A Match

by vivilove

Summary

Jon Snow and Sansa Stark are both single parents who are far too busy raising their seven-year-old daughters and jaded by past experiences to seek romance despite the efforts of their friends and family. But when their girls wind up on the same youth soccer team with Jon as the coach, they just might find a match.

Notes

Having spent more than a few Saturdays watching the kiddos play soccer (or football if you live anywhere in the world besides the US...lol), I decided to try some slightly sports-themed Jonsa.
Thank you so much, Dena1984, for this awesome mood board!!

“It’s official. I like football,” Margaery called from the hallway as she entered her sister-in-law’s two-bedroom condominium.

“You’ve always liked football,” Sansa responded from the kitchen. “Or did we really just go to all my brother’s games in high school for other reasons?”
“Soccer, I mean. I like soccer now. Is Minisa here?”

Sansa peeped out to the hall and saw the lovely brunette hanging up her jacket by the door. “I’m pretty sure they’ve been calling it soccer here for a year or two now, Mrs. Stark. And, no, she’s not here. She’s having a sleepover with Arya tonight.”

“Then it’s okay for me to tell you why I like soccer now, or football?” she asked with obvious glee.

“Do tell,” Sansa said with a smirk.

“Cause the guy that helped me get Mina registered was hot as fuck, that’s why!” she squealed.

“Excuse me?!” Robb said exiting the kitchen to stand next to his sister. “Who exactly is hot as fuck besides your husband, my dear wife?”

“I…uh…shit,” Marg muttered as Sansa broke into laughter. It never took Marg long to recover though. “No one else is as hot as you, lover.” She moved into Robb’s arms and Sansa turned her head slightly away as they kissed. “And I was only noticing for Sansa’s sake.”

“Would you please stop that?” Sansa said, only partly annoyed. “You two have got to stop trying to fix me up. Mom and Arya are bad enough. Bran even tried to ‘introduce’ me to his physics professor the other day. Honestly…”

“Well, this guy was hot! Not your normal type really but…”

“That might be a good thing,” Robb interjected.

“Shut up,” Sansa said affectionately as they moved back into the kitchen and started setting the table.

“Anyway, besides being handsome and hot as fuck,” she said in a stage whisper, “he was sweet and courteous.”

“Courteous? Well, that sounds better than that asshole, Joffrey,” Robb commented.

Marg rolled her eyes and continued, “Dark hair and eyes, well-built and he kind of had an underlying…I don’t know…like a brooding kind of thing. And his voice…God, Sansa…it was low and husky and enough to make any hot-blooded woman wet before he even got near your…”

“Oh my, God! Woman! Stop talking to my sister like this…in front of me at least!”

“Marg, I just want Mina to get to play youth soccer this spring. I’m not interested in finding anyone right now.”

“Honey, it’s been months since you last had a date and nearly four years since you and Harry split for good.”

“Well, Mina’s been through a lot and she’s only seven. There’s time enough for me to find someone else…if I ever want to. And, based on my batting average to astound you with another sport’s term, it may be best if I go ahead and start collecting cats to keep me company for later when Mina’s grown.”

“Sansa, you don’t have to marry anyone but aren’t you lonely? Don’t you want some action at least? How long’s it been since you had a really good orgasm? With something that doesn’t require batteries?”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, Marg, but my battery-operated friend does a pretty good job so I’m
not complaining.”

“Please stop talking now,” Robb moaned pitifully as he gave a full body shudder. Sansa swatted her brother’s shoulder and decided to change the subject. “Thanks for going tonight, Marg. Harry promised he’d sign her up and pay for the registration but of course he bailed at the last minute and I didn’t know how long Littleprick was going to make me stay over.”

“You need another job, Sans,” her brother said…not for the first time.

“It’s fine, sweetie. Robb and I will look forward to seeing her play.” Just as they started to sit down though, Marg said, “We just both want you to be happy,” with that look, that look that made it hard to breathe sometimes.

“I am happy,” Sansa said quietly. “I’ll be right back,” she said as she bolted to go check some imaginary issue in the laundry room.

Friday nights, when Robb and Marg would come over and eat with her and Mina or they would go eat with them, were usually something she looked forward to all week. But as she heard them whispering together about ‘poor Sansa’, she clutched her chest and shook her head at her foolish tears and wished they’d just shut up.

Eight years ago, Sansa Stark had been a freshman in college. She was away from home for the first time in her life and she’d met handsome, charming Harry Hardyng at a sorority mixer that September. He’d said all the right things and Sansa, being unexperienced and a bit overwhelmed by the adjustment school had been, had started sleeping with him soon after.

By Halloween, she was knocked up. She blamed her own foolishness. She’d never gotten on the pill because Harry had said they could use condoms. But then Harry had gotten lazy about the condoms. He’d said he’d just pull out. Apparently, he’d not been pulling out soon enough every time.

She’d went home for Thanksgiving Break and tearfully confessed that she was pregnant to her mother and father. They’d been disappointed by the news but completely supportive when she told them she wanted to keep the baby. She dropped out after that semester and moved back home. Harry had said he’d help out and be there for her but then he’d avoided her during most of her pregnancy claiming school work. Before she’d delivered a couple of months later though, he’d reappeared with flowers and apologies.

Sansa had taken him back and they’d moved in together. Her father and mother had tried to talk her out of it but she’d not listened. She’d wanted to believe him and that they could have it all despite the early start on a family. She’d moved back close to school and they’d found a little apartment. They had about eight months of playing house and on-the-job training as parents before Harry decided he missed being a carefree college kid and checked out again. Sansa moved back home with her daughter but then he’d returned all teary-eyed a few months later and said he was finally ready to commit to them both. That had lasted until their daughter was three and by then Sansa was done with Harry’s promises once and for all. She had long since decided that her sole focus would be their daughter, Minisa.

Harry liked being a dad…at least he liked the fun parts of being a dad. He liked to pop in and out of their lives. He liked to be Daddy when it suited him. And Sansa couldn’t bring herself to try and fully block him from seeing Mina. She adored her father. How could she not? He was the fun guy that would take her out for trips to the zoo or the arcade and buy her stuffed puppy dogs and bring her flowers and call her princess. And he was never around to make her clean her room, enforce
bedtime, refuse candy or get on her about schoolwork.

And Sansa was ashamed that she had another reason she couldn’t exactly shut him out. As long as Harry was involved, the child support came through every month which was not always as certain when he’d disappear for a month or two. And, as she hadn’t finished college yet and had a low-paying secretarial job, his financial support was needed. But he was not a reliable guy to say the least. Mina was only a facet of Harry’s life that he enjoyed indulging in when it suited him. Mina was Sansa’s life…no other facets compared to her.

She’d dated a few guys…two jerks and a stalker-in-the-making. And, her boss was forever toeing that invisible line between a ‘concerned and caring’ employer to an ‘inappropriate and creepy’ guy. So, another man was just not something Sansa imagined that she was really in the market for any time soon.

Sansa lay in bed that night thinking of her family’s well-intended attempts to fix her up. She didn’t want to spend the rest of her life alone but for now she had Mina…and a vibrator. She was happy…or at least content. I guess that’s the word.

The phone rang around 11:30PM and Sansa had just started snoozing. “Hello?”

“Hey.”

“Arya…what’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Sansa. We had a lot of fun tonight but now…she misses you and wants to come home. I tried…”

“No! It’s perfectly alright. I hope she didn’t hurt your feelings.”

“No, I understand. I just hope I’m not…you know…calling at a bad time.”

“I promise you’re not interrupting anything here. Want me to drive over?”

“No, I’ll drive her to you.”

“Alright. Thanks, Arya.”

Sansa threw back the covers and rose to wash off her face. She wanted to be somewhat awake when her baby got home. I’ll fix her some cocoa and we can snuggle up in my bed. What else could I need in my life?

“Hey, baby,” Jon said as he gently nudged the little girl asleep on the couch.

“Daddy,” she sighed as she opened her blue-grey eyes and looked up at him with a sleepy little grin.

“Sorry, Jon,” Rhae said coming in from the kitchen. “She fell asleep watching ‘Wild Kratts’ and I hadn’t moved her. She wanted to see you anyway.”
“It’s fine,” Jon answered lifting his little girl up to carry her to bed. “Did you have a good night with Aunt Rhae?”

“Yes, but I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, baby.”

“Did you sign me up?” she asked as they reached her bedroom.

“I did.”

“Are you going to be my coach?”

“I am.”

She gave a happy and contented smile and wrapped her skinny arms around his neck and Jon felt his heart fill with that joy it always felt when Lyarra was happy. He kissed her cheek and tucked her into bed.

He came back in after Lyarra was asleep and sat down next to his half-sister. They shared a father but not a last name. They hadn’t discovered each other until they were teenagers but they were close now.

“Thanks for watching her, Rhae. Registration ran late.”

“No problem. Did you at least go have a beer with Theon?” she asked when he had kicked his shoes off and started in on the stir-fry she’d heated up for him.

“No, I was trying to make sure they had everything handled. Last night of registration so of course it was packed.”

“Jon…” Rhae whined. “You never go out or do anything.”

“I went out with Theon not long ago.”

“Two months ago.”

“He texted me. I don’t think he missed me.”

Jon handed his phone to Rhae and she snorted when she saw a selfie Theon had sent Jon of himself with an extremely buxom brunette with a text that said: Swears she can suck a golf ball through a garden house. Let's hope I find out!

“Lucky Theon,” she laughed.

“Yeah…well, it’s probably more like Wishful Thinking Theon.”

“When’s the last time you had a date?” Rhae asked next and Jon tried not to roll his eyes. He failed. “Don’t roll your eyes at me, little bro.”

“Rhae…”

“When’s the last time you had a girl go down on you like Lucky Theon?”

“Oh, God…Rhae! Please stop talking,” Jon said with a shudder. “Going down and Theon are two things I don’t like hearing in the same sentence…especially from you!”
“I’m serious! You’re smart and you make decent money and…”

“That makes me sound boring as fuck, Rhae. It’s okay. I am boring as fuck.”

“You are not! You’re wonderful, sweet and handsome and you’re a great dad and…”

“Okay, okay…enough! You’re making me blush. Don’t you need to get home?”

“Well then,” she said with an annoyed sniff. “I guess I won’t let the door hit me in the ass on the way out.” She got up but then turned back to him. “Jon…just don’t close yourself off from happiness. If you don’t want to go seeking someone, that’s fine but don’t…don’t be this mopey you that hides away from any chance at romance. If you keep rolling your eyes at me, they’re going to get stuck that way.” He started to grumble at her but she continued, “If you meet someone special, don’t do that thing where you ignore her and push her away before you even learn her last name just cause you’re afraid of getting hurt.” Jon smiled and hugged his sister as she gathered up the rest of her things and headed to the door. “Did I make a dent at all?” she asked.

“No.”

“But I get to keep trying, right?”

“Always.”

After Rhae was gone, he went to the fridge and grabbed a beer and sat down to watch a little TV. His phone dinged and he checked his message.

**Theon:** Where the fuck are you, man? My friend has a friend. Come on out and get some!

**Jon:** Rhae had to go so I had to get home to Lyarra. Maybe next time.

**Theon:** It might fall off if you never use it.

**Jon:** Fuck off.

**Theon:** Your loss, man.

“I don’t doubt it,” Jon said to himself with a half-hearted grin as he decided to head to bed.

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Jon Snow was a 29-year-old assistant principal at his seven-year-old daughter’s elementary school. He also volunteered at the youth soccer region where his daughter, Lyarra, played. The single female teachers and mom volunteers had taken to Jon immediately when he’d started at the school two years ago. They liked to shower attention on the attractive and unmarried assistant principal at the school…whether they were wearing wedding rings or not. But, he was not interested in getting involved with any of his co-workers or the moms from school, especially not the married ones. Thus, the rumor had started around the school not long after he’d shot down one too many married ladies (as politely as he could) that he was obviously gay. He didn’t really care what they said about him though. If they wanted to think that, let them. At least most of them had stopped hitting on him.

He dressed for bed and turned out the light to lay down. He briefly wondered how Theon was faring and gave a groan. It wasn’t that he didn’t want a woman. It wasn’t that he didn’t want a wife if he could find the right woman. He just couldn’t see how any of that was in the cards for him anytime soon. He had Lyarra and he was…content. *I guess that’d be the word.*
Nearly eight years earlier, he’d still been in school when his girlfriend, Val, had broken up with him unexpectedly. They’d been together for nearly two years but she’d decided to study abroad for a semester and said she thought it would be best if they took a break. When he asked how long of a break she wanted, she’d ended up saying she really didn’t know but she wanted to be free to date other people. He’d been heartbroken. He had loved Val and thought she felt the same. Maybe she did in her way but obviously not enough to try and maintain a long-distance relationship for the six months she’d be gone.

Two months later, he’d went to a party and ran into Ygritte, a redhead from school that had been in one of his classes the previous year. He was lonely and more than a little intoxicated and ended up going home with her. They had started dating. Ygritte wanted to pursue a relationship with him even though he wasn’t sure that was what he wanted. But he felt like a dick for admitting to himself that he’d just seen it as a one off at the time.

So, four months later, he was still dating Ygritte and trying to make things work when Val had called him and informed him that she was pregnant with his child. She immediately informed him that she’d moved on and didn’t expect him back in her life. She also said she didn’t want anything from him but just wanted him to know that he would be a father. If Val thought this bombshell would have little impact on Jon though, she was highly mistaken.

Jon’s own mother had gotten knocked up as a teenager by a married man, him and Rhae’s father. And while Rhaegar Targaryen had managed to make amends to his wife, Elia, and be a father to Rhae, he’d had little to do with Jon or his mom. He’d sent his child support checks like clockwork and kept his distance. Jon didn’t want to be anything like that. He wanted to be as involved in his child’s life as much as Val would allow.

When Jon told Ygritte he was going to be a father in a few months by his previous girlfriend, she’d shrugged and said okay. But when he told her he wanted to be a part of his child’s life even though things were finished between him and Val, she wasn’t so understanding. He’d attended child birth classes and prenatal appointments with Val while juggling his course load and trying to keep Ygritte happy. He failed at that. He knew it wouldn’t be the last time he failed at something. Things between him and Ygritte ended in an ugly shouting match where the cops ended up getting called. No one went to jail at least and Jon took his black-eye as a lesson learned and decided he was well rid of her.

Val had been slow to accept his help and hesitant to let him be involved at first. He didn’t blame her really. She’d decided to end things with him and thought they were through with each other. Now, she was going to have a life-long reminder of their relationship.

Once Lyarra was born, Val realized how difficult of an adjustment parenthood was and she became more open to his help. There wasn’t any romance between them anymore. They were just two people who shared a beautiful little daughter and were trying to give her all that they could.

And then, everything had changed the night Val had died. She’d been visiting her father and taken Lyarra with her. It was late when she was driving back and the roads were slick. She’d run off the road and struck a tree. She’d been killed instantly Jon was told when he’d rushed sixty miles north in the dead of night. His five-month-old daughter had been asleep in her car seat when it happened and was not even injured...a miracle for which he would always be grateful.

“Dad?” the little voice whispered, stirring Jon from his unhappy memories.

“Yeah, baby?”
“You awake?”

“Yes.” He knew what this was. She’d had a nightmare. But Lyarra was a very independent seven-year-old and didn’t like coming to him for nightmares anymore. He’d have to coax it out of her.

“You need me?”

“Yeah. I woke up and had trouble going back to sleep.”

“That happens. You wanna come lay with me for a bit?” She didn’t answer. She simply sprang into his bed as though she’d just been waiting for him to give the word. I suppose she was. He pulled her up close and smelled her clean, sweet hair. “What was it?” he asked. “The dragon one?”

“No…that was a baby thing. Dragons don’t frighten me anymore.”

“They frighten me,” he chuckled. “Was it the zombie one?” He felt her give a slight shudder but she shook her head. “What then?”

“I dreamed you died.”

Jon hugged her tighter and whispered, “That was just a dream. I’m here.”

He waited to see if she’d say anything else. She didn’t but her small hand was playing with his soft t-shirt, slowly twisting the fabric through her fingers as her breathing became slower and more steady. She was soon snoring softly but Jon would not find sleep easily this night he knew. Her fear of him dying had reared up from time to time and then would simmer down again. Guess it’s back.

It made him uneasy because there are some promises a person might wish to keep with all their heart even though they concerned matters that are not entirely in their hands. Not that he planned on dying anytime soon but Lyarra needed him and he wanted to always be there for her. She was already growing up without a mother. He didn’t want his baby to worry about him. He pulled her a bit closer and stroked her hair that was so like his own. She was his world. What else could I need in my life?
Making an Ass of 'U' and 'Me'

Chapter Summary

Minisa’s mom and Lyarra's dad meet...it doesn't go so well. Later, they have a more amiable conversation.

Chapter Notes

Note for any of you that are Premier League fans—I made Jon a Man U fan because that's my husband and son's favorite team but it's not central to the plot of the tale so if you want you can just insert your preferred Premier League team at that part...lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jon had been a football fan from an early age. He’d been born and lived in the United States his entire life. He loved his country but his mother was British and Jon had formed a strong attachment and deep abiding love for his mother’s homeland as well. She’d been in the States since she was twelve but she had always been passionate about her country’s favorite sport and raised her son to follow football, or soccer as everyone else at school had called it. He’d played since the age of four and adored everything about it.

