most importantly, who inside the GCPD was rotten to the core.

Stashing my bike in a secluded alley, I scaled the nearest fire escape, the cold metal rattling under my grip. From the rooftops, Gotham unfolded beneath me, a sprawling maze of decay, its streets pulsing with crime under the flickering glow of streetlights. I crouched low, my eyes locked on a squad car weaving through the streets below.

Inside sat two cops, Detective Arnold Flass and Officer Jim Gordon.

Flass. His reputation was as filthy as the streets he patrolled. One of Gotham’s most corrupt officers, a man who took payoffs as naturally as he breathed. But Gordon? He was an unknown variable. A recent transfer from Chicago. I needed to know where he stood in this city of shifting alliances.

The car rolled to a stop outside a nondescript brick building, its neon "Bar & Grill" sign flickering weakly. Flass wasted no time—he climbed out, adjusting his belt as he swaggered inside. A payoff, no doubt. Routine corruption, masked under the pretense of duty.

But Gordon didn't move.

From my perch above, I studied him through the windshield. His hands gripped the wheel, knuckles white. He exhaled slowly; a man trapped in a world he didn't belong in. The dim glow of a nearby streetlamp illuminated the tape holding his glasses together, the fresh bruises blooming across his cheekbone.

Signs of a fight. Signs of resistance. Gordon hadn't just witnessed corruption; he had tried to stop it. And by the looks of it, he had paid the price.

This wasn't just another dirty cop. This was a man standing at the edge of a decision, and I could help him decide his next move.

"Officer Gordon", my voice breaking into the comm channel for the car. "What is Flass doing in there?"

Gordon looked around, "Who is this? How did you get this line?"

"I'm a friend. I just want to help clean up Gotham. I know you want that too." I told him.

"Your nothing like me." He spat back speaking to the air, not knowing where to direct his words. "I put my name, my family, my job all on the line to stop these payouts and every time it blows up in my face. You on the other hand can't even face me, man to man. Vigilantism never helps; the law has to be upheld by those that it is their duty. Not those who think they know what's right. Don't contact me again."

I cut off the signal as Detective Flass came back to the car, he held a small bag and had a huge grin on his face. I tried to work with Gordon, but it was time to take this into my own hands.

As soon as the cops got back in the car, I struck. A flick of my wrist sent two shuriken slicing through the night, shattering the streetlights with precision. The glow of the city flickered out, plunging the alley into darkness.

Silence. Then, panic.

The men outside tensed, shifting uneasily, their hands twitching toward their weapons. They knew something was wrong. They could feel it. But they had no idea where it was coming from.

Until it was too late. I dropped from the shadows, landing in their midst like a specter of the night. They barely had time to gasp before I was on them. A strike to the throat silenced one before he could shout. A sharp kick sent another sprawling into the pavement. They went down in seconds.

Next, I shattered the door off its hinges with a single powerful kick, the wood splintering under the force. Before the men inside could react, I lobbed a smoke grenade into the room.

Fsssshhhhh.

The thick, suffocating fog consumed the air, swallowing everything in a veil of black and gray. Coughing erupted from the men inside. Shadows shifted wildly as they staggered through the smoke, blind, desperate.

Perfect.

The first one tried to feel his way toward the exit, wrong move.

I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and yanked him off his feet. His breath hitched, and for the first time, he felt it, fear.

I lifted him just enough so his toes barely scraped the ground, forcing his body to understand I was in control.

“Why was Detective Flass here?” My voice was low, guttural—designed to tear into the deepest parts of his mind.

The man stammered, struggling for words. “I... I don’t know.”

Not good enough. With a sharp twist, I hurled him into a nearby table. The wood cracked under his weight as he crashed against it, gasping for air, scrambling to push himself up.

I was already on him. Grabbing him again, I slammed him against the nearest wall, his head snapping back against the plaster.

“I saw him,” I said, my voice like gravel. “He walked in empty-handed. He walked out with a bag. By the weight and the way he carried it, that bag was full of money.” I leaned in close, letting him feel the heat of my breath against his ear.

“Tell me why.”

His breathing was ragged, his pupils blown wide with terror. “I—I gave him the money! But I wasn’t told what it was for!” He swallowed hard, his entire body trembling against my grip.

“I was just hired to pass it off—to tell him to stay off the docks tonight. That’s it! I swear! That’s all I know!”

He was lying about a lot of things. But not this.

I held his gaze, letting the silence stretch. Letting him drown in the sheer weight of the moment.

“I believe you.” His shoulders sagged with relief.

Then I knocked him unconscious.