Growing up in America in the early and mid-90’s, it was hard to catch matches on television, or much coverage at all for a boy who was obsessed with it. As a kid, he’d sat through many hours of 'Sportscenter' just trying to catch the two minutes of soccer coverage and highlights they might give in an hours-worth of programming that was normally devoted to American football, baseball, basketball and even, God forbid, NASCAR and golf. As a teen, he’d been busted by his mother more than once catching replays of matches on TV in the wee hours of the morning, the only time ESPN deemed them worth showing. She’d reprimand him for being out of bed on a school night… and then sit right down to watch with him.

But, as interest in the sport had steadily increased in the States over the past couple of decades, Jon found he was not as alone in his passion for footy as he thought. Jon was quite good in high school and even earned a partial scholarship to play his first two years of college before he’d blown out his ACL and been forced to quit playing for the squad. He’d met Val at a team mixer his freshman year and had met Theon around that time as well. Theon wasn’t on the team but he came to all their matches which was saying a lot because, other than parents and girlfriends, there usually weren’t all that many fans watching collegiate soccer at Jon’s university. The other football program, as Jon thought of it, was infinitely more popular. And, while one would imagine that Jon as a Manchester United fan and Theon as a Liverpool supporter might loathe the mere sight of one another (well, if one knew much about Premier League rivalries anyway), they got along very well despite some clear differences in temperament and interests beyond their favorite sport.

They’d both been delighted, along with Jon’s mother, a few years ago when NBC Sports had started airing Premier League matches in the States. Jon would’ve happily spent hours of his weekend watching live football every Saturday and Sunday while knocking back a few beers with Theon,
except that really wasn’t acceptable with Lyarra in his life. So, he’d have it on in his room while she watched cartoons on Saturday mornings, remaining stone-cold sober and trying not to shout too loudly when his team scored or curse too crudely when their opponent did. And little by little, as her interest in ‘Mickey Mouse Clubhouse’ waned, Lyarra had started creeping into his room those mornings and began watching with him. She’d followed in her dad’s footsteps following Man U… except she liked to tell him that Harry Kane and Cristiano Ronaldo were both super cute. Christ, she’s seven. Do we have to go there already?

Jon’s mother had married a fellow Brit living in the US three years ago and, when an opportunity arose for his step-dad to return to the UK for work last year, Lyanna had begrudgingly gone with her husband. She still hadn’t quite forgiven the poor man though for taking her away from her son and grand-daughter. She was begging Jon to bring Lyarra over for the summer once school was out but he hadn’t made up his mind yet.

“Alright, girls. Stand on the line with your ball and we’ll practice dribbling,” Jon said as he grabbed Lyarra’s water bottle and tossed it next to his coach’s bag. Training had started ten minutes ago but he’d spent that time of this first session saying a quick word to the parents and learning the girls’ names and having them learn each other’s.

As the girls moved over to do as he bid, a new little girl came sprinting up to him. She had big blue eyes, long red hair braided into pigtails and more than a few freckles across her nose. Jon noticed that her cleats were obviously brand-new along with the hot pink ball that looked like it’d never met grass. She had on iridescent green socks with strawberries all over them and was holding a rather small Shopkins water bottle that looked like it was made for a toddler.

“Are you my coach?” she asked while trying to catch her breath.

“Well, that depends,” he said smiling at the child. “Are you Minisa Stark?”

“Yes…well, no,” she answered as her brow furrowed and a hurt look crossed her face like a gray cloud marring a sunny day. “I’m Minisa Hardyng. Stark is my mommy’s last name.”

“Oh,” he said embarrassed at his gaffe. I was certain the form said Stark. He quickly recovered to give the child a reassuring smile. “Well, Minisa Hardyng, have you played soccer before?”

“No,” she said. “It’s my first time.”

“That’s terrific! I love new players. I’m Coach Snow or you can call me Coach Jon if you like.”

She gave him a big smile at that. She was missing a couple of teeth like Lyarra (like most seven-year-olds) and Jon told her to go join the other girls on the line. He looked around to see if he spotted her mom or dad but no one new was there. That’s odd.

Jon would often assist the coach of the teenage boys’ team in the region as well. He enjoyed helping with them if he could because, unlike with the younger kids, he could still get out on the field and really play against them during scrimmages. He could tell himself he still had it and relive his glory days until he got home with aching muscles and had to pop an Aleve in order to rest that night. At those practices, parents were more of a rarity. The teens were usually dropped off and picked up when it was over…assuming they weren’t driving themselves there yet.

But at this age, the parents usually stayed. Especially at the very first practice…when it’s your child’s first time ever playing. But he didn’t have time to ponder that too long as there were eight little girls...
waiting for him. Jon shrugged to himself and started the girls off with some calisthenics and simple
drills.

Over an hour later, the field was empty except for Jon, Lyarra and Minisa. No parent or guardian had
returned during training and no one was there to pick her up when it had ended nearly thirty minutes
ago. At first Jon hadn’t been too concerned. Shit happens and a person can get delayed but, as time
ticked by, he was getting more and more annoyed…and ready to get Lyarra home for their dinner.

The girls didn’t seem terribly concerned for a good fifteen minutes as they were in a deep discussion
about their favorite boy bands and shows while passing the ball back and forth. But from time to
time, Jon would see Minisa looking towards the parking lot. And the disappointment on her face
when she saw that no one had arrived yet or was coming their way, hurt him to see.

He couldn’t leave the child there obviously but this had never happened to him before and he was at
a bit of a loss. He pulled out her registration form. He recognized it. The lovely brunette that had
filled it out had had a lot of questions and she’d used a pen with purple ink. She’d said she was
Minisa’s aunt. She’d clearly written ‘Minisa Stark’ but that didn’t matter now. He scanned the form
and saw the mother’s number and the father’s. Stark or Hardyng…who should I call? Minisa’s
address was the same as her mother’s on the form so he started to call her.

“Mommy!” Minisa shouted just then.

Jon looked up and saw a red-head in a skirt making her way awkwardly across the darkening field
towards them in high heels. He tried to conceal his annoyance at this apparently flighty woman who
had jetted off after dumping her daughter at practice and was now returning late, thirty minutes late.
She didn’t even come to registration. She had the girl’s aunt do

“Mina!” the woman cried. “I’m so sorry! Are you Mina’s coach? I am so sorry!” she said again as
she turned to him.

“Yeah…I’m Coach Snow,” he said more than a bit tersely. “Training ends at 7:30 so if you could
maybe be here on time to pick your daughter up next week. It also starts at 6:30.”

“I do apologize but…” she began, looking a bit vexed and hurt at the same time.

“She could really use a better water bottle if you want to pick one up next time you go shopping,” he
said with a meaningful look at her well put-together outfit and perfect nails while making a guess at
where she’d been. “She ran out early and I don’t want any of my players getting dehydrated. But
your daughter did terrific tonight. We’ll see you next week, Minisa,” he said with a smile at the child
and without another glance at the woman.

Jon trudged off to grab up his bag filled with soccer balls and plastic cones and his player forms as
Lyarra started asking what was for dinner. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from losing his
temper but he felt the anger bubbling up inside. The audacity of some people. As if I have nothing
better to do than wait around for her to decide to flit back by the fields to pick up her child.

It was something he saw often enough at school. The handful of kids that were late every single
morning. The kids that were always the last ones picked up every day, sometimes nearly an hour
after dismissal by adults not wearing regular clothes but still in their pajamas. The parents that never
attended a parents’ night, a parent-teacher conference, a chorus concert or anything. He’d met
parents that honestly couldn’t be there at the school for stuff like that but who were still involved in
their child’s education at home at least…but he’d also met plenty that just didn’t give a shit.

“Coach Snow,” the woman said from behind him. “I would like to say…”
“Look, ma’am,” he said turning swiftly back around with a scowl. “I’m not trying to be an ass but...”

“Swear jar, Dad!” Lyarra shouted and burst into giggles.

Jon rolled his eyes and sucked in a deep breath to start again when Minisa’s mother said, “Never mind. You can think what you want of me. I’m very sorry you were inconvenienced. She won’t be late again and you won’t be left waiting in the future. Good night...and thank you for staying with my daughter.” The last part came out in a cracked and strained voice and her eyes had filled with tears. “Come on, baby,” she choked out as she hastily turned away.

Jon turned back around to pick up his bag again and hated to acknowledge the gnawing feeling digging a hole in his gut now. He’d spoken intemperately to someone he really didn’t know at all. Great first impression you make, Jon. He slowly made his way towards the parking lot trying to leave a little distance between them but Lyarra wanted to walk with her new teammate and he could hear the girls chatting, apparently unaware of any tension between their parents.

As they reached the parking lot, Jon heard Minisa say, “Mommy, why did Daddy leave? He said he was going to watch me practice but he left.”

“I know, baby. I guess Daddy couldn’t stay this time,” she answered stiffly as she avoided her daughter’s eyes and his.

“He promised to watch me!” the girl shouted next and Jon didn’t miss the hurt and the anger in her young voice, anger that was unfairly being heaped on her mother now.

“I know. Sometimes Daddy has to break his promises,” was all her mother said in a voice that spoke of many broken promises, years and years of them.

And Jon reminded himself that she was a single parent, too. Just like me and like Mum was. And, he felt like...an ass. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath.

“Swear jar, Dad!” Lyarra shouted again.

Mina was still angry but silent and sullen in the backseat as they pulled out of the parking lot and Sansa felt like her chest might explode from trying to hold back her own tears of anger and frustration and pain. It was so goddamn unfair. Harry had texted her at 7:15 to say he’d had to run to pick up his dry cleaning and got held up when he’d stopped to get himself some dinner and wouldn’t make it back in time to pick up Mina from the soccer fields. Sansa didn’t see the text until 7:35 as she had been driving home from work when he sent it. She’d only just made it home and was still in her work clothes when she saw it. She couldn’t believe that he’d just dumped her at the fields and left. But then again...she could.

She’d wasted five minutes calling to yell at him for being so thoughtless and giving her such little notice and then cursed herself for wasting the time when the fields were a good fifteen minutes away from home.

Harry had agreed to pick her up from school and take her shopping for her soccer gear and then take her to practice and bring her home. Well, he completed part of the task apparently. Sansa had already
purchased the cleats, ball and shin guards but Harry said his little girl needed ‘special’ socks and a ‘cooler’ water bottle. *Looks like something designed for a toddler*, Sansa thought with annoyance as she glanced at the bottle that looked like it might hold eight ounces of water at best.

Then, she thought of Minisa’s coach…Coach Snow. *Well, he’s cold and frosty enough for that name*, she thought until she recalled the warm way he had spoken to Minisa. *I guess I shouldn’t be surprised he’d think the worst of me. No doubt in his little fairy tale corner of suburbia mommies are always in attendance at soccer practice except when daddies are the coach.*

He was a handsome man despite being clearly pissed off and Sansa was certain there’d be some beautiful wife at home wondering why her husband and daughter were running so late. Perhaps he could blow off all his resentment at being held up by the hare-brained mother that had forgotten her daughter at the fields during her very first practice with his wife. *What would it be like to have another adult at home, someone that cared about me, that I could express my frustrations to? Or just talk to about anything?*

She gave an angry sniff when she thought of him and his assumptions about her. She hadn’t missed his meaningful look when he mentioned shopping and gave her the once-over. Sure, she was nicely dressed. Mr. Baelish expected it and she had to look the part of the successful businessman’s receptionist. She wanted to stay pissed at Coach Snow but knew he had a right to be annoyed. In truth, she’d rather just be royally pissed at Harry who had no good excuse at all and maybe call him and rant some more. She’d rather embrace her anger than think about the pain.

But then the thought of Mina would come creeping in. Just the thought of Mina feeling abandoned, being left with a man she’d just met to watch over her while her own father couldn’t be troubled to stay…or at least make an effort to return for her. Ned Stark had made his daughters (and sons, too) feel like they hung the moon and stars. Did Harry ever make Mina feel that way? Maybe he did sometimes. But the thought of Mina feeling like she’d been dumped and like she wasn’t the apple of her father’s eye made all of Sansa’s concerns over what Coach Snow might think of her and the stupid crap Harry had pulled over the years to inconvenience Sansa and others completely meaningless. She hurt for her little girl who deserved so much more than such a sorry half-ass excuse for a dad.

Sansa turned on some pop music for Mina as she swallowed as many of her tears as she could past the huge lump in her throat but refused to let her daughter hear her sniffles and sobs. *Those can wait for my pillow…like always.*

And when Mina stirred from her melancholy to start singing along to Taylor Swift’s ‘Bad Blood’ and asked her mother to sing as well, Sansa sang loud and clear.

> ‘Band-aids don’t fix bullet holes,
> you say sorry just for show,
> if you live like that,
> you live with ghosts.’
“Who is that?” Theon asked the following Thursday night. Jon glanced over to where Minisa was with her mother getting ready. Ms. Stark was wearing a skirt and heels again and looked out of place next to the other moms in their jeans and sneakers. Not that there weren’t other parents there in work clothes but she was definitely the best dressed adult on any of the surrounding fields. Jon was in athletic pants and his old Direwolves t-shirt with his whistle around his neck. “Holy sh…Sugar Honey Iced Tea, Snow. Would you look at the legs on her, man?” Theon said next as he punched Jon’s shoulder.

“Swear jar, Uncle Theon,” Lyarra said from the ground as she pulled her shin guards on.

“You’ve caught on to that one, I see,” he laughed. “You ready to play some football, little squirt?”

“Yeah! You gonna help Dad tonight?”

“If he’ll let me,” Theon answered.

“You’re not a registered volunteer. I can’t have you out there helping,” Jon said. “Not that you’re much for rules, I know,” he continued when Theon rolled his eyes at him. “Why are you here anyway?”

“Rhæ texted me and said she’s picking up squirt for the night. Thought we’d grab a beer after practice.”

“It’s Thursday, Theon. I have to work tomorrow. It’s an in-service day for the kids but I’ve still got to get up and go in.”

“And?”

Jon rolled his eyes and said, “Stay if you like…just don’t hit on all the moms.”

“I’m just hitting on one of them,” Theon replied with a grin as he strolled over to where Ms. Stark stood with her sunglasses on and her arms folded across her chest.

Jon called the girls to the field and started training. He had them pair off for passing drills and was pleased when Lyarra asked Minisa to be her partner. He glanced over to Ms. Stark who was smiling encouragingly at her daughter while trying to ignore Theon’s attempts at flirting…or whatever it was he thought he was doing.

Good God…

“Theon!” he yelled. “Come help Abby with her passing drills. I’ve got an uneven number tonight.”

His friend gave him a withering glance but trudged over and pasted on a smile for the child at least. He saw a smirk appear on Ms. Stark’s face before she noticed him looking at her. He smiled but her half-smile was quickly replaced by a reserved look and she focused her attention back on their girls. What would you expect, Jon? You acted like an ass and now she despises you. At least she’s not asking to have her daughter moved to another team.

Jon walked around to each pair of girls, giving advice and helping retrieve errant balls. When training was over, he shooed Theon back off the field and asked the girls for suggestions for their team name. Purple Unicorns and Panther Pouncers were both suggested. Oh my… One girl suggested West Ham and Jon just shook his head. Then, Lyarra piped up with the Sugar Honey Iced Tea Kickers. Swear jar, Lyarra! he almost shouted. He just raised his eyebrows and gave her a knowing look which caused her to turn her head and bite her lip.

“Crazy Pop Tarts!” another voice suggested…Minisa.
“Uh…” Jon began just as half a dozen little girls raised their voices and chanted, “Crazy Pop Tarts! Crazy Pop Tarts!”

“Okay then…” Jon said uncertainly before smiling at the seven little girls now standing and chanting in unison. “Crazy Pop Tarts, it is.”

Theon was cackling over by the sidelines as practice broke up soon after and Rhae appeared to pick up Lyarra.

“Aunt Rhae! I want ice cream!” Lyarra shouted.

“Aunt Rhae! She needs dinner first!” Jon shouted.

He heard laughter from nearby and found Ms. Stark and Minisa smiling at them. He smiled at Ms. Stark and once again she looked away as though she’d been caught doing something she wasn’t allowed to do. She’d removed her sunglasses as it was getting dark now. And as Jon looked at her…really looked at her…he realized how beautiful she was. No wonder Theon was trying to hit on her. She’s gorgeous.

He had mostly noticed the red hair first and he’d honestly kind of sworn off red heads since Ygritte but looking at Ms. Stark he thought he might need to reconsider that. You really shouldn’t hold a bias like that anyway, Jon. It’s very unfair. Red hair, blue eyes and creamy white skin…along with those legs that go on for days. Yep…you need to reconsider your ban on redheads, man.

He shook his head to refocus on his family. He hugged his daughter and sister good-bye and Theon helped him lug his gear to his car when he spotted Ms. Stark and Minisa standing next to her car. Ms. Stark was on her phone and Minisa was practicing dribbling her ball back and forth between her feet.

“Coach Jon! How am I doing?” she asked.

“You’re doing great…but the parking lot isn’t the best place to practice,” he finished quietly.

“Mina, stop!” Ms. Stark said then getting off the phone. “Put your ball in the car, baby. Your coach is right. It’s not safe to practice here.”

Minisa huffed but put her ball in the car and climbed in. “When is Aunt Marg coming?” she asked.

“She’s on her way,” her mom responded looking at Jon curiously.

He realized he’d been standing there…and staring at her. “Uh…sorry. I just wanted to tell Minisa…”

“Mina!” the girl interjected. “I like to be called Mina.”

“Well, I wanted to tell you, Mina, that you picked a really cool name for the team. You’re a fast learner on the field, too.”

“Thank you,” the child beamed with pride and Jon noticed the way Ms. Stark smiled at her daughter’s pleasure. I know that smile. It’s the one I wear anytime I see Lyarra happy like that. It looks better on you though.

“That’s very nice of you,” she said.

“I’m sorry about the way I came off last week…”

“No, it’s perfectly understandable. It’s far easier to just make assumptions.” Jon felt himself blushing at being called out for what he did in fact do. But then she said in a friendlier tone, “I might have
done the same in your situation anyway. I’m Sansa, by the way,” she finished by holding out her hand.

“I’m Jon,” he replied as he shook her soft, warm hand.

“So, I don’t have to address you as Coach Snow then?”

“Only if you want,” he laughed.

“We going out or what, man?” Theon called from his car.

“Just a sec!” he responded. “Are you alright here?” he asked wondering why they were still lingering when the parking lot was emptying quickly.

“My sister-in-law is coming to get Mina from me here. I…I have to go back to work tonight.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Mommy’s boss is a jerk and won’t let her off early for my practices unless she promises to come back and make up the time,” Mina said.

“Mina!”

“It’s what Uncle Robb said!”

Sansa looked uncomfortably between her daughter and him and shrugged. “It is what it is, baby,” she said with resignation. For such a beautiful woman, it was jarring to see how defeated she looked just then. “There’s your aunt,” she said next as a sleek SUV pulled in beside their car.

“Honey, I am so sorry about running late!” the aunt from registration said as she climbed out and went to hug her niece.

“It’s okay. Thanks so much for doing this,” Sansa replied.

“Oh…well, hello there!” she said next noticing Jon. “Do you remember me? You were so helpful that night at registration.”

“Yes, I remember you,” Jon said.

“I’m Margaery Stark, Sansa’s sis-in-law and Mina’s aunt. Are you Mina’s coach?” she asked as she elbowed Sansa in the ribs.

“Yes, I am.”

Jon could see Theon slinking over, no doubt wondering how Jon had ended up chatting with two lovely ladies and deciding that he needed to be part of this conversation. Jon was forced to introduce him and smirked at the way Theon’s smooth charm dried up in an instant when he noticed the enormous rock on Margaery’s ring finger. He wasn’t so pleased though when he turned all his charm back on Sansa…not that she seemed to notice any.

“Come on, kiddo,” Margaery said calling Mina to hop in the SUV after a few minutes of chatting. “We’ve got big plans tonight. We’ll make Uncle Robb take us for ice cream after dinner and then stay up watching whatever you want!”

“Margaery…” Sansa sighed.
“Now, I get to spoil her a little bit, don’t I? You have a good night and tell Little Prick he’s an ass,” she said more quietly as Mina was already in the vehicle.

“Thanks again,” Sansa said with a quick smile before turning to the men again. “Thanks for coaching the team, Jon. Mina’s very excited and enjoying it.”

“Sure thing. I’ll see you next week.”

“Yes. Well…I hope you two have fun together tonight,” she finished with a suggestive smirk. Jon jaw dropped at what her tone was suggesting when he realized she was teasing him. “Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t just make assumptions, should I?” she finished saucily before climbing into her vehicle.

“See you next week, Coach.”

“Yeah…see you next week,” Jon said smiling all over himself and trying to ignore the electricity racing up and down his spine now from her playful teasing and cheeky grin. Theon started laughing and asked if he’d missed something but Jon redirected by agreeing to go out for a beer. “One beer,” he clarified.

“Two,” Theon countered.

“Alright two.”

“And you need to ask that foxy mama out, Snow.”

“No way…I’ve already managed to make an ass of myself with her last week. She’s probably got a boyfriend or something anyway. And, I’m not interested in starting anything with one of the moms from soccer.”

“You’re not interested in her?” Theon scoffed. “You are fucking full of shit, Snow. I saw the way you were looking at her during practice and staring just now.”

“You are imagining things.”

“I call bullshit and you’re buying for lying.”

Jon laughed and said, “Alright…alright. You win and I guess I’m buying.”

Sansa grumbled to herself as she got off the phone. Mr. Baelish had called no sooner than she’d pulled out of the parking lot to say he was heading home and there’d be no need to return tonight. And then he’d dropped hints that he might need her for an hour or two on Saturday. *Saturday! No fucking way am I giving up any weekend time to you, asshole!* It’s what she’d like to say anyway but she knew she’d just meekly nod and do it because she needed the job. She could almost hear Robb’s voice in her head telling her to go find another job. *Well, we’ll see what happens, big bro,* she thought. She’d recently turned in her résumé for a couple of other positions. There was the secretary position at that other elementary school she really wanted. *The hours would be so perfect with Mina even if she doesn’t go there.*

She’d also turned in her paperwork to start a couple of night courses in the Fall to try and finish her
degree. Good luck managing that if you’re still working for Little Prick and staying till seven at night. It’d been slow going but she was starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel that would put a diploma in her hands at long last.

She was nearly home when she got the expected text from Margaery.

**Margaery:** That’s him! Hot AF guy from registration is Mina’s coach!

**Sansa:** Who is this?

**Margaery:** Sansa, I demand you make an attempt! He was looking you over. He’s interested. Bang him! Your clitoris will thank you.

**Sansa:** Ewww! Must you put it like that? He’s probably married.

**Margaery:** I didn’t see a wedding band. If you don’t like him, go for his friend!

**Sansa:** Aren’t you supposed to be watching my daughter?

**Margaery:** We met Robb at the ice cream place and they’re in line already having a debate over why football is better than soccer.

**Sansa:** What happened to dinner?

**Margaery:** Blame Robb. He wanted ice cream first. Mina’s chatting with a little friend in line now. Oh, they are ganging up on Robb! Sounds like soccer wins. They’re so sweet :)

**Sansa:** That’s nice. Must be a friend from school. And, my brother wanted dessert first? Why am I not surprised? Wait…don’t answer that.

**Margaery:** I could tell you all about it if you’re really that desperate for sex tales?

**Sansa:** And good-night.

Sansa laid down her phone and shook her head, smiling to herself. Okay, yeah…my clitoris might thank me. He is hot. And he’s nice when he’s not busy assuming the worst of me. He could be married anyway. Some guys don’t were their bands all the time. But what if he’s not? What if he’s a single dad?

She tried to imagine what it would be like spending more time in the company of Jon Snow, to maybe have coffee with him or even go out to eat or something. She then recalled the excruciating awkwardness of her last date, a blind date, and her intense desire to just go home and be with Mina rather than make small-talk with the guy from her dad’s office that her mother had set her up with. It’s pointless, Sansa. The good ones are all taken. He’s likely taken as well even if he’s not married.

She sighed and looked for something to watch on TV. ‘Sense and Sensibility’…perfect. Sansa would have to admit when she was younger, she saw herself more like Marianne Dashwood, romantic and passionate about things, rather than her serious, older sister, Elinor. She had liked guys that could make you swoon saying all the right things and had conventional, pretty-boy good looks. Not that Jon Snow wasn’t good looking. He was definitely that. But she suspected that he didn’t always have
that happy knack of saying exactly the right thing and perhaps he did look a bit broody at times. *Just because he’s not grinning like a fool all the time doesn’t mean he’s broody. Granted, he has an amazing smile when he does smile.*

She still loved Marianne’s youthful passion but, as she’d matured (and lived through Harry), Sansa began to see how Elinor’s good sense and steadiness were admirable qualities when facing all the shit life can throw your way. So, she poured some wine and watched raptly as Mr. Farris finally made his stumbling proposal to Miss Dashwood and teared up at Elinor’s own tearful though joyful response while wondering ever so briefly what Jon Snow’s lips would feel like pressed to her own. She felt the grin spreading across her face before focusing back on the movie. *You got him, Elinor. You go, girl. High time you were finally happy at last.*

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Mina cautiously carried the double-scoop cone back to the little table her Aunt Marg had claimed. “Aunt Margie, can I sit with Lyarra?”

“Sure, you can, sweetie. Robb, pull up that other table. We can see if Mina’s little friend and her mom would be willing to sit with us.”

“My hands are full of ice cream, baby,” Uncle Robb said. He’d got a triple-scoop for himself and was holding Aunt Marg’s sorbet, too.

“That’s not her mom. That’s her aunt,” Mina clarified for her aunt and uncle.

“How do you know Lyarra, honey? Is she in your class at school?” Aunt Marg asked as she shot Uncle Robb a dirty look and got up to move the table herself.

“No, she’s on my team. She’s Coach Jon’s daughter.”

“Oh!” her aunt said brightly. “Well then…we must convince them to join us. Robb!” she finished snapping her fingers at her uncle.

Her aunt and uncle started whispering together as Mina started in on the top scoop, Rocky Road. Then, Uncle Robb went back over to where Lyarra’s aunt was paying at the cash register. Soon, they came over and joined them. The adults started talking but Mina was eyeing Lyarra’s banana split.

“What flavors are those?” she asked.

“Black Cherry, Lemon and Vanilla. My aunt says the fruit flavors and the banana kind of makes it healthy enough to call it dinner,” Lyarra laughed. “My dad wouldn’t like it though so don’t tell on her.”

“Okay. Your dad’s really funny and he’s a good coach.”

“Thanks. Your mom’s really pretty. What’s her name?”

“Sansa.”

“That’s a pretty name. So, are your parents divorced?”
“No…they weren’t ever married.”

“Oh. My mom and dad weren't married either. My mom’s dead. She died when I was little.”

“I’m sorry,” Mina said feeling sad for her friend now.

“It’s okay. I was a baby. I don’t remember her but I still get sad about it sometimes.”

Mina didn’t know what to say to that. She couldn’t imagine life without her mom even if they sometimes argued. She polished off the Rocky Road and started on the Caramel Swirl scoop. Lyarra finished half her banana split before she said she was full and the girls chatted about soccer and school and other interests they shared as the adults continued to talk.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from 'Bad Blood' by Taylor Swift.
“Mum…is something wrong?” Jon rasped into the phone.

“Why should anything be wrong for me to call?” Lyanna said brightly on the other end in a voice that screamed that his mother was wide awake. “Don’t tell me you’re still abed. Are you sick?” she asked next in a perfectly ‘mum’s worried’ tone of voice.

“I’m not…Christ,” he said fumbling to grab his glasses so he could check the time. “I’m not sick. It’s 6:15 in the morning.”

“You’re always up by now.”

“Not on a Saturday,” he grumbled.

“Jon, the derby’s today. Coverage has already begun. Do you mean to tell me your still abed when we’re playing City in a little over an hour?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean to tell you,” he said quietly as he climbed out of bed and stalked into the bathroom so as not to rouse his sleeping daughter. “Lyarra had a rough night with the nightmares again so I’ve had a rough night as well.”

“Oh, my poor little pet…is she sleeping now?”

“Yes, just like I was.”

“Sorry, love. Go on back to bed and call me at the half. We can discuss the match, alright?”

“Alright.”

“Have you thought anymore about coming to visit over the summer?”

“Honestly, no…but I promise to make up my mind soon.”

“Alright, then. Call me later. Love you.”

“I love you, Mum.”

Jon looked in the mirror and grimaced at his reflection before heading back to the bed to slide under the covers again as carefully as he could so as not to disturb Lyarra.

The pediatrician had said the nightmares weren’t anything to worry over and that in time she’d work through it on her own but Jon still worried and wanted more than anything to just make everything right for his daughter right away without her having to suffer one more single sleepless night. Of course, he couldn’t which was the frustrating part.
He didn’t really mind her coming to his bed, even if her foot usually found its way into his face or she always stole the covers. He’d come to accept that he’d probably sleep terribly when she joined him but if it helped her, it didn’t matter. In truth, he enjoyed the excuse to hold her close and know she wanted him near. She was growing so fast and Jon missed her being a baby and toddler when he was her whole world and she was always eager to be in his arms. That had started waning rapidly when she turned four and was becoming a rarity by the ripe old age of seven.

Not that she wasn’t affectionate and wouldn’t give hugs but she’d become self-conscious about hugging him good-bye on the way to class at school in the mornings. They were down to fist-bumps and high fives at school now and, if he wanted a hug in the morning, he’d better get it before they left the house. The few times that Jon couldn’t resist giving her a quick hug at school, she’d shove him away and say, ‘Sheesh…Dad!’

And forget about hugs on the soccer field. Last season, she’d taken a hard hit and fallen to the ground in a heap. Jon had thundered out onto the field at once ready to scoop her up in his arms and rush her to the nearest emergency room. Since he was the coach, it didn’t appear odd to anyone for him to be the first one to Lyarra even though the ref hadn’t motioned him over yet. But he didn’t run out on that field with his heart in his mouth as her coach. He did it as her dad. And she had sat up and said, ‘Please don’t embarrass me,’ while hastily wiping away her tears before she gingerly stood up on her own two feet. She wouldn’t even accept his offered arm to escort her to the sidelines. Maybe that was what was natural. She shouldn’t want to be babied and cuddled all the time when she wasn’t a baby anymore but Jon often wondered that if Lyarra was it, the only child he’d ever have, why did she have to grow up so fast? Why couldn’t she just stay little a little longer?

“Dad…derby’s today,” Lyarra said in his ear just as he’d drifted off to sleep again.

“Yeah.”

“Pre-match coverage may have started.”

“Yeah,” he said smiling despite the fact he’d hoped to sleep in a bit. “Want me to turn on the TV?” She nodded enthusiastically. So much for sleeping in.

“Dad? Can we go to the zoo this afternoon? I’d really like to go today.”

That was unexpected. Lyarra used to love going to the zoo with him on Saturday afternoons but she didn’t ask to go all that much anymore. In fact, the last three times he’d asked if she wanted to go, she’d said ‘not today.’ Jon smiled to himself thinking of the way her little face used to light up when she saw the animals…any of the animals.

He pulled her up for a hug, knowing that here at home, he could still give hugs without being shoved away and said, “Of course, we can.”

“Mommy,” Mina said from the doorway in her PJs as Sansa was getting dressed, “Where are you going?”

“Mommy’s got to head into work for a couple of hours and Grandpa’s on his way to get you. He’s going to take you to him and Grandma’s house until I come get you.”

“But it’s Saturday,” Mina huffed. “Why are you going in? You told me it was just a one-time thing
“I’m sorry. Mr. Baelish needed me for a couple of hours. I’ll be home in time for lunch.”

“But you said we’d go to the zoo this afternoon,” Mina said dejectedly.

“We will! I promise. I’ll take you to the zoo.” Harry took Mina to the zoo all the time and Sansa rarely got to take her because that was ‘Daddy-Daughter’ fun. But Harry was out of town and she was looking forward to this. She walked over to her daughter and touched her shoulder. “I’ll take you, I promise.”

“Alright, I’ll get ready for Grandpa.” She turned to go but stopped and turned back around. “You’re not going to miss my first match next week, are you?”

*No…not for anything.* “No, baby. I’ll be sure to tell him I’m unavailable for the next eight Saturdays at least.” *And hopefully, I’ll have another job by then.*

Two hours later, Sansa sat at her desk typing while Mr. Baelish sat on the corner of it regaling her with tales of his last trip overseas. He wasn’t really doing anything wrong but she wished he’d move his ass off her desk and let her focus on finishing her work.

“Sansa, I don’t think I’ve mentioned how lovely you look in that shade of blue.”

*Ick.* “Thank you, Mr. Baelish.”

“I really appreciate you coming in today.” *As if I had much choice since you told me to come in today.* “I hate taking you away from Minisa and your family so much.” *Funny…I highly doubt that bothers you.* “I’d love to make it up to you. Maybe I could take you to lunch today…”

*Oh, fuck no…no fucking way.* “I’m sorry, Mr. Baelish, but my mother is expecting me for lunch at her house and then I’m taking Minisa to the zoo. Thanks anyway.”

“Well…some other time perhaps.” *Some other time…right after hell freezes over.* “Tell your mother I said ‘hello,’” he said as he finally headed back to his office just as her phone chimed with a text.

**ROBB: You need to find another job.**

**SANSA: You are telepathic…and correct.**

“Lyarra! Wait up,” Jon said jogging to catch up to his daughter. “You just blew right past the penguins, baby.”

“Oh! Sorry…I really wanted to see the wolves. Two o’clock is their keeper chat time.”

“Yeah…okay,” Jon said as they hurried past the meandering crowds, bobbing and weaving like two people on an important mission. “How do you know about the wolf thing?” he asked.
“I…uh, saw a sign. Come on!”

The match start had been delayed from a fight that had started between the United and City fans. Then, there’d been an insane amount of injury time but United had held on to win 2-1. Theon had dropped by and they’d started watching the Liverpool-Everton match. And before Jon knew it, it was nearly one and he’d not started fixing lunch yet and Lyarra was screeching that they needed to hurry up so they could get to the zoo before 2:00. He’d hurriedly put together some peanut butter crackers and apple slices and then found himself being ushered out the door by a nearly frantic Lyarra. I had no idea she was so interested in wolves.