The second his body hit the ground; the door burst open but I was already gone.

Gordon and Flass stormed in, their guns drawn.

Flass barely masked his shock at the scene before him—the wrecked furniture, the unconscious bodies, the lingering haze of smoke curling through the air.

But Gordon? Gordon’s eyes told a different story. For the first time, he saw the truth. Not just about me. But about his partner.

I soared over Gotham City, the wind tearing at my cape as the city stretched beneath me—its streets pulsing with crime, its skyline jagged like the broken teeth of a beast. The docks loomed ahead, shrouded in fog, their towering stacks of shipping containers forming a labyrinth of steel and shadow.

The docks were Gotham's underbelly, a breeding ground for corruption where shipments under the cover of darkness always meant something bad. Drugs, weapons, bodies—whatever was moving tonight, it was big.

I landed silently atop one of the containers, blending into the night as I pulled out my binoculars.

Below, Luca Falcone paced restlessly, his eyes darting around the dockyard like a rat expecting a trap. The weight of this deal was pressing on him—if it went wrong, he knew he'd have to answer to Carmine *The Roman* Falcone himself.

Ten armed guards patrolled the perimeter, their fingers twitching over their triggers, scanning for anything out of place. Another five stood watch over the shipment, their postures rigid. And then there were the four men unloading the cargo, each armed with a small handgun—likely there to work first and shoot second.

Twenty men in total.

I could almost hear Alfred's voice in the back of my mind. *Assess the situation before attacking Master Wayne. You can't take on twenty men at once.*

I took a second to assess then I enacted my plan. I moved fast. A flick of my wrist sent a shuriken slicing through the air. It struck the main floodlight, plunging the docks into instant darkness. Shouts of confusion erupted below as I descended onto them.

The first two guards didn't even have time to scream. One felt the snap of my arm against his throat, his world going black as he hit the pavement. The other only saw a blur before my fist met his temple.

The third was quicker. He swung around the corner, his gun already raised, his finger tightening on the trigger.

Too slow.

I snapped my cape up in front of me, the fabric absorbing the impact as bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the reinforced Kevlar weave. The shooter hesitated, his mind struggling to comprehend why his bullets weren't tearing me apart.

I took a step towards him.

Another shot. Another bounce.

I took another step.

His breath hitched. His hands trembled and then I vanished.

Before he could process what had happened, I was behind him, my fist slamming into the side of his head. He crumpled.

The rest fell just as easily. One by one, they ventured into the shadows, drawn by whispers, by noises, by the eerie feeling that something was lurking just beyond their vision. And one by one, they never returned.

Bodies hit the ground in silence. The docks became eerily still.

Only Luca remained. His eyes darted wildly, the realization creeping into his mind—he was alone.

Then, his instincts kicked in. He turned and ran. He was a coward.

I reached for my belt, pulling a bolo free. With a practiced flick, it soared through the air, wrapping tightly around his legs.

He hit the pavement hard, his breath escaping in a sharp wheeze. He struggled, clawing at the ground, desperate to crawl away. But I was already there. Towering over him. A shadow of judgment. His fate was already sealed.

I pressed my boot down on his fingers, grinding them against the cold steel of the dock.

Bones strained under the pressure, and Luca Falcone howled in agony.

"Where is Carmine Falcone?" My voice was low, measured, dangerous. "What part does he play in Gotham's underworld? Tell me!"

“Ahh!” he choked out, his breath ragged. “My hand—!”

I lifted my foot, only to yank him up by the collar of his shirt, slamming him back against a shipping container. His body rattled against the metal, and I could feel the tremors running through him.

“I... I don’t know, man!” he stammered, his words tumbling over each other. “Carmine never tells me what he has planned! All I know is he’s got people, cops, judges, half the city in his pocket! He wants to be the boss of Gotham. This shipment, it was supposed to be for the Maronis, but Carmine took it. It’s how he shows his power.”

I exhaled through my nose. “I already know that.”

I grabbed him by the front of his coat and threw him against the container. He hit hard, gasping as he crumpled to his knees. “Tell me something worth knowing.”

His hands shot up in surrender, his breath coming in quick, panicked gasps. “Okay, okay!” His eyes darted around, searching for an escape that wasn’t there.

“Carmine’s holding a gala. One of those big, high-society events all for ‘philanthropy.’ Every important person in Gotham will be there.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why?”

Luca swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Sweat slicked his face despite the cool night air.

“While the socialites are getting drunk downstairs... Carmine will be meeting with the heads of the families upstairs. He’ll act like he’s not taking their territory, give them gifts, make them feel important. It’s all a setup. He’ll let them drop their guard, and then when the time is right, he’ll move in.”