The wolf exhibit was on the far side from the entrance and Jon would’ve been thoroughly winded by the time they got there if he wasn’t in good shape. A small crowd had gathered around to hear the zoo keeper talk about the Red Wolf. But, much to Jon’s confusion, Lyarra seemed completely uninterested in anything the keeper had to say and kept craning her neck around as though she was expecting something to appear…or someone.

“Mina!” she shouted and went sprinting off back the way they had come.

“Hey, Lyarra,” the girl replied with a huge grin as the two girls immediately started whispering and giggling together.

“Hi, Coach Jon,” Mina said to him as soon as he walked up to the pair.

“Hey, Mina. Well, isn’t this a pleasant coincidence?” he grinned, wondering how they had planned this. Not that I’m complaining, he thought as he saw Sansa jogging up through the crowd.

“Mina!” she cried. “Don’t ever…run off…like that…again!” she gasped while huffing and clutching at a stitch in her side.

“Soory, Mom. Look who’s here!” Mina said next indicating Lyarra and himself.

“Hello, Sansa,” he said. He wiped his palms against his jeans and wondered why his stomach was suddenly tightening up.

“Oh! Hello, Jon,” she replied tentatively before she blessed him with the most radiant of smiles. Oh, God…be careful, Jon.

It was probably due to the exertion of running to catch her daughter but Jon sincerely hoped the blush that was now spreading across her face and down her neck might be one of pleasure at seeing them. Okay, not likely but I can hope.

He looked her over as discreetly as he could, curious to see this more relaxed side of Sansa. No skirt and heels today. Just skinny jeans and a soft, buttery-colored t-shirt and her sunglasses pushed back into her beautiful red hair that was in a ponytail. And looking completely gorgeous.

“Come on, Mina! Let’s see the wolves,” Lyarra said and the girls headed back over to where they could view the small wolf family of a male, a female and their pup in their wooded enclosure.

He stepped a bit closer and said quietly in Sansa’s ear, “I think we’ve been set up.”

“What?!” Sansa said in clear shock.

Wait, that sounded wrong. “Not like…I mean, I think the girls planned to meet here. I…did you think I meant…I didn’t mean…” he babbled helplessly and gestured at her and then himself. Get it together, Jon. He drew a deep breath and said, “I think they planned to meet each other here at the
zoo today. At the wolf exhibit at 2 o’clock to be exact.”

“Oh! I see,” she laughed. “That would explain the way she was acting about getting here then. Sorry, I misunderstood you…”

“Happens to the best of us,” he replied.

Sansa snapped her fingers and pointed at him. “The ice cream parlor,” she said with a knowing smile then. “Mina and I had this planned for the past week. They must’ve discussed it then. Unless, you and Lyarra were already planning to…”

“Yeah, that must’ve been it. Lyarra couldn’t stop talking about running into Mina there. She just mentioned the zoo this morning.”

“Mina was excited to see Lyarra there. She also…she mentioned that Lyarra’s mother had died when she was a baby. I’m sorry, Jon.”

He braced himself for the familiar impact of that blow. It didn’t matter the circumstances. Anytime someone new brought up Val’s death unexpectedly it pained him even after all this time. But it wasn’t about losing the woman he’d once loved. Their romantic feelings had dried up well before Lyarra’s birth but he’d still loved Val dearly as his friend and the mother of their child. And Lyarra, his spirited and independent daughter, was a daily reminder of her mother. What hurt was the reminder that his girl was growing up without someone so very essential, someone who plays such a huge part in shaping who most of us turn out to be. And like always he raged against the futility of his wish that Lyarra could’ve known her mother and that Val could’ve had the chance to raise their daughter.

Sansa was wringing her hands together and looking away when she whispered, “I’m very sorry, Jon. I shouldn’t have…”

“No, Sansa, don’t apologize. Val isn’t a taboo subject. She was a lovely and bright young woman. We didn’t plan it but she was very excited to be a mother. It’s not fair that she’s missing it. We’d broken up before she found out she was pregnant but we agreed to work together at raising our daughter. Mostly, it hurts me to think of her because of Lyarra. She doesn’t like to show it but she thinks on her mother a lot and it pains her. She asks lots of questions about Val which is good but sometimes I feel I can answer her questions and at other times I feel woefully inadequate. And, she’s the one growing up without her mother. It’s something that so many people take for granted but it’ll never be a part of her life.”

Trying to diffuse any discomfort between them, he looked towards the girls watching the chimpanzees, hoping to come up with something to say to change the subject, and was surprised when he felt a soft, warm hand covering his own. He looked over to find crystal clear, blue eyes staring at him with compassion and understanding. No words were needed just then. They simply stood there looking at one another as their girls chatted about the chimps with her hand lightly touching his. Jon would’ve liked to clasp her hand in return but he hesitated. He barely knew her. He didn’t want to push her away by coming across as forward. But more than that, he was afraid. Afraid of what caring for Sansa might mean. He suspected she could capture his heart far more quickly than he wished to admit…and then break it to pieces if she chose. So, he enjoyed the comforting but safe intimacy of her hand on his while they looked at one another.

Safe? I’m afraid my heart is already in jeopardy but perhaps I don’t mind after not having anyone to offer it to for so long.

The spell broke a moment later when Mina started shrieking, “Ugh! Mom! The chimp just pooped and then threw it at the others! So gross!”
Lyarra was holding her sides and laughing at her friend’s dramatics before Mina started laughing, too. And, as he enjoyed the sound of the girls’ and Sansa’s laughter, he thought to himself that no song could possibly sound as sweet.

“Do you think they know we planned this?” Minisa whispered.

“No. Well, maybe. Dad gets this certain look when he catches me doing stuff. I don’t think he minds though,” Lyarra said with a glance back at the adults who were trailing along behind them.

They’d moved on to see the gorillas and she looked over her shoulder at her father watching Ms. Stark. Dad was actually looking like a dork at the moment the way he was staring at Mina’s mom. Something about the way he was looking at her made Lyarra feel a bit weird inside and maybe a little mad or something. But then Ms. Stark said something and they both started laughing together and the feeling went away. She liked seeing her dad smiling and laughing like that. And Ms. Stark was nice and really pretty. And if her dad and Ms. Stark were friends, that’d make it easier to hang out with Mina outside of soccer. Lyarra shrugged to herself and returned to her friend.

“So, then what did your grandpa do when you told him?” she asked Mina.

“He laughed and called me sneaky but said he’d take me to the zoo if Mommy had to work too late.”

“Does your grandpa like soccer?”

“I dunno. He watches football and baseball with Uncle Robb sometimes.”

“Well, I’m glad your mom could make it.”

“Me, too.”

“I think Dad likes talking to her even if she doesn’t know much about soccer.”

“She said she’d be at all my games at least.”

“Great,” Lyarra said and they went back to discussing other things.

They spent the next three hours wandering around the zoo together. The girls were always a little bit ahead of them, heads together and chattering away about the animals…and Pokémon.

And Sansa learned more of Jon Snow. And the more I learn, the more I like. He was learning about her as well but he wasn’t pushy or prying with his questions the way some of her dates had been. Is that what I’m calling this? I don’t know but I like talking with him.
She said little of Harry but then little needed to be said just now. Minisa was here and Sansa was always mindful of what she said of her daughter’s father when she might overhear her. But from what she’d ascertained of Jon’s father from the few comments he’d made when they discussed their own parents, she believed Jon had some understanding of her situation. **Which is worse? A father who keeps his distance and never shows you much love but at least you learn not to expect anything or a father who half-way tries but then always leaves you doubting and disappointed?**

Jon was neither of those things at least. He was wonderful with his daughter and children in general. Mina had certainly taken to him. *No great surprise he works in education,* she’d thought when they’d briefly discussed their jobs.

“So, did you have fun with your friend the other night?” Sansa asked as they stopped at the playground near the entrance. The girls were both starting to tire but they still had enough stamina to beg for a little time at the playground before leaving. “And I’m not suggesting anything inappropriate by that question,” she joked.

“Yeah, it was alright. We had a couple of beers. It’d been awhile since we’d hung out…away from Lyarra anyway. I hope he wasn’t bothering you at practice.”

“No, he was fine. He got put to work before he could get too serious about hitting on me,” she said with a sideways glance at Jon.

“Yeah…I, uh…I just thought you might not want to be bothered. Or maybe I should apologize for stealing him away?” he asked with a playful twinkle in his eyes.

*Oh, Sansa…be careful. I could drown in those eyes if I look too long.* “No need to apologize,” she said with sudden flush coming over her.

She was proud that it came out so evenly because her heart had been in a flutter for a while now. Margaery was right. He was handsome or ‘hot as fuck.’ More than that he was truly kind and courteous as promised. And while Sansa was thoroughly enjoying his company, she was also more than a little nervous. Harry hadn’t managed to completely ruin her romantic heart but she feared falling for a man she barely knew, especially since he had serious responsibilities that mirrored her own. *Sansa…you’ve got to keep your head. You’re not 16 anymore. Your girl must come first. I know, I know, he’s dreamy but…God, he’s so sweet with the girls,* she thought then as he hurried over to help them reach the higher monkey bars and then stood under them both with his arms raised, ready to catch any falling girls.

The topic of dating arose unexpectedly when Sansa got a text from Arya asking if she’d be interested in meeting her Aikido instructor for tea sometime. Sansa had grumbled aloud at the text and then explained when Jon had raised his eyebrows in question.

“My sister’s always trying to set me up…and so is my mom…and Margaery.”

“You too, huh? Rhae is always asking to fix me up but I’m quite stubborn and impossible I’ve been told on numerous occasions.”

She smiled at that and said, “Oh, then you can empathize. My family is insane. They’ve always got some ‘nice man’ they want me to meet. I’ll admit my track record with guys isn’t great. Alright, it sucks…but I still get to decide for myself, don’t I?”

“Of course. That’s exactly how I feel. Rhae is great but she’s always pushing me towards women that are…well, they’re not what I’m interested in. I’d rather find a woman for myself. Preferably one that understands what it means to be a parent. Someone like you really.” Sansa glanced at him and
was pleased to see the blush spreading across his face now. “I, uh...shit...” he muttered, as his hand came up to rub at the back of his neck and he looked at her sheepishly.

“Dad! I’m hungry,” Lyarra shouted as she came racing up to them both on the bench they’d been sharing while the girls chased each other up and down the slides.

Sansa bit her lip to keep from laughing at the obvious relief she saw on Jon’s face at his daughter’s well-timed interruption. He jumped up at once and they started discussing possible meal options. Jon had leaned over till his forehead was resting on top of Lyarra’s head and they were obviously whispering together. Then, they did some sort of fist bump/high five routine that was more intricate than an Olympic figure skating performance.

“So...” Jon said walking back over with his hands thrust in his pockets and a very appealing grin on his face, “Lyarra and I were wondering if you and Mina would like to go grab some Mexican food with us. There’s a place nearby that we like. My treat.”

She only hesitated for a moment before she smiled and said, “Sure, Jon. That’d be really nice.”

Dinner had been nice. Wonderful really. Jon and Lyarra’s preferred Mexican restaurant had a soccer theme so it was playing on all the televisions. Sansa didn’t mind. It was obvious he adored the sport but he focused his attention on the girls and her. And if his gaze wandered to the TV once in a while, it gave Sansa an opportunity to observe him closer. She couldn’t say she minded when his hand would stray to the chips and salsa as he glanced at the TV and would brush her own. Her heart would start pounding away and they’d both look at one another. He’d mutter an apology and smile at her shyly and Sansa could not keep from grinning like fool.

She enjoyed seeing the girls together, too. Lyarra and Mina were quite a pair. They weren’t little mirrors of each other and yet Sansa thought they complimented each other rather well. Lyarra was more boisterous whereas Mina was more reserved at times. And, Mina was given to silent spells of self-absorbed contemplation whereas Lyarra’s eyes were always observing those around her and reading their feelings. But they were both comfortable with each other and it stirred something in Sansa to see them like that. She had three brothers and a sister that she loved very much but she’d told herself Mina probably didn’t miss something she’d never had by being an only child. Seeing Mina and Lyarra together made her wonder what it might’ve been like if Harry had been steadier in his attentions and if they’d had another child together. No, things with Harry were never going to work. I’m just glad to see Mina so happy with a new friend anyway.

The server had brought one check at the end of the meal. Almost every date Sansa had been on the server had always asked how they wanted the check, together or split. Even the handful of times her and Harry had taken Mina somewhere together over the past few years it had happened more than once. She suspected the lack of comfort and intimacy between herself and her dates (and Harry) had probably been as apparent as someone waving a red flag around. Jon didn’t seem to notice anything odd in the waiter’s assumption though and pulled out his wallet at once but Sansa wondered if the server saw the four of them and saw a typical family of four out for dinner on a Saturday night. She found she liked that thought, even if it wasn’t a fact. It was something pleasant to consider anyway. But for now, they were still getting to know one another. And even though Sansa had enjoyed spending the day with Jon Snow and his daughter more than all her dates over the past four years put together, she reminded herself that this hadn’t actually been a date. He hadn’t asked her and she certainly hadn’t asked him. This had all been set up and arranged by their daughters. The question now was what’s the next step? And will there be a next step? She found herself hoping there would be.
“Jon…is something the matter?” Theon rasped into his phone before checking his clock again to be certain he’d read the time correctly.

“I think I’m in trouble…with a woman.”

Theon had fallen asleep on the couch watching highlights from the day’s matches and stretched as he said, “Well, you see, son…that’s why you should always practice safe sex.”

“Fuck you,” Jon replied irritably. “This is serious.”

“You’re calling me after midnight and waking me up so fuck you, Snow.”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

“Now…why are you calling me after midnight and how are you in trouble with a woman? Am I going to need to come up with some bail money or something?”

“No. I want to ask Sansa out. I ended up spending the whole afternoon and evening with her, her daughter and Lyarra and now I can’t stop thinking about her. I’m exhausted but my mind won’t let me rest and I’m…argh! This sounds ridiculous that I’m calling you when I say it out loud. I’m sorry. Your friend is pathetic…and horny.” Theon rubbed his hands over his face and couldn’t help laughing. “Don’t fucking laugh,” Jon hissed. “You’ve got to help me. I don’t know what to do.”

“For now, you just need sleep, I think. I usually jack off when I can’t stop thinking about a woman and then I can usually fall asleep alright after that.”

“God! Why did I call you?” Jon asked before sighing and continuing, “Shit. Alright so…I’m going to go ahead and say it. I’ve already done that. It didn’t really help because I’m still thinking about her.”

Theon was guffawing now. “Ahhh! You’re really sprung on her, aren’t you? Holy, fuck. Sorry. Okay, I’m know you’ve asked women out in the past, Snow.”

“Well, it’s been a while…quite a while and I’m freaking out over here. Obviously.”

“Yes, I’m picking up on that. Okay, first of all…don’t call her after midnight to ask her out or I suspect she’ll just block your number.”

“No shit.”

“Second of all…just ask, Jon. It’s a yes or no question but I have a sneaking suspicion she’ll say yes.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Okay. Theon?”
“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing. Now, don’t call back tonight…and you owe me more beer.”

“Right.”
Anticipation

Chapter Summary

Jon asks Sansa out and their families want to discuss it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Would you like to go out with me sometime?”

“Uh, would you like…oh! Would I like to…Yes! Yes, Jon.”

It hadn’t come out quite that fast but close enough for Sansa to wonder if he were part hummingbird to rattle it off that swiftly. She hung up the phone and knew she was smiling like a loon.

“What’s that look about, Sansa Stark?” Jeyne Poole asked.

“Nothing,” she said blushing a bright crimson without a doubt.

“Are we ready to get started, ladies?” Mr. Baelish asked as he swept into the room preventing Jeyne from questioning her further. “Sansa, you looked flushed. Are you feeling unwell?” he asked next as he edged away from her desk.

“No, Mr. Baelish,” she replied. Wait… on second thought. “Just a slight…ahem, soreness in my throat. I’m sure I’ll be fine,” she finished with what she hoped was a convincing croakiness. I’m not available Saturday but never hurts to lay a little groundwork.

Littlerprick was a rabid germ-a-phobe. Her cold last winter had been one of the best weeks of her work life since Mr. Baelish had sent her home for two delightful (well, not including the coughing and hacking) days off at home. He’d even paid her for the time off which was a rarity. Then, he’d kept his distance for the rest of the week. Of course, when Mina came down with it the following week, he’d docked her pay the day she had to stay home with her daughter and Sansa had been forced to ask her mother to care for her the other two days that Mina had missed school. Oh, to have a job with paid sick leave!

She had been hoping it was the elementary school calling about her application for the open position there. The numbers had been similar. Instead, it was Jon calling. He had been adorably awkward getting to the point of his call but Sansa didn’t mind. She preferred adorably awkward over smooth arrogance any day of the week. He’d asked her out just like she’d been hoping he would and she’d readily agreed. They’d made plans for Saturday night since Mina would be at Harry’s and Jon said his sister would gladly watch Lyarra. A date with Jon Snow. An actual date without the girls. You’ve been on dates before. Why are you so giddy about this? Oh, help!