His breathing was ragged, his body trembling under the weight of the truth he had just spilled. “That’s how crime works in Gotham,” he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. “Everyone thinks they’re in control, until they’re not.”

I stared at him for a long moment. His lips trembled. His pulse raced. He was terrified.

"Please, man," he whispered. "Just don't hurt me."

I pulled out a pair of cuffs and snapped them around his wrists, securing them to the cold steel of a nearby pole.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said as I stepped back into the shadows. "The police will take care of you. And when they do you are going to tell them everything."

Luca looked at me with a look of fear, he slowly nodded his head and then I was gone.

Jim Gordon

We arrived on the scene to see a shipping container full of premium cut cocaine and men unconscious on the ground. I could tell a lot of the officials on the docks had been paid off for tonight to happen. I could tell just by looking at my partner's face.

"Hey, Gordy. What do you think happened here?" His face trying to mask the uneasiness he felt.

I heard a voice shouting out in the distance, "Help me man, you gotta get the bat away from me." We walked over and found Luca Falcone cuffed to a pole, ranting about some kind of bat man swooping down and busting this whole operation. He said it was a nightmare come to life, so dark and terrifying. Then, he confessed everything to me, every single detail of the operation they were running.

"Well, its gonna be a long night." I say to Flask as I take the handcuffs off Luca and then put them back on once he is off the pole.

We gathered the rest of the unconscious men and took them all back to the station for booking. I could tell that Flass was not happy with all these arrests, that it jeopardized his standing with the family. It made me proud to make Flass sweat like that, knowing he might get fewer payouts now.

The next morning, I knew something was wrong the second I walked into the precinct. Flass was grinning. That same arrogant, smug expression he always wore when he thought he had won.

“How’d you sleep, Gordy?” he sneered, stretching lazily. “I slept like a baby.”

My stomach twisted. My eyes darted toward the lockup, empty. Empty. Every single one of the twenty men we had arrested last night... gone.

I turned on Flass, my voice sharp and demanding. “Where are the Falcons from last night?”

He feigned surprise, widening his eyes. “Oh? You didn’t hear?” He chuckled, shaking his head. “That big bust we made? Total bogus. Poor old Luca was off his rocker, apparently. His witness statement? Inadmissible.” Flass shrugged, that infuriating smirk still plastered on his face. “Had to let ’em all go.”

My pulse pounded in my ears. I took a step closer, my hands curling into fists. “Are you kidding me?” My voice rose. “We caught them next to a shipping container stuffed with cocaine! We got them red-handed!”

Flass barely suppressed a laugh, straightening his tie. “Actually,” he said, his voice dripping with condescension, “since they were all unconscious, and Luca wasn’t near the shipment—” he gestured with air quotes, “just locked up. Well, it’s all circumstantial, isn’t it? Wrong place, wrong time.”

I clenched my jaw so tightly it ached. “So, you’re telling me,” I growled, my fingers brushing against my mustache as I fought to keep my anger in check, “that twenty men just happened to be strolling past a massive cocaine shipment—fully armed—and not one of them is connected to it?”

Flass spread his hands in faux innocence. “Hey, don’t get mad at me, Gordon. That’s just what they told me when I came in. I was just as concerned as you.” He said but his smirk deepened.

Something inside me snapped. My fists trembled. The first major drug bust against a crime family in years, and it was all swept away like nothing. A technicality

Flass started to say something else, lifting his hand to pat me on the back. Instead, I punched him in the face.

The satisfying crack of my knuckles against his jaw echoed through the room. Flass staggered, his grin vanishing, replaced by the shock of a man who had never expected consequences.

I stood over him, my breath heavy, my knuckles stinging, and for the first time since I walked into this cursed city. I didn't regret a damn thing.

Chapter Seven

Bruce

“Alfred, I need to get an invite to this party. I have to be there.” I tell Alfred as I put away the bat suit. “Once I am in, I can talk up the crowds and learn what has been happening in Gotham. Also, I will be in place for when Carmine leaves for his dinner party.”

“Yes, I believe you were invited alongside, Mr. Fox.” Alfred told me, handing an invitation to me.

“Ah, Mr. Lucius Fox. He has been running the company in my absence, correct.”

“Yes, the company has never been better.”

“But is he a good man Alfred?” I asked him, placing the invitation on the table.

“Lucius Fox is one of the finest men, you will ever meet. Your father and I included.”

“That’s high praise coming from you, Alfred.”

“Yes, and it is well earned. He and your father were the best of friends growing up and I was able to spend time with him as he helped your father balance his responsibilities as a father, a doctor, and the owner of a large company.” Alfred explained to me.

“I’ll be sure to talk to him. See if there is anything that I can do for Mr. Fox. I would like to assist him in any way.”

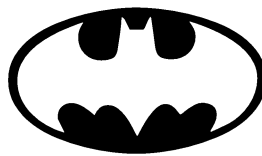
“Careful sir, I don’t believe helping the family mission falls into your mission statement.” He said as he motioned to the cave.

“You’re funny, Alfred. The Wayne name is something that I have neglected but I realize I can do good with my parent’s money, and it can be a way to distance myself from all of this.” I said also motioning at the cave. “I can become this socialite version of myself that will ask as a mask, and besides some of the richest people in the world are also the most corrupt, and they love to talk in the comfort of another rich person.”

“So billionaire by day and vigilante by night,” Alfred said nodding. “Well then, I must be off. I doubt your suits from when you were a child will still fit, so you need a new suit.”

Alfred and I both glanced at the batsuit, “A suit with a tie.”

Alfred went back upstairs, and I checked on the status of the prisoners, To my surprise, they had been set free. The level of corruption continued to surprise me, I needed to be more proactive, and the first step was this party in a few nights.



The party at the Falcone home was lavish beyond measure, just as I knew it would be. So, to match the energy and sell my socialite life, I paid for two models to accompany me to the party. I drove up in one of my Ferrari's and handed the keys to the valet with a practiced arrogance.

“Take it for a spin.” I told him, patting him on the back as I led the girls inside.

We walked into the party, and I grabbed drinks for the girls making my way through the crowd. All of Gotham's elite were here and they all looked like they couldn't care less about the decrepit state of Gotham outside these walls. I made my way to the girls and introduced them to some people in the crowd, giving me more time to snoop around.

I walked up to the balcony of the ballroom, drink in hand and scoped out the scene. Two armed gunmen guarded the door that led into a room at the top of the stairs. I spotted Carmine still on the floor meeting and greeting people, so I knew the meeting hadn't started yet.

A man followed close behind Carmine and from I had heard this man was Oswald Cobblepot. Oz, as he was called, had apparently been raised in wealth until his parents lost all of their wealth in some shady dealings. Oz was thrown into poverty, a life he did not have a taste for and he had attached himself to the most powerful people around. This is what led him to worm himself into the Falcone family. He had secured a place of power as

one of Carmine's right-hand men, a place that brought him great wealth but also gained him the nickname of '*The Penguin*'. A name he had earned because he frequently wore tuxedos that made him look like an emperor penguin.

Also on the floor was Mr. Fox, he seemed not to be enjoying himself and I took that as a good sign. He was being polite and cordial but I could tell by looking at his face that he would rather be somewhere else. I came down from the balcony and introduced myself to him.

"Mr. Fox? Bruce Wayne. I think you are running my company for me." I said extending my hand to him.

He took it giving a firm shake, "Ah yes, Mr. Wayne, I did not believe you were back in Gotham. Are you going to be planning the parties frequently?"

"As long as I can still find a hot date, then most likely Mr. Fox. I want to enjoy this life that I have been given." I told him, pretending to sip my martini.

Mr. Fox leaned in close putting his hand on my shoulder, "Mr. Wayne, you may be fooling everyone else, and expertly I might add. But you remind me of your father and how he used to act when he was younger. He never liked these parties, but he put on a face because it benefited him and his practice that helped those less fortunate. I don't know your reasons, but your secret is safe with me."

My face dropped the pretended arrogance, "Alfred told me that you knew my father well, how come I have never met you till now though?"

Lucius nodded his head, like he knew this question was a long time coming. "I was never good at the social scene and for a long time, I just ran the R&D Department at Wayne Enterprises. All of the projects, inventions, and gizmos that could be thought of it was my job to create prototypes for approval. Most never got approved but I didn't mind, I loved taking an idea and actually turning it into an actual product."

"And you didn't spend time with my father at this time?" I asked.

“I never came by the manor if that is what you are wondering but Thomas would come visit me all the time up until his death. At that time, Wayne Enterprises was passed to you and in Thomas’ will, it named me as your proxy. I was to run Wayne Enterprises until you were old enough, a huge promotion but one that I succeeded at. But I knew that you would turn 18 and I would be back to R&D. To my surprise you disappeared for ten years and were presumed dead. So, I just kept on running Wayne Enterprises as it was the only connection I had left with my friend.”