She was excited, nervous but happy, too. And she just knew she’d wind up spending a ridiculous amount of time scrutinizing her wardrobe between now and Saturday…and it was only Monday. It was during the meeting as she tried to focus on Mr. Baelish’s spending analysis that she realized what was different about this date compared to any date she’d have over the past two years at least. Despite a healthy dose of nerves, she was actually looking forward to it.
“So, are you going to tell me or not?” Jeyne asked over lunch in the breakroom.

“I, uh…I got asked out.”

“Oh! A date for Sansa! That’s terrific! I could tell by the blushing and huge grin you were obviously excited about something. And there you go turning the loveliest shade of red again. So, tell me all about him. Is it a certain handsome golden haired prince?”

“Joffrey?!” Sansa choked over her soda and then spent the next three minutes remembering how to breathe again and wiping up the spill Jeyne’s words had brought about.

For such a sweet friend, Jeyne really could be clueless sometimes. Joffrey had been an asshole…from date one. Sansa regretted that there had been a date two, three and four. At least there wasn’t a date five…and at least I didn’t sleep with him. She’d come close though. She’d been very lonely and going through some serious self-esteem issues and thought it might be worth a shot. Wrong! If the guy’s a selfish prick outside the bedroom, he’ll be a selfish prick in the bedroom…not that there was that much to his prick. And for once Harry’s timing had been ideal when he’d called to say that Mina was throwing up and wanted her. So, Joffrey had left unsatisfied and pissed off and that had been the end of it.

“No, Jeyne. That was over a year ago and I’ll never go out with him again.” Jeyne made a pouty little face and Sansa’s eyeballs really wanted to roll up to the top of her head when her phone started ringing again. She glanced at the number and did a double-take. She’d looked up the number again this morning to be certain because it’d been so similar to the number Jon had called from. “Excuse me, Jeyne,” she said rising from her chair to head outside for this call. No way was she going to let it get around she was applying for another job just yet.


“Uh…yeah.” She hurried out the side door and drew a deep breath to calm the fuck down. “Hello?”

“Hello, is this Sansa Stark?”

“Yes.”

“Hi, this is Brienne Tarth, the principal at Chelsea Elementary School. I was hoping you might still be interested in the position here and perhaps we could schedule an interview?”

Could this day be in better? “Yes, Ms. Tarth. I’m very interested and would love to meet with you.”

Could this day be any better? Could I sound anymore like Chandler from ‘Friends?’ Short answer…no.

He’d planned to call Sansa on Sunday but then chickened out. Plus, him and Lyarra had kept busy around the house with laundry and cleaning…and there was football to watch.

So, Monday morning he had headed into work with his stomach in so many knots he feared he might throw up. You can do this, he’d said to himself while he stared at his phone. He’d already repeated it about a thousand times when a child did in fact throw up right outside the office and Jon had to help deal with the ensuing chaos of shrieking children. Once that was cleaned up and the unfortunate
That was easy. What were you so worried about? he chided himself afterwards. She’d been friendly, sweet, easy-going and perfect. And she said yes! Perfect Sansa, perfectly perfect Sansa...beautiful, perfect Sansa...perfectly, deliciously, delightfully sexy Sansa. Shit, don’t get ahead of yourself, he groaned pulling at his hair and banging his head on his desk.

“Jon? You got a minute?” a voice asked from the doorway. “Unless you’re terribly busy trying to bash your skull in.”

“Sure, Brienne,” he said as he sat up straight, rubbed his head and tried to act like he’d been doing something besides freaking out over the thoughts of running his hands through Sansa’s hair and tasting her lips. Not that Brienne would be fooled. She had a sixth sense for slackers and daydreamers. Jon wasn’t typically either of those things but she always seemed to know when he was not focused.

She was holding a large cardboard box and plopped it down on his desk. “The staff t-shirts for Field Day came in. What do you think?”

Jon held one up and shuddered. They were blue and gold and said, ‘Go Chelsea Lions!’ If I must work at Chelsea Elementary, couldn’t we at least have different colors and a different mascot than those guys?

“It’s terrific…as long as I don’t have to wear it,” he said in a clipped tone as he dropped the shirt like it was covered with spiders.

“Jon…is this a soccer thing again?” Brienne smirked. She knew perfectly well that it was. Yes, I’m petty and immature when it comes to my team’s rivals. So, sue me. “Yes, Brienne, it’s a soccer thing. You know I loathe Chelsea…the team, that is! Not our elementary school. I’ve come to accept the name of our…um, school.”

“You’ll be wearing the shirt, Snow. Everyone will be wearing the shirt on Field Day. It promotes a sense of community and unity…don’t roll your eyes at me, young man,” she barked in her best Mean-Principal-Tarth voice. He laughed because he wasn’t a bit intimidated by her act and she continued, “And I forbid you to play hooky that day. You’re helping run it.”

Jon dropped his head on his desk and banged it a few times before saying, “Alright. I’ll wear the shirt. Do you really think I’d disappoint the kids? My own daughter being one of them?”

“Of course not,” Brienne said. “And try and be enthusiastic about it or I’ll take a picture of you in it and post it on Facebook. We have some mutual friends that are dedicated to your soccer-loving world.”

“You wouldn’t dare, Tarth,” he said with narrowed eyes.

“I would dare, Snow,” she responded. “On another note, I set up the interviews for the open secretary position.”

“Oh, great. How many?”

“Just three. They all look promising so we should find a good match. We’ll do the interviews next Monday, alright?”
“Sure thing,” he answered. She rose to leave but left the box sitting there. “Um…Brienne, did you want to take these somewhere?” Like the dump.

“No, I thought you might be kind enough to pass them out for me to the staff after school. Be sure and wear one to model it for the teachers when you do. Several of the ladies have commented on how they love you in blue.”

“Oh, hell no,” he hissed under his breath.

“Swear jar, Jon,” she warned with a merry twinkle in her blue eyes.

“You live to torment me, don’t you?”

“Yes…yes, I do.”


“That guy?” Robb asked in her ear.

“Yes, that guy…and would you please stop pointing at him?” Sansa whined smacking at her brother’s hand that was currently directed at Jon as he ran a lap around the field with the girls on Thursday night to warm them up.

“He seems okay, I guess. Not sure he could be considered as hot as…”

“Shut up, Robb. And yes, he is.” Robb grinned and set up his chair to watch the girls practice with her. He admitted he didn’t know all that much about soccer but was determined to learn so he could cheer on his niece properly. Sansa quickly regretted bringing him though. “What are you doing?” she yelped when Robb sauntered out towards the field during a water break.

“I’m just going to introduce myself to your future husband and make sure he knows he’d better treat you like a queen…or else,” he finished smacking his fist into his other palm.

“Robb, please don’t embarrass me…or yourself.” Sansa held her breath as Robb went up to Jon and they started chatting.

“What’d I miss?” Margaery asked as she arrived from work.

“Just your husband acting like a Neanderthal.”

“Well, nothing new there, I’m afraid. Oh! He’s going to give Jon ‘the talk,’ I see. Very big-brotherish of him. Could be worse. Ned could’ve come.”

“Dad would never do something so ridiculous and mortifying…at least not since I finished high school.”

“So,” Margaery said as that wicked little glint entered her eye. “How far will you go with Coach Snow on Saturday night? Is he going to score?”

“Is sex all you think about?” Margaery wagged her eyebrows suggestively and smirked. “God, no wonder my brother worships you. It’s a first date, Marg. He’s taking me to dinner downtown and
then he suggested we could see a movie. He’s really sweet and kind of…well, not shy really but maybe a bit? I think he’s kind of like me…afraid of hoping for too much. I can’t see him being the type to try and invite himself in on the first date.’ Margaery made a disgruntled noise. “I think that’s good. I don’t want to rush into something too quickly and then things fall apart before we give the relationship a chance. And the girls are friends. I don’t want to spoil that if things just don’t click for me and Jon.”

“That’s very wise,” Margaery said with a pious little nod. Then, the gleam came back into her eyes. “So, what you’re saying is you’ll wait till the third date to fuck him?”

“Marg!” she exclaimed and slapped her sister-in-law’s arm. She glanced over at the field where Robb and Jon were talking, fearing that they’d been overhead and at that moment Jon looked her way. He was a little sweaty in his fitted shirt and soccer shorts and he was very cut. His curly hair couldn’t have looked more artfully tousled and begging to be played with if he’d spent hours on it. His eyes were soft and his mouth was quirked in a tentative, sweet smile. She smiled back at him as the heat flooded her cheeks. “Yeah, okay…maybe by the third date,” she whispered as her and Margaery dissolved into giggles like teenagers.

“So…a date with Sansa?” Rhae prompted with a grin.

Jon groaned and dished out a serving of fish for his sister. He wasn’t that annoyed. He was excited about the date tomorrow night but he didn’t want to discuss it right now with Lyarra in the next room. But Rhae was hard to deter.


“You really like her, don’t you?!” she prodded.

“I do. Do you think that’s stupid? For me to like her so much this soon?”

“No, I don’t suppose so. But, I thought you’d sworn off redheads after Ygritte.”


“Well, alright. Good for you,” Rhae said with a smirk. “This might…well, never mind.”

“What, Rhae? You obviously have something more you want to say. Say it in here before we go to the table.”

“I’m not saying anything. She seems nice. She’s very beautiful...like model beautiful,” she said then.

“You think she’s out of my league?”

“No! No one is out of your league, little brother,” Rhae said before heading out of the kitchen with her plate. Lyarra was already sitting down and waiting for the adults to join her. “So, kiddo,” Rhae said as she sat, “You looking forward to hanging out with Aunt Rhae tomorrow night?”

“Sure, Aunt Rhae,” Lyarra said as she started on her rice.
She had already meticulously separated the peas into colonies of three. Jon knew the next move would be to add grains of rice to each colony, making a circle around each set of peas. Lyarra still enjoyed playing with food when she didn’t like what was served and Jon suppressed another groan. If it’d been pizza or Mexican, she’d have already inhaled half of it. Fish, peas, rice…well, it would be a work of art tonight.

“Please eat, baby,” he urged and got a little scowl in response.

“Will you need her to spend the night, Jon?” Rhae asked with a teasing tone.

Jon drew a deep breath and told himself to not get aggravated with his sister. Rhae liked to fix him up…and she worried way too much about his sex life. Or lack of a sex life. She was also immensely protective of him and could possibly be a bit overbearing at times.

“I don’t need her to spend the night, Rhae. If Lyarra wants that and you want that, I won’t object. But, I don’t need her to, alright?” Would I like that to be necessary? Sure but this is a first date and Sansa is…well, she’s special. I don’t want to screw things up.

Rhae waggled her eyebrows and mouthed, “Sure about that?”

“Sure about what?” Lyarra asked. She never missed much. He knew it which was why he didn’t want to discuss the date in her presence but Rhae sometimes thought that Lyarra was still ‘too little’ to catch on to the things they discussed. It wasn’t that he wanted to keep things from her but he’d like to have at least a date or two with Sansa under his belt before he had that talk. Lyarra was only seven so naturally she wasn’t omnipotent and some things went over her head but she still caught a lot more than she missed. “Why would Dad need me to spend the night with you on Saturday? United’s got the early game on Sunday. We’ll be up by 7 to watch pre-match coverage. You’re never up that early,” she told her aunt.

Thanks, Rhae, Jon thought while glaring at his sister. “Um…I’m going out with a friend tomorrow night, baby.”

“Theon?”

“No…I’m going out with Mina’s mom.”

“Oh, okay,” Lyarra shrugged. “Where will Mina be?”

“With her father.”

“Well, I like Sansa. Why can’t I come with you?”

“Uh…well, it’s kind of like a…”

“Is it like a date?” his daughter asked before he could spit it out.

Her brow was scrunched up and Jon worried what she thought of this. Rhae was looking at him apologetically. Too late for that now, he thought with a sigh. He’d dated a co-worker of Rhae’s over a year ago for a couple of months. Lyarra hadn’t liked her at first…then, she really hadn’t liked her after she got to know her. Which was fine because Jon didn’t exactly like her all that much either once he brought her around his daughter. It was clear she didn’t particularly like kids and him having one was going to be an issue. Or not an issue really since that pretty much ended things. He hoped with Sansa that Lyarra might feel differently. She seemed to like her. She really liked her daughter and Sansa was great with the girls.
“Yes, it’s a date. Is that…”

“Excuse me,” Lyarra said getting up from the table unexpectedly and heading to her room.

“Oh, shit,” Rhae whispered. “Jon…I am so sorry.”

“Yeah…well, enjoy dinner while I go talk to my daughter,” he replied taking a deep breath and following her down the hall. She was already sitting on the bed when he came through the doorway with her legs folded up and under her and holding her favorite stuffed animal. He sat down on the edge of the bed. “Baby…”

“I like her,” she said. He wanted to ask if she meant Sansa or Mina but just waited. “I like Sansa. She’s nice and pretty. Mina’s my friend,” she said next.

“Yeah, I know. I’m really glad you’ve made a good friend on the team.”

“I was hoping to have her over sometime soon.”

“Well, we could do that…”

“What would happen if you got married to Sansa?”

“No one is getting married…not anytime soon if at all,” he said.

“But if you did…Mina would be like my sister, wouldn’t she?”

“Yes, she’d be your step-sister. Would you like that, you think?”

“Sisters fight.”

“Well, sometimes they do. Not all the time, I imagine.”

“Kayley and Kylie fight all the time…every day. They hate each other.”

“They don’t hate each other. The twins do fight a lot but…it’s not that way in every family, love.” Lyarra hugged her stuffed white dog tighter and Jon thought he’d rather rip his own arm off then see the miserable expression on his daughter’s face now. “Lyarra,” he said cupping her face and looking into her eyes. “I’m taking Sansa out for dinner. That’s all. There’s nothing more to it than that for now.”

“Do you love her?”

“Uh...no. We haven't known each other that long. But I like her. I wouldn’t have asked her out if I didn’t.”

“What if you fall in love with her? If you get married and she’s your wife, what about me?”

“You’ll always be my daughter. I’ll always love you. Nothing could ever change that.”

“What if you had a baby with her?”

“Lyarra...no one could ever take your place in my heart. If I have other children some day, I'll love them, too. But I promise that nothing will change my love for you.”

“I like when it’s just you and me,” she whispered and Jon pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head.
“I do, too,” he whispered back. He tried swallowing the lump that was forming in his throat now. “I love being with you, just you and me. I don’t want you to think I’m not happy.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy, baby.”

“But you get lonely sometimes.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can just tell,” she said before she smiled and continued, “Dad, can I have something to eat besides fish and rice and peas?”

Jon shook his head at the never-ended turns a child’s mind could take and smiled. “Um…there’s some leftover mac and cheese in the fridge if you want it.”

“Okay,” she said before jumping off the bed to head to the dining room again. Jon collapsed back on the bed and covered his eyes and wondered whether that had gone well…or horribly. He also wondered if he’d ever figure out the right things to say. “Dad,” Lyarra said from the doorway.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“You better dress nice tomorrow night. Sansa’s pretty and she dresses nice. You can’t go looking like a slob.”

“Yeah, okay,” he laughed. “Maybe you can help me pick something out to wear.”

“Good plan,” Arya said.

Sansa and her sister rejoined the family soon after and Bran and Rickon were busy throwing couch cushions at Mina and each other when they were supposed to be making a fort for movie time. Catelyn Stark grew hoarse trying to get her youngest sons to ‘settle down’ and not break anything. Robb and Margaery had opted to stay at home tonight so Sansa figured she wouldn’t be asked too many questions about her date for tomorrow night with Jon. She’d thought wrong. She was busy smiling to herself thinking of Jon walking her to her car last night after practice and the giddy little thrill she’d felt standing close to him while the girls had been chatting when Rickon burst in on her thoughts.

“Robb says you’ve got a hot date tomorrow night, Sans.”

Sansa’s eyes flew wide open and she looked to Mina sitting on the couch next to her dad. Ned
Stark’s own eyes got wide as well but he wore a bemused look and kept chatting with his granddaughter. Bran punched Rickon in the shoulder but Mina was busy telling her grandpa about her trip to the zoo from last weekend. Okay…she didn’t hear him.

Okay, she thought later on the drive home. She did hear him.

“Mommy? Did you hear me? What hot date was Uncle Rickon talking about?”

“Yes…sorry, baby. I have a date tomorrow night.”

“Is it with Mr. Baelish?”

What?! EWWW!! “No! Um…no. It’s with Coach Jon actually.”

“Oh…okay.”

Mina started humming along to the radio and Sansa wondered whether she should say anything further or ask if Mina had questions. Mina had never seemed to mind when Sansa went on dates before but she somehow wondered if it would be different this time. None of the guys Sansa had dated had wound up being worth bringing around her daughter so the whole ‘Mom’s got a date’ thing never seemed to phase her. But Mina already knew Jon and liked him. Plus, she really liked his daughter. Would that make a difference? Ultimately, she just let Mina hum along to the radio. Her daughter liked to think things over and a lot of times she would come back to something long after Sansa thought she’d already moved on. She’ll bring it up in her own good time.

It was a sunny but cool morning at the fields on Saturday when Sansa and Mina arrived for the Crazy Pop Tarts’ first match. Jon was already there and Lyarra shouted for Mina to come over as soon as she spied her. The girls started passing the ball back and forth and Sansa walked over to Jon.

“All set, Coach Snow?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so, Ms. Stark,” he said.

They stood there smiling at each other and Sansa had that same giddy excitement as earlier in the week, except now the nerves were really coming on. She swept a stray strand of hair behind her ear and tried to tame the butterflies. By some unspoken agreement, they turned to watch their girls warming up with the other teammates that had joined them.

“I’ll warn you that there will be a ton of Starks here today and I will go ahead and apologize in advance if they get rowdy. They can be…passionate about sports.”

“I kind of got that impression from your brother.”

“Robb is bad. So is my Dad. My sister, Arya, is worse.”

“Duly noted,” he said with a grin.

“And then there’s Harry,” she murmured to herself as she saw him heading their way.
“Daddy!” Mina shouted as she saw him and Sansa bit the inside of her cheek to keep from grimacing.

Harry was tall with sandy hair and blue eyes. He was handsome and charming in his way but now whenever Sansa looked at him she wondered what she’d ever found so appealing about him. The easy smile and dimples just reminded her of his carelessness and thoughtlessness now. At least he managed to make it here for Mina’s sake.

“Hey, Princess!” he shouted, lifting her up into the air and spinning her. Sansa was aware of Jon’s eyes on her and she gave him a quick smile as Harry walked up to them both carrying a laughing Mina over his shoulder. “Hey, Sans,” he said.

_That’s my family’s nickname for me. I hate for you to call me that_, she wanted to say. But instead she said ‘hi’ and introduced Jon. “This is Mina’s coach, Harry. Jon Snow. You didn’t get to meet him that night you brought her to practice,” she said with a slightly frosty tone. _Okay, maybe it was more glacial than I intended_, she thought as Harry gave her that sardonic look she despised.

“Oh, yeah…hey, man! Harry Hardyng.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jon responded while offering his hand.

“Mommy’s got a hot date with Coach Jon tonight,” Mina said then and Sansa could’ve laughed aloud at the two men’s shocked expressions just as they let go of each other’s hands.

_Yep…knew she’d bring it up in her own good time_, Sansa thought as she bit her lip to keep from giggling like a loon.

Chapter End Notes

Date night next chapter.
Sansa cringed as her sister and brothers broke into another chorus of ‘We Are the Champions.’ At least they saved it for the parking lot this time.

“STOP!” Mina shouted. “You’re embarrassing me!”

“And me,” Sansa said. She glanced over to where Jon and Lyarra were getting into his Jeep. He looked at her and mouthed, ‘See you later?’ and Sansa felt herself blushing like a girl as she gave him a quick, ‘Yes.’

“Oh, come on, Sans,” Harry said coming up behind her, his patronizing tone setting her teeth on edge at once. “Our girl scored a goal in her very first game. She’s like a soccer prodigy. The next… um…which one do you like, pumpkin?”

“I like Meagan Rapinoe and Carli Lloyd…and Alex Morgan.”

“Yeah, Alex Morgan. She’s the pretty one, right? You’ll be as good as her.”

The ‘pretty’ one? That would be the one you’d mention…and don’t you fucking start with me again, Sansa thought as she shot him a dirty look.

She was proud of her daughter but she didn’t want all the family’s over-the-top carrying on going to her head. And Harry…he was the worst. Highly competitive and a completely misogynistic asshole when it came to women’s sports. It’s t-ball all over again.

Mina had played t-ball when she was five and Harry told her she was destined for the Majors every time she managed to connect the bat with the ball that was sitting right there on a tee waiting to be hit. Mina had sweetly broken the news to her father that girls didn’t play Major League Baseball. ‘I meant softball, princess. You know…whatever girls do.’ Sansa had nearly chewed her own tongue off then to keep from screaming at him in front of their daughter.

“You did really well, Mina. I’m proud of how hard you’ve worked since you started and loved the way you and your teammates played well together. And, I was glad to see you being such a good sport even when the other team scored,” Sansa said.

Harry gave her incredulous look and scoffed…until Mina said cheerfully, “That’s exactly what Coach Jon said to us all at the end of the game!”

Harry’s easy smile faltered for a moment but he said, “Um…he seems like a good coach.”

“He’s the best coach ever!” Mina said to her father. But then, she dropped her eyes when she
realized her father didn’t look pleased by that.

*Oh shit.* “Let’s get your bag out of my car, baby, so you and Daddy can go have some fun tonight, alright?”

People like to win. Winning feels a helluva lot better than losing. Parents enjoy watching their children succeed. And sometimes, they like to live vicariously through their child’s accomplishments whether in sports, academics or some other activity. Sansa knew all this. Her own father had not been above making embarrassing displays over his children especially when Robb played football in high school.

But Harry…everything was about winning to Harry particularly when it came to sports. Mina hadn’t played anything but the one season of t-ball until now. Harry said he was just being encouraging but Sansa thought his encouragement sounded more like pressure.

“*Hit a home run for Daddy,*” he’d said back in the t-ball days.

“Score a goal for Daddy,” he’d said this morning.

“And what if she doesn’t, Harry?” Sansa had hissed once Mina had given him a thumbs-up and ran off. “Are you going to make her feel bad about it?”

“No…God, Sansa…were you always this uptight?” he had asked. The conversation had gone downhill from there. “Afraid I’m going to embarrass you in front of your new boyfriend?” he’d said once they’d reached the spectators’ side of the field.

“He’s not my boyfriend.” *Not yet anyway but I prefer his company a billion times over yours.*

“Yeah, okay. It’s been like what…two weeks since she started practices and you’re already going out with the guy?”

“Since when do you care who I date and how long it takes for a guy to ask me out? I certainly don’t give a shit about the…women you date unless you’re bringing them around our daughter.”

“Whatever. All I hear lately is how great soccer is and how wonderful Coach Jon is. Mina told me all about the *fabulous* trip to the zoo with him and his daughter the other night when I called.” He’d leaned into her ear and said, “I don’t care if you need a little action but can you *try* and focus on our daughter for just one second? I mean, if you and Best Coach Ever break up, think of how that’ll affect Mina.”

“How dare you?! Everything I do revolves around Mina and her happiness! My entire life for the past eight years has been about nothing but…”

“Hey, Harry,” Robb had interrupted then. His tone had been light. His look was not. And Harry had plastered on his fake-ass smile again and acted like him and Robb were best buds. They weren’t. They never had been and never would be. At that point, Harry said he was going to find a place to watch. “You okay?” Robb had asked once he walked away.

“Yes…thanks. I shouldn’t let him bait me.”

“You bet. Arya wanted to come over but Mom didn’t want any bloodshed at her granddaughter’s first soccer game.”

The match itself had been fine. Mina and several of her teammates had scored including Lyarra but the other team scored, too. With no keepers at this age group, there were a lot of goals scored. But
Mina was getting to play soccer just like she wanted and she was having a good time. That’s all that was supposed to come of this. Sansa smiled herself then and thought of Jon. *That was all that was intended but maybe more will come of it.*

She retrieved Mina’s overnight bag from the car and hugged her daughter. Harry made one last snarky remark saying he wouldn’t call *too* early to arrange the drop off but Sansa ignored him and spoke to Mina.

“If you need me, just call, okay?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

Mina wasn’t always a lock on overnights. Usually it ran about 60-40 that she would manage to stay overnight away from Sansa. That wasn’t just Harry. It was her family and Harry’s mom, too. And that was okay. Her daughter needed to know that she could always come home if she wanted. *Jon would understand, I think,* Sansa hoped. And suddenly, she could not wait to see him tonight. She looked at her watch and sighed. *11:20. 6:30 is still a long ways off.*

Sansa looked at her reflection as she put in her silver hoop earrings. She’d chosen a black and orchid floral pattern dress. It was sleeveless and fitted at the top with a flared skirt that ended just above her knees. She was wearing her black ballet flats because she wanted to be comfortable. She wore heels at work all day. So, on the weekends, she stuck to flats and sneakers. She had her black cashmere cardigan that her mother had given her last Christmas lying on the bed next to her clutch. There was at least a dozen discarded clothing items on the bed as she had agonized over this decision like she knew she would. She was still worried that she might be a touch too dressy but then again, she preferred being overdressed to underdressed. And the restaurant Jon had suggested was supposedly very nice. She’d worn her hair down and was just starting to doubt her entire ensemble again when the doorbell rang.

He was right on time and she answered the door uttering a slight gasp when she saw him. Jon Snow…he cleaned up nice. *Nice? Hell, he looks amazing!* He was in dress pants and a soft blue button down and a tie. His hair was pulled back in a manbun which looked far sexier on him than she imagined any manbun had a right to look.

“Wow, Jon…you look great!” she exclaimed. *Sheesh, Sansa. You’re gushing, girl. Well...he’s hot.*

“Thanks. Lyarra actually helped me pick clothes,” he grinned self-consciously as he looked her up and down. “You look fantastic by the way,” he continued before he darted in and kissed her quickly on the cheek. “I, uh…I hope that was okay,” he said with a sweet awkwardness just like when he’d called to ask her out. “Not too forward?*

“I’m not complaining,” she said, smiling but also wishing she wouldn’t turn the color of a tomato. *Wishful thinking there, dear. At least he’s blushing, too.* “Lyarra has good taste in clothes.”

“Well, she told me that you were pretty and I should dress nice instead of like a slob for a change.”

She laughed and asked, “Are you saying without her help you’d be in athletic pants and a t-shirt like I usually see you?”
“Yep and probably taking you to Hooters for dinner,” he deadpanned. She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “I’m kidding there.”

“I’m glad,” she laughed. “Believe it or not, I did have a guy take me there for a first date once.”

“You’re not serious.”

“I am. I discovered that he’d just broken up with one of the servers there and wanted show her up by bringing a date in to rub in her face.”

“Oh, my God,” he said in a disgusted tone. “Tell me there wasn’t a second date.”

“Uh…no. The wings were good though.”

He snickered and said, “Yeah, it’s Theon’s favorite place to go. Imagine that.”

“What?” she said jokingly, “I figured he’d prefer Twin Peaks.”

“Well, he likes that place, too, but Theon would tell you he prefers the classics…when it comes to hot wings with a side of T and A, that is.”

They walked out to his Jeep and chatted about the morning’s game as he drove towards their destination. She was glad they had something to discuss. Most of the time it felt like a chore trying to propel a conversation along on a first date. Dinner was normally a very welcome distraction because it meant their mouths would be occupied and the strain of ‘making small talk’ would be temporarily lifted. But with Jon, Sansa didn’t feel that way. As they rode along together for that twenty minutes just chatting about the girls, the game and their families, she realized how comfortable she was with him. It had happened last week at the zoo and dinner afterwards but Sansa had wondered if maybe that was because their girls were there and they were both too wrapped up in their parenting role for there to be too much expectations about their conversation. It was delightful to discover that she felt just as relaxed with him now as she did then.

There were butterflies fluttering in her stomach but it was a different sensation than what she usually felt on a date. Comfortable…but excited. Comfortably excited. I think that’s what I am. They weren’t the swarming horde born from fear of another doomed encounter, another failure. They were a happy little flutter initiated by this thrill of another variety, from spending time with Jon and pleasure in being in his company. Other interests were stirred as well. He was quite good looking and he smelled incredible tonight, an appealing masculine scent but not overpowering. She liked the sound of his voice, deep and husky, that sent a shiver of anticipation through her. She loved his smile and the way his eyes crinkled up when he laughed. And he laughed a good deal at Sansa’s rendition of her sister belting out Queen on their way to lunch earlier just to annoy her.

“Honestly, I may have to ban them all from the next match.”

“Nah, they all seemed fine,” he said. “Be glad my mum wasn’t there. She can get a bit scary.” He grinned then and confessed, “Well, I’m not much better but I try to keep it reined in for youth football and save my ranting for the professionals.”

They chatted about his mother and her living in the UK now and then returned to other topics. But whatever the subject, one thing Sansa really liked was the way he listened to her. And she really couldn’t get over the way he looked at her, like she was fascinating…interesting and beautiful. He made her feel…special. Maybe a woman like Sansa, who all her family would say was beautiful on the inside and out and plenty interesting, should already feel special. But her luck with men being what it was (virtually nonexistent), she’d secretly come to doubt it. Harry hadn’t done much to make
her feel like she was worth any extra effort (at least not once he’d got her to sleep with him) and no one else had either. But tonight, she felt special. She wasn’t full of doubts and questioning what this handsome, kind and intelligent man saw in her for a change.

“So, how’d you get into coaching?” she asked at the restaurant once they were seated and placed their drink order.

“I’ve always loved football…uh, soccer…but once I’d accrued enough injuries that I figured my playing days were coming to an end, I started looking for a way to stay involved in the sport first hand…besides just watching it on television. I started out volunteering with the teenage boys’ team a couple of hours a week but once Lyarra turned five she asked to play. Lucky for me, she loves it so I get the pleasure of combining two things I’m passionate about, the sport and kids, or my kid to be exact.”

“You must be a great teacher. I’ll bet all the kids love you,” she said.

“Yeah…I loved teaching a lot and I miss having my own class full of kids. Administration is fine. It’s kind of like all the kids are my kids now but assistant principals don’t get to have the daily interactions with most of the students the way a classroom teacher does.”

“That’s true. I guess you get attached over the course of a year.” He nodded and she said, “I forgot you’d said you worked in school administration. Do you work at Brookhaven or Long Castle?”

“Neither, though I attended Long Castle when I was a student. I’ve never worked at any high school. I taught 4th grade before I got roped into trying administration.”

“Oh! I’m sorry. I just assumed you must have taught older kids. A lot of…”

“Yes…she’s not wrong. He’s kind of…” she trailed off not sure if she should finish the statement. Creepy. You don’t want to tell him that, do you?

“A jerk? I believe that was Mina’s description,” he joked.

“Yes…she’s not wrong. He’s kind of…” she trailed off not sure if she should finish the statement. Creepy. You don’t want to tell him that, do you?

“What?”

“Ummm…he just makes me feel sort of uncomfortable at times. He’s…he’s always telling me I’m pretty and he’s…”

“A creep?” Jon asked looking concerned.

“Yes,” she said but plowed on when Jon started to look aggravated on her behalf. “It’s fine really. He’s my parents age and it’s not like he’s making any moves really. Anyway, I’ve applied for a
couple of other jobs and I’ve actually have an interview scheduled for Monday.”

“That’s great,” he said smiling once more. “To your success on Monday then,” he continued, holding up his glass for a toast.

“To success,” Sansa said with a smile as she clinked her glass against his. *Success to us as well, I hope.*

The Spring evening was balmy as they left the restaurant and downtown was alive with crowds seeking their Saturday night libations and entertainment. They agreed to skip seeing a movie and opted to walk along enjoying the city park’s Dogwood trees and azaleas in bloom in the fading twilight. Fairy lights illuminated the walkways and Jon could not have hoped for a more romantic place to go strolling if he had planned this. He was cautiously optimistic that their date was a success so far. *Is it successful enough for me to hold her hand? Only one way to find out.*

At a crosswalk leading from the park to Market Square, Jon grasped her hand as they made their way through the press of people out enjoying the restaurants, bars and shops in the open-air, pedestrian friendly space. He didn’t let go once they reached the Square and she didn’t seem to mind that. He liked the feel of her soft hand in his and he was enjoying the way the evening breeze was wafting her enticing scent his way and playing in her hair.

Sansa pointed out a bakery that she had heard of and they went inside to browse. He noticed her admiring the frosted lemon cake pastries in the display case while he was busy admiring her. She was gorgeous anyway but she looked radiant tonight. Her dress, her hair and her eyes…he couldn’t keep his eyes off her. He had a juvenile desire to snap a picture of himself with her and send it to Theon and text something like, ‘Look at this beautiful woman who’s willing to be seen with me.’ He wouldn’t though. He’d just relish being in her company and getting to know her better.

“All right,” she said, and he let her hand go. “I think I can handle the lemon cake pastries by myself.”

“See something you like?” the lady behind the counter asked.

“Yes, very much,” he wanted to say as his eyes were still on Sansa. “Two of the lemon cakes, please,” he said instead.

He enjoyed the childish look of delight that lit up her face then. She busily dug into her treat at one of the little tables in the back while he asked that the other one be wrapped up to go. Lyarra loved lemon cakes, too.

“You can’t just sit there and watch me eat this,” Sansa grinned. “I’ll feel like a pig if you don’t share it with me.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” he replied, smiling back at her and pinching off a bite.

It was quite good. But what was far better were the satisfied moans and sighs Sansa made with each bite she took. *Christ…she’s going to have to stop that. Or not,* he thought wickedly as she licked her lips between bites and moaned once more. He felt yet another jolt to his cock at that and cleared his throat.

“Mmmmm…this is sooooo good,” she hummed appreciatively, closing her eyes for a minute to savor
it. Her lips were parted in a perfect imitation of ecstasy and Jon knew he’d be picturing that face and her sounds later in private.

“Yes,” he said in a strangled tone and had to look away for a minute to regain his composure. “So… um, you mentioned you were working on your degree. What are you studying?”

“Marketing. I’ve been working on this degree for so long though sometimes it feels pointless,” she said in a defeated tone. “Sorry, I don’t mean to sound like such a downer. It’s just frustrating. I can only take a course or two per semester. I feel like I’m spinning my wheels sometimes, you know? But, I’m not too many hours away from finishing now which is nice.”

“That’s great, Sansa. I guess it’s been difficult with Minisa and working full time.”

“Yeah. I love my daughter but being a mom so young kind of brought my big career dreams to a screeching halt. Not that I had such great…well, it doesn’t matter.”

Jon squeezed her hand and nodded…and couldn’t help but feel a tad guilty. It takes two to tango but Val had dropped out of school just like Sansa. She was the one who was pregnant and had to give birth after all. He could’ve been a selfish prick and pretended that it was none of his concern. Moms didn’t necessarily get that option. Of course, he hadn’t done that but after Lyarra was born, Val had talked about going back to school…maybe once Lyarra was one or two. He wondered now if she would’ve been able to finish her degree or if she would’ve struggled with leaving their daughter to do that.

After Val’s death, he’d been extremely fortunate to have his mother and Rhae’s help so he could finish his Master’s. And, he had been closer to his degree anyway. Sansa was younger than him and had left college with just her freshman year under her belt and three years (at least) in front of her still. He admired that she had managed to hold on to her dream of obtaining her degree and, regardless of what happened between them, he really hoped she would achieve everything she wanted.

They left the bakery and walked towards the center of the Square as a band was warming up to perform on the outdoor stage. There was a bar nearby and Jon could see highlights from the day’s matches on the big screen in the patio area. It wasn’t too crowded and it had a decent view of the stage.

“Would you like to have a drink and listen to the band?” he asked.

“Yes, that’d be nice.”

Jon loosened his tie and drank his Guinness, watching Sansa sip her Chardonnay as the band performed. Everything about tonight had been perfect, more than he could hope for truly. One date…one official date…and I’m already falling for her. She’ll likely ruin me for any other woman at this rate. He wondered if she had any idea how she was affecting him right now but he doubted it. Her love life had been as rocky as his apparently. Maybe more so. He worried that she’d be as guarded with her heart as he was with his. Well, was…until I met her.

And there were still the girls to consider. Lyarra had already expressed some of her fears and concerns. Jon wondered if Mina would have similar feelings…but different ones perhaps since her father was still in the picture. From what Jon had seen of him today and gleaned already from things Sansa had said, he thought Harry Hardyn was probably an asshole. Any guy who had won Sansa’s affections but failed to treat her like a queen had to be, right? But Jon didn’t doubt that he loved his daughter (in perhaps a slightly self-centered kind of way) and Mina obviously loved him. How would she feel about another man in her mother’s life?
He shook off his concerns and enjoyed watching Sansa sway in her seat to the music. The smile on her face made him grin like an idiot but, when she looked at him and smiled right back, he felt his heart soar. He liked how genuine she was. And she genuinely loves lemon cake, Chardonnay and listening to live music…I’m taking notes. He’d been with a couple of women that were always trying to put up a front with the world. Busy trying to show everyone how perfect they were. He found it tiring and, as he suspected from the get-go, he was never able to live up to their expectations of a perfect boyfriend. Sansa didn’t make him feel like that though. She made him feel…comfortable but excited, too.

They were heading back to her place near 10:30 when Jon’s nerves from earlier started to hit him full force again. The part of a first date that he usually dreaded the most was coming next…the ‘goodnight’ part. Usually, he just feared misreading a woman’s signals of whether a kiss would be welcome or not and what degree of kissing was appropriate based on how the date had gone. But it was more than that with Sansa. He wanted to kiss her more than anything but he feared getting too caught up in that kiss and maybe pushing too far too soon. The last thing he wanted was to scare her off.

Lips or cheek? Lips…maybe? Okay. Shit, I need to calm down. I feel like I may start hyperventilating.

He parked his Jeep in her driveway and dashed over to open her door. He hastily rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants as Sansa dug her keys out of her purse. She seemed nervous as well but, once the keys were found, she pushed a tendril of her hair behind her ear and smiled at him. Her look was tremulous but expectant, too.

Okay…a kiss then.

Sansa cleared her throat and swatted at an insect buzzing nearby that had been attracted by the porch light. “I had a really good time tonight, Jon.”

“Me, too. I really enjoyed spending the evening with you and…well, thanks for agreeing to go out with me.” He stood there staring a bit too long and saw a bit of doubt creeping into her eyes. Now, idiot!

He leaned in aiming for her lips but panicked at the last second and diverted from her mouth to her cheek. But his cheek kiss was an epic fail and he only managed to kiss her right on the corner of her mouth, half lips and half cheek. Somehow, that seemed more sensuous than if he had just pecked her lips. He froze, eyes locked on hers, looking for signs of displeasure.

Sansa’s eyes widened but then her tongue darted out and licked the corner of her mouth where he’d just kissed her like she had with the lemon cake earlier. And that was sexy as hell.

“May I try that again?” he asked huskily.

She nodded and he was not imagining the flush spreading up her neck and across her lovely cheeks. He took his time now, determined that he would give her a proper kiss goodnight. He put his hands on her waist. It seemed so small in his hands. He took a step closer and she did the same. They were face to face and mere inches apart. He studied her face, her eyes and then her lips and then back to her eyes again. She had been smiling but now she wore a serious expression. Her lips were parted and he could hear her shallow breathing, waiting for him to make his move. He closed his eyes and this time his lips were right on target.

The press of Sansa’s lips against his own was soft and sweet and everything he had hoped. After a chaste peck, his lips caressed hers with soft open-mouthed kisses but no tongue…not at first. A soft smack of a kiss and another…and then another. He pulled back for a second and bit his bottom lip, looking at her questioningly. Her blue eyes fluttered open and her expression was unmistakable. His
blood surged with renewed ardor. She wanted another kiss and he was more than willing to give it to her.

He moved one hand from her waist to cup her cheek and dove back in hungrily to kiss her more passionately this time. She sighed into his mouth as he tilted his head and slid his tongue into her warm, wet mouth to explore. She tasted of wine and lemon cake and the combination was more erotic to Jon than any other he could name. He felt her tongue glide against his own and a muffled sound rumbled from his chest or throat perhaps…rather like a growl. Sansa was the one to pull back this time and she was breathing heavily. He was panting.

“Sansa…” he pleaded, not sure what to do now or what she wanted. He wanted to kiss her some more but…

“Come inside,” she said breathlessly.

She unlocked the door and he followed her into the condominium and told himself (and his cock) not to get too far ahead of himself. She’d invited him in but, the moment she wanted to stop, they would stop.

But Sansa had her own plans apparently, for as soon as they were through the door and it clicked closed behind him, she pressed herself against him and kissed him with a fierce sort of longing but a sweetness, too. Her body curled into his was overwhelmingly soft and curvaceous. He pulled her closer but kept his hands at the small of her back instead of grasping her ass and grinding against her like he wanted.

He laid soft kisses across her cheeks and made his way to her ear, kissing the shell of it and inducing the most delicious giggles from Sansa when his hot breath tickled her skin. She had her hands on his shoulders and was griping them as though it was the only way for her to stay on her feet.

He put his hands back on her waist and slowly walked her backwards down the entrance hall, not all that sure of his destination since he hadn’t really got past the front door when he’d picked her up earlier. She pulled away with a laugh and grasped his hand to lead him to her living room. They collapsed on the couch beside one another.

Jon caressed her face and whispered, “You’re so beautiful,” before they resumed kissing with all the heat of young lovers.

It had been so long since he’d kissed any woman like this and he was aroused to an embarrassingly obvious degree by now but Sansa didn’t seem perturbed as she ran her hands through to his hair causing the rubber band holding it back to fly off. He couldn’t care less because he thought she had a terrific idea there and he was desperate to run his hands through her silky, auburn locks. It was cool to the touch and so soft. Her mewling sounds as he carded his fingers through her hair as he kissed and gently sucked at her neck nearly undid him. He raised his mouth back up to capture hers once more and she eagerly waged an amorous battle with his tongue.

His hands ran from her hair downward and caressed her shoulders and glided across her breasts. And he immediately felt her tense up and she broke off from their kisses.

“I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely, trying to get himself back under control.

“No, don’t be. I’m just…I don’t think I’m ready to go further just yet,” she said drawing a hand up to her forehead.

“Of course…I understand,” he said. He struggled to gulp in more oxygen for he felt dizzy from their
kisses. Once he had mastered himself enough to look back up at her, he was troubled by the way she was worrying her bottom lip. Her eyes looked frightened like she imagined he might be upset with her. He could almost see herself preparing for a blow. Not a physical one, just another blow to her battered heart. He knew the feeling. “Sansa,” he said gently then, “I really like you. You say stop and we stop…always. We won’t go any further tonight. I’m not…I couldn’t bear having you think that I’m only interested in scoring. I really want to give us a chance. I’d like to have something serious and meaningful with you, okay?”

“I’d like that, too…but I’m scared.”

“Me, too. I’m scared of ruining things and getting my heart broken…and I’m scared of what the girls will think and if this will hurt them in some way. But there’s something I’m even more scared of,” he said, taking her lightly by the chin. “I’m scared of not trying at all and possibly missing out on something truly wonderful,” he finished stroking her cheek.

“I wouldn’t want to miss out on that either,” she said cupping his face now, rubbing his beard softly between her fingers. “I really like you, Jon. I want to believe that everything will work out perfectly and our girls will be happy but I know we can’t be sure of that. But it’s worth it to me to try. You’re definitely worth it.”

“Oh, sweet girl…that makes me so happy to hear,” he said before lightly kissing her lips once more, gentle pecks this time.

She leaned into him. Her eyes sparkled with tears and he instinctively knew that she wanted to be held more than anything right now. He put his arms around her and she nestled her head into the crook between his shoulder and his neck. He slowly caressed her back and her breathing became steadier. And, while his cock was still hard, his heartbeat was beginning to return to normal. He inhaled her sweet scent and enjoyed the warmth of her. Holding her in his arms was more than enough for tonight and when she moved out of his embrace at last, he said he would head on home. She walked him to the door and they kissed once more.

“Can I call you tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yes…I’ll be looking forward to hearing from you,” she smiled.

Jon saw his sister to the door and thanked her again. They’d agreed for her to watch Lyarra at his house so she could sleep in her own bed and not be disturbed since he’d likely come in past her bedtime. Rhae had been elated when he’d walked in close to midnight.

“I figured you’d be badgering me for details,” he chuckled as she said nothing but smirked at him for two minutes straight.

“I don’t need any details. I can see it on your face. She makes you happy and that makes me happy. Plus, your hair’s a mess and your lips look a bit swollen from kissing. That’s all I need to know for now, little bro.”

He’d hugged his sister and finally crawled into bed twenty minutes later. He was lying there thinking of Sansa and her lemon cake just as he knew he would be and his hand was migrating southward
when he heard his phone chime. He groaned and slid his glasses on to see who it was. As if I don’t know.

THEON: Well…

He grinned to himself before typing out his reply.

JON: I think I’m in love.

Sansa had washed her face and went to bed soon after Jon had left. She’d tossed and turned for about twenty minutes before she conceded that she would rest better with a little help from her battery-operated friend. But the climax it brought her felt a bit hollower than normal. She missed his warm hands on her, his arms wrapped around her, and the soft growls and moans he probably didn’t realize he made when they were kissing.

And trying to picture his soft but firm lips on the area getting the attention only made the vibrator seem more artificial than usual. Still, with the make-out session from earlier and a little imagination, she was able to get off. She lay there flushed but not completely sated when her phone chimed.

MARGAERY: Well…

SANSA: I don’t think I’ll be able to hold out till the third date.

MARGAERY: Now, that’s what I like to hear. He still there?

SANSA: No, I had to put the brakes on. I got scared.

MARGAERY: Oh, honey.

SANSA: It’s okay. He was really sweet and understanding.

MARGAERY: He seems like he would be.

SANSA: Marg…I think I’m falling in love.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you thought I did well with their date. Lady_Firefly put the pressure on saying it was built up to Bastard Bowl expectations...lol.

I’ll be on vacation in a few days so this fic won’t be getting an update till approximately mid-June. Sorry!

Thanks to all of you for reading and especially those of you subscribing, leaving kudos and comments :)
Chance

Chapter Summary

Sansa freaks out about her interview but Jon is there to help. They both talk to friends about their budding relationship. Harry shows up unexpectedly at practice and then Jon and Lyarra have Sansa and Mina over to his house for a cookout.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait for any of you that have been looking for an update on this one. I struggled with getting this chapter the way I wanted it for several days. This is a long chapter to make up for it at least.

Thanks very much to Janina for always letting me bend her ear and to kittykatknits and Jeanettesc for talking me down off the great big shelf of insecurity for this chapter! You ladies are awesome!

Monday morning dawned bright and sunny for late March and Sansa saw Mina off to school with a smile. She’d told Mr. Baelish she had a doctor’s appointment this morning. She didn’t like lying but she didn’t want to admit she was heading off to an interview for another job. He could be quite petty and the last employee that had openly admitted to looking for another job had suddenly found themselves unemployed. Poor Ros.

Sansa hoped this interview would go well. She longed for the day she could say sayonara to Mr. Baelish.

Once Mina was delivered to school, Sansa turned up the radio to sing along while her mind reflected on Jon calling yesterday. He’d asked politely how she was and if Mina had had a good time with her dad before he invited them to come grill out with him and Lyarra on Friday night.

“We’d love that. Thank you, Jon.”

“Great! Hopefully, the weather will cooperate but if it rains, I’ll come up with a back-up meal. I’ve got a good-sized back yard and the girls can run around or whatever.” They’d nailed down the specifics and talked about their daughters some. But then his voice had dropped into a low and husky tone. “I miss you,” he’d said. “I’ve thought about you and last night…a lot. I can’t wait to see you again.”

Margaery, you were so right about that voice. Sansa had squirmed in her seat and squeezed her legs together, trying to sound casual as she’d replied, “I’ve been thinking of you, too.” I came while I thought of you. Please tell me you did that, too. “I can’t wait to see you either.”

She’d stood there breathing heavily into the phone for a solid two minutes after that which was okay since he’d been doing the same. I’m never going to make it to the third date.
Sansa drew herself back to the present as she turned into the Chelsea Elementary School’s parking lot. She was nervous but hopeful. Interviews make most people nervous. You can do this, Sansa. You’ve got plenty to offer and Ms. Tarth seemed really nice on the phone.

The bell had already rung for class to start so there was no hubbub of activity outside like there surely was during drop-off time. Sansa climbed out of her car and smoothed down her practical brown plaid skirt and adjusted the collar of her cream-colored blouse while cursing her new heels that weren’t broken in yet. She patted her hair once more that she’d worn up in a tidy bun and grabbed her satchel.

She walked up to the school and punched the button for the intercom. After stating why she was there she was buzzed in and made her way towards the office. A little boy, probably around six and looking rather down-hearted, exited the office as she approached. Sansa smiled at him and received a quick smile in response before he turned the corner down another hall.

Her heels clicked along the floor and she had her hand on the door to the office door when she heard something that rooted her to the spot as though she’d been playing a game of freeze tag.

“Mr. Snow!” the boy’s voice shouted from right around the corner. “Do you like my new shirt?”

“Yeah, Danny,” that voice she recognized at once replied. “I love Batman but you’re running a little late for class, aren’t you?”

“My mom overslept…again,” the boy said in a huffy little voice.

“Well, I don’t always like getting up either. Did you get signed in?”

“Yeah, I got a tardy slip. I can’t get ice cream on Friday if I get another one this week,” the child whined.

“Aww, I’m sorry. It’s just Monday. Maybe you’ll be fine the rest of the week. Try not to let it spoil your day anyway. Come on, lots to do in 1st grade today, I’ll bet. I’ll walk you down to Mrs. Gutierrez’s room.”

Oh, my God…oh, my God! He works here. He’s the assistant principal here! I should’ve…FUCK! I should’ve known!

Sansa stood there with her hand still poised on the office door. The ladies behind the counter could see her through the glass and were staring at her.

Calm down. There’s no need to panic…just because you went on a date, just because you’ve spent the past two…or more…nights fantasizing about him doesn’t mean you can’t get through this interview. No need to panic. Are you crazy?! This is the perfect time to panic!

The door opened towards her jolting Sansa out of her trance. “Can I help you?” a buxom woman with curly hair and a friendly face asked.

“I’m…uh…I’m Sansa Stark,” she sputtered. “I have a meeting type, uh…thing. I have an appointment with Ms. Tarth…for an interview…for a job…here.” Sansa! You sound like an idiot. She cleared her throat and stood there gaping at the woman who was smiling at her. She felt herself flushing like a tomato and wanted to crawl under the nearest rock.

Shit! If we’re dating, can I even work here? Are we dating? It was one date…but I want there to be more dates. I can’t work under him, can I? Under him? That’s an interesting notion…oh, God! I can’t do this. I can’t…oh, fuck.
“Oh, yes,” the woman said warmly. “You’re interviewing for the secretary position, right? Come on in. I’ll let Ms. Tarth know you’re here. You’ll be meeting with her and our assistant principal, Mr. Snow. They’re both wonderful and…”

“I’m sorry,” Sansa choked out. *Don’t start crying, you coward!* “I think…I’ve made a mistake.”

“Are you alright, honey?”

“I can’t…I can’t do this,” she cried before she turned and fled towards the exit.

Jon made his way back towards the office only to find the ladies in the middle of some sort of kerfuffle. His normal reaction would be to keep his head down and scoot into his office, praying that he would not be noticed. Randa, Shae and Megga were all well and good individually but taken as a whole they could get rather loud and worked up over things. It sometimes led to quarreling. Jon had found his opinion was rarely wanted or welcomed unless he was asked to take sides which he resolutely tried to avoid. *Brienne is far better at handling this than I am.*

But his ears perked up before he could creep past them when he heard Shae ask, “And then she just ran out?”

“Yes…poor thing looked ready to start sobbing. Job interviews are nerve-wracking but she looked like she’d seen a ghost or something.”

*Okay…maybe I should get involved in this.* “What’s going on, ladies?” he asked.

“The 8:30 interview,” Megga laughed. “She showed up and then suddenly freaked and bolted. At least that’s what Randa says. Can you imagine, Mr. Snow?”

“What happened, Randa?” Jon asked Myranda Royce. Of the three, he got along best with Randa.

“I don’t know, Jon. Poor thing was standing as still as a statue outside the office so I went out to check on her. She looked so nervous and then ran off and said she couldn’t do this.” She passed him a file folder. “Here’s her paperwork. I can shred it if you like but I thought Brienne would want to know first.”

Jon opened the file and read the name at the top of the neatly typed résumé…Sansa Stark.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed.

“Mr. Snow!” Megga gasped in horror. “Thank goodness there’s not any children in here!”

“Swear jar, Jon,” Brienne said mildly, waltzing in from the back with her coffee.

“I’ve got to catch her,” he muttered, zipping past the stunned ladies and bursting through the doors to the parking lot.

He tore outside looking left and right. The parking lot wasn’t even half full right now but he was so afraid she might have left already he almost didn’t notice that her car was right in front of him. He could see her crouched over her steering wheel. Her shoulders were shaking.
“Sansa!” he shouted before pecking on the passenger side window.

She jumped like she’d been shot and then looked at him. Her eyes were red and there were tears on her cheeks. *Oh, fuck.* She stared at him like a deer caught in headlights for a few seconds and then her sweet face crumpled up and she started sobbing again. He ran around to her side and pulled on the handle. She hadn’t locked the door and she shrieked when it opened.

“I’m sorry!” he cried. “I didn’t mean to scare you!”

“No, I’m sorry!” she shouted back.

“Why are you sorry?” he asked while pulling her out of her car and into his arms.

And then Jon discovered that Sansa was apparently part magpie as a great rush of words came gushing from her mouth at an incredible rate.

“I heard your voice and I freaked out like an idiot and then I ran out here and I realized I was an even bigger idiot and I’ve ruined this chance even though I really thought this would be a good fit for me partly because I love kids and thought working at a school would be fun and partly because I hate working for Mr. Baelish and desperately want to leave that job but obviously if we’re going to be seeing each other then I can’t work here if you work here and I really like you and I want to keep seeing you and I want things to work between us and I’d hate to give up that chance even for a job I could really use and then I started thinking that you were going to realize that I was the interviewee that didn’t show up and you’d question why I left and maybe then you wouldn’t want to…”

She finally trailed off and drew breath after what could possibly have been the world’s longest run-on sentence. She opened her mouth again but he cut her off. He cupped her cheeks with both his hands, using his thumbs to wipe her tears away.

“Sansa, you can still interview for the job, sweet girl. We’ve went out on one date. That doesn’t rule you out from the job. And even if we keep dating, it’s not a deal-breaker here. We have a married couple working here.”

“Really?” she asked with such hope.

“Really.”

“But they’re probably both teachers.”

“Well, yeah,” he said while cursing himself. *Should’ve thought of that.* “Okay, so say you’re hired. Brienne’s the boss but I guess I’d be your supervisor in a sense and maybe that would be awkward if we’re dating.” Her shoulders started to sag in defeat again but he kept going. “I can talk to Brienne. If it’s a problem, I could always go back to teaching in the Fall if she’ll let me. I can transfer to another school if she hires you and it’s really an issue…”

“Jon! You’re not doing that,” Sansa said. She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed his cheek. “You are very sweet but you are not about to change your job…your life around over me.”

“But I’m already willing to do that for you and Mina. I’ll do anything to…”

He couldn’t believe he’d just said that aloud. *What the hell, Snow? Are you really this serious?* He drew a deep breath and was fumbling for the right words when they found they weren’t alone anymore.

“Ahem…Jon?” a well-known voice said from behind him.
“Hey, Brienne,” he said while keeping his hands and eyes on Sansa’s face. *I’ll do anything to make this work for you, to make you happy.*

“Would you be so kind as to catch me up a bit?” Brienne asked in an amused tone.

He kept looking at Sansa and whispered, “She really is great. She’s going to love you.”

Sansa’s eyes darted past his shoulder to look at Brienne and then returned to him. “I’m so embarrassed. She’s going to think I’m nuts,” Sansa whispered back.

“That’s okay. She lives to embarrass me,” he replied before turning to face Brienne. “Brienne, allow me introduce Sansa Stark who is here to interview for the open secretary position. We…um, went out Saturday for the first time. You know how you’re always pestering me to date? Well…yay for me ‘cause I found someone really special and asked her out,” Brienne started sniggering and Sansa was starting to smile at last. “So, here’s the thing…neither of us realized she was applying for a position at the school where I work. She was…mildly surprised when she saw me…”

“Actually, I heard your voice,” Sansa interjected.

“Okay, she *heard* me and realized that this might make things…awkward.”

“So then, I decided to make things ten times more awkward by running off and crying in my car,” Sansa continued with a genuine smile now. “I’m really sorry for acting like such a child, Ms. Tarth. I hope you’ll be willing to overlook my behavior but I understand if you can’t.” *That’s my girl. Okay, I guess she’s not my girl yet. I’d like for her to be my girl.* “And you’re very fortunate to have a great guy like Jon working for you and I completely understand if there are rules about administrators dating staff.”

Brienne gave Sansa one of her sunny smiles and said, “I’ve looked forward to meeting you, Ms. Stark. I honestly don’t believe there’s any policy forbidding Jon and you from dating. There’s been enough teachers here trying to lasso him since he started.” *Really, Brienne? You had to mention that?* he thought giving her a stare. Brienne snickered again and continued, “But for now, why don’t you take a moment to collect yourself and then come on in when you’re ready? I hope you’re still interested in the job despite this guy being here,” she said chugging Jon on the shoulder…and nearly knocking him off balance. “I’m sure we can work through this if you’re a good fit for us. You really were my top candidate on paper and I’d like to get to know you in person. Jon…just bring her in by the side door.”

Thank you, Brienne. He nodded and waited till Brienne headed back in to kiss Sansa softly on the forehead.

“Wipe away those tears, beautiful,” he said stroking her hair. “You’ve got an interview to get through.”

“Thank you…for coming to get me.”

“Well, I did say I couldn’t wait to see you again. I had no idea I’d get my wish so soon.”

“Me, either,” she laughed.
“Alright, Sansa Stark. Robb and Minisa are playing video games in the living room. The child is being entertained as well as your daughter. Now, tell me everything,” Margaery said emphatically as she plopped down at the kitchen table next to Sansa.

“The interview wasn’t so bad after a disastrous start.”

Sansa thought it had went well enough considering. Jon had bowed out of sitting in on the interview but walked her to her car after it was over. He’d followed up by asking her out again for Saturday night.

“If you can stand me three nights in a row between practice Thursday, coming over Friday and then a date Saturday,” he’d joked.

“I just might be able to tolerate that much of you,” she’d teased in reply.

“That’s good to hear,” he’d said huskily then. *Oh, God…there’s that panty dropping voice again.*

“Not that!” Margaery huffed. "Pooh, on that! I want you to get another job but job talk is boring. Tell me about the date! Tell me if he’s as good a kisser as those pouty lips suggest!”

“Marg…oh, my God. So good. I can’t even…”

“Ahhh! I knew it! Oh, honey…I’m so excited for you. And do you really think you might have the big L for him or the other L?”

“Which L’s are we discussing?”

“Love or lust?”

“Oh! Well, I won’t deny some lusting but, Marg…he’s wonderful and he really seems to care about me, you know?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“You know my track record. Guys who aren’t related to me actually caring about me? Not something I’m all that familiar with.” Margaery made a sad little face. “But Jon is…well, he’s kind and thoughtful. He’s a great dad and he’s terrific with Mina and…”

“Hot as fuck.”

“God, yes.”

“Sansa wants to tap that.”

“Ugh. You are sooooo…right.” Margaery squealed but Sansa shrugged and asked, “Am I getting in too deep already?”

“No! He seems so sweet, Sansa. You deserve to be happy with a great guy that will treat you right for a change.”

“I want that so badly with him. I keep fearing I’m going to wake up and it’s all going to have been a dream.” Sansa’s smile faltered and she said, “But I know it’s not a fairy tale or anything. We’ve both got daughters that we’ve got to think about and what will they think of this? Shit, I just don’t know sometimes.”
Margaery gave her a loving pat on the hand. “Sansa…you’ve got to cut yourself some slack and stop fretting over this so much. You are twenty-six years old. And even if you were forty-six or fifty-six or whatever, being a mom, and you are a great mom, doesn’t mean you’ve got to be a nun. You should still feel free to date this man, fall in love with him and, by all means, bang him. In the end, even if it doesn’t work out, will you be any worse off than you were? ‘It’s better to have loved and lost…”

“Oh, Christ, don’t quote that crap to me.”

“Well, there’s some truth to it and I know what a romantic you are. You’ve got to put yourself on the line a bit and Jon has to do that, too. I know that’s scary. It’s probably scary for him as well. And, I know you worry about Mina but you owe yourself happiness if you can find it. Your daughter loves you. In the long run, she’ll want you to be happy, too. And, might I say that a good bang would probably clear your head of some of these worries?”

“You always say that,” Sansa laughed.

“And I’m always right.”

“You seriously offered to transfer to another school?” Theon asked during dinner on Wednesday.

Lyarra had already retreated to the living room to watch cartoons but would soon be calling for ‘Uncle’ Theon to come watch with her.

“Yeah. God, do you think I scared her off?” Jon asked while wiping off a plate.

“You’ve scared me off,” Theon said. “Christ, you’ve got in bad, boy.” Jon covered his eyes and groaned. Theon patted his shoulder and said, “I’m kidding, okay? Has she acted like she’s scared off?”

“No.”

“Okay, there you go. But working together? You sure you can keep your hands to yourself?”

“You are such a pig.”

“Hey, I just express myself more openly than you do, Snow.”

“I knew I should’ve talked to Rhae about this.”

“Well, I’m insulted now.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jon said sarcastically.

“No, you’re not…ass. So, how’s Lyarra been about this?”

Jon lowered his voice to respond. “She had some worries when she found out about the date but since then she’s kind of been okay with it. She hasn’t been having trouble sleeping the past few nights either.”
“That’s good. But you know…”

“Yeah, I know we’re still going to have stuff to work through. Mina and Sansa will, too, especially if things keep going the way they are.”

“The way they are?” Hmmm…that sounds promising. How soon before you bed her, Snowman?”

“Bed her? What year is this? And please, don’t call me that.”

“Bed her, fuck her, make sweet, sweet love to her…”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You are such a prude sometimes. Can I at least come to practice Thursday and watch you two make kissy faces at each other? I’ve hit a dry spell. Maybe watching you two little lovebirds making woo will get me back in the game.”

“No…and fuck you, Greyjoy,” he said under his breath and then threw his dish towel at his friend when Theon blew him a kiss.

Thursday night arrived and Sansa was driving Mina to soccer practice. She couldn’t believe her good fortune as Brienne had called and told her the job was hers if she wanted it. While Sansa had her concerns about working with Jon considering everything, she’d decided she was willing to take this chance. Jon had called her every night urging her to accept if she was offered the position. And his words and Margaery’s about taking a chance at happiness had stuck with her as well.

“Even if things don’t ultimately work out between us, this is a good place to work with lots of great people,” he’d said.

Sansa couldn’t argue with that. And she while she was still working on her degree, this job would really help her make progress there with the earlier hours. She relished the thought of having a few weeks off during the summer to spend with Mina as well.

And turning in her notice tomorrow to Mr. Baelish would be so sweet. She would miss Jeyne but nothing else about that place.

Sansa and Mina headed across the field to where Jon and Lyarra were already passing her ball back and forth to await the rest of the team when Sansa was surprised to spy Harry pulling in to park next to her car.

“Daddy!” Mina shouted when she saw him. Her daughter bounded off to greet her father and Sansa wondered why he was here tonight.

“Hey, Princess,” he replied, hugging Mina who then ran off to join Jon and Lyarra.

They followed their daughter side by side at a more moderate pace. Sansa shot a quick look at Jon as they reached the field and saw that he was watching them...closely.

She took a deep breath to settle her nerves. Harry had never threatened her or laid a hand on her but
for some reason, she still felt uncomfortable with this sudden appearance. He only had Mina two weekends a month and sometimes he was ‘too busy’ to take her. And he rarely took her for the entire weekend even when he did have her. He sometimes saw her during the week but that was usually on Harry’s terms.

So, his unexpected presence caught her off guard after their less than friendly conversation on Saturday and his snarky, whispered remarks on Sunday when he brought Mina home. Sansa felt reassured to know there was another adult here. Knowing that it was Jon that was here made her feel even better.

“So, how’s it going?” Harry asked.

“Fine,” she replied and tried to keep the iciness from her voice. *Play nice and maybe he will, too.*

“Did you come to see Mina practice? She’ll be so happy to have you here,” she said as sweetly as she could manage without gagging.

“Yeah, I thought I’d watch practice tonight,” he replied. But something in his tone suggested that he wasn’t just here to watch their daughter.

“Harry…”

“Look, Sansa. I know I’m not Father of the Year material in your eyes. I get that. But if you’re going to date this guy and he’s going to be part of my daughter’s life, I figured I’d make an effort to see him interact with her while supporting Mina in something she’s enjoying.”

Sansa fought to not roll her eyes. He could be such a possessive ass sometimes but she had to admit it sounded like a valid reason…on the surface anyway.

“That’s fine,” she said. “She’s your daughter, too. You belong here, too.” Sansa took a moment and then decided to continue. “We’ve only went on one date so far, Harry. What makes you think this is any different than the other guys I’ve dated since we split?”

She knew things were different this time and that Jon was different than any of those other guys but she was curious what Harry would say.

“Something about the way he looks at you and the way you look at him.”

“You’ve spent barely any time in our presence when we weren’t separated by an entire soccer field.”

“I saw what I saw. I don’t know if you ever looked at me like that. And the way Mina talks about him, I can tell you both think he’s so great,” he finished solemnly.

Sansa had a kind heart and, though he’d done many things to hurt her and anger her over the years, she could understand Harry’s concerns. *How would I feel if he fell in love and I heard Mina talking about Daddy’s wonderful new girlfriend all the time? Threatened? Maybe. Harry certainly would feel that way.*

“Mina’s birthday is next month,” she said to switch the topic.

“I’m well aware of when our daughter’s birthday is,” he said sourly.

He had missed her birthday two years ago. Business, he’d claimed. He vehemently denied forgetting it altogether when he called the next day. Mina had been convinced. Sansa was not.

“Well, Mina wants a party and my parents have offered to host it. So, I figured you might want to be
“Oh, yeah...nothing like having Ma and Pa Stark giving me looks the whole evening, along with your brothers. Not to mention your sister shooting me with death ray glares.”

“It’s Mina’s birthday, not Harry’s list of excuses to feel sorry for himself, dammit. And my parents are always polite to you as are my brothers. And while Arya is never going to like you, she is capable of being cordial for an hour or two for her niece’s sake.”

“Humph. What about lover boy? He going to be there, too?”

“I haven’t discussed it with him yet but since his daughter and Mina are good friends and she wants to invite her team, yeah probably.”

“And what if I don’t want him there? Don’t want to watch you making out with him?”

“Making out with him? ‘Cause I’m some kind of bitch in heat that humps hot guys during children’s parties? Fuck you,” she hissed between clenched teeth.

“I didn’t...shit, that came out wrong. I didn’t mean it like that, Sans.”

“Is that what this is about, Harry? Are you having trouble with the idea of Jon being part of Mina’s life or part of mine?”

“Both maybe,” he said with his eyes on the girls running through their warm-up drills now.

“Well, you lost the right to have any say in my love life a long time ago,” she reminded him.

“Yeah...I know,” he sighed. “Text me the party details once it’s arranged. I’m going to watch from over there.”

He moved off to where a couple of other men had gathered to watch their daughters and Sansa heaved a sigh of relief. She found Jon’s eyes on her, his eyebrows raised in silent question. She smiled and nodded. I’m okay.

“Jon, this looks wonderful. I can’t believe you made all this food,” Sansa said the following night as Jon laid the platter of marinated chicken fresh from the grill next to the grilled asparagus and potato salad.

He could cook. His mother had taught him how to cook once he’d become a parent. He could still hear her chirping in his ear that he would not be surviving off pizza, take out and frozen dinners now that he had a child to feed.

“You will not be feeding my granddaughter chicken nuggets and pizza all the time.”

Guess the jokes on us both, Mum. I fix all the healthy stuff I can but your granddaughter still prefers chicken nuggets and pizza.

“Thanks, but I’ll let you reserve judgment on my cooking until you taste it. I think I do alright but
Lyarra will probably complain. That’s why I grilled a couple of hot dogs. I didn’t know if Mina would eat this.”

“Mina will eat anything. She