“Well, I’m not interested in the family business, but you have made my parents proud, I know. I’ll have Alfred draw up the necessary documents to keep you in charge, I will retain my shares, but I am comfortable with you running the day-to-day activities.” I said but then I noticed Carmine head up the stairs, the guards moving aside to let him into the room. “If you excuse Mr. Fox, I think I have neglected my dates.”

I stepped away from Mr. Fox and sent a message to Alfred. When I walked the girls out to my car, Alfred was there to take them home. As the girls climbed into the back seat, Alfred popped the trunk for me. Inside lay the Batsuit, it was time to make a scene.

Alfred pulled away the car and I slipped away into the shadows to become a thing of fear. Once I was suited up, I climbed to the second floor and perched outside on a windowsill. I listened in as people filed into the room being checked by the guards for weapons before entering. As people shuffled in I realized there were more people here than Luca knew was coming. Not only were the family heads here, but also the police commissioner, a judge, and Gotham’s mayor. All eating together as friends.

As they gathered, the commissioner’s phone rang and he stepped away to answer it, “This is Loeb.” His face shifted into one of annoyance. “Gordon, how many times do I have to tell you! There was no way we could have held onto his men. Stop asking and just accept how Gotham is.” He hung up the phone as Carmine walked up to him.

“This Gordon character. I have heard about him and the trouble he has been causing, I know a few of your people gave him a beating. But maybe some of my men need to get involved.”

Commissioner Loeb visibly gulped, “No, sir. We have sent some pretty clear messages. He knows to keep his head down or things will get ugly quick. My boy, Detective Flass, is there to make sure of it.”

Sal Maroni spoke up from the table overhearing the conversation, “I would be careful with how directly you act against Gordon. A young up and comer in the DA’s office named Harvey Dent is getting cops thrown in prison for corruption. It seems to be his goal; this man is untouchable. Nothing works on him, he’s been touted as Gotham’s white knight, he’s untouchable.”

Carmine walked back to the table, now addressing everyone, “No, no one is untouchable. As we sadly found out a few nights ago at the docks.” He motioned to Sal Maroni, “Our joint operation to foster unity between the families was ruined. This was supposed to be an easy operation, we both paid good money to you and your guys, Commissioner to stay away from the docks.”

That realization hit me; Luca was wrong. Falcone wasn’t trying to steal territory; he was trying to unify crime and lead it as the orchestrator. I couldn’t think on it too long as Commissioner Loeb’s voice cut through my thoughts.

“It wasn’t one of us,” he said attempting to deflect blame for the botched job, “There were no units stationed anywhere near there. If Luca is to be believed, it was some kind of bat vigilante.”

“Commissioner, please.” Falcone said, gripping the back of his chair. “The reason we got Luca out is also because its true. He’s loony. You don’t actually think there is a man sized bat walking around stopping crimes do you?”

The commissioner looked up, ready to die on this hill, “Everything we have from that night points to this bat like man. The witnesses of 20 men all say the same thing, that he swooped in from the shadows.”

Carmine scoffed, “Lies. Lies to protect people’s hides like your own commissioner. Lies to save you from the punishment that comes for failing us.”

I had heard all I needed to hear, it was time to move in. I shut down the power by snipping the wires that ran along the house, at the same time throwing a smoke bomb through the window. A people inside coughed, I placed small explosives on the outside of the wall, blowing a section wide enough for me to step inside. The explosion had knocked everyone to the ground, and they stared up in shock as I entered.

I was cast in shadow, as an open brazier cast the only light in the darkened room. I draped my cape in front of me completely making me a black silhouette speaking from the shadows.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you have eaten well. You have feasted on the very heart of Gotham; you have tasted its wealth and its spirit. Your feast is nearly over. From this moment on,” I placed a lid on the brazier extinguishing the flame sending the room into complete darkness. “None of you are safe.” With that, I left them to drown in their own fear.

I launched myself out the window, gliding into the cold Gotham night as shouts of alarm erupted below. Chaos spread through the gala—glass shattered, chairs overturned, and terrified guests screamed as they scrambled for safety.

Upstairs, Carmine’s voice cut through the panic, barking orders to his men. Then, gunfire rained from upstairs. Bullets tore through the air, trailing behind me as I soared over the estate. But it didn’t matter. They couldn’t hit what they couldn’t understand.

To them, I wasn’t a man. I was a shadow. A specter. A warning.

As I vanished into the night, I knew the message had been delivered. They would talk about this night. They would remember what they saw, what they felt, the helplessness, the terror and the fear would stay with them.

Because Gotham now feared the Bat, and this was only the beginning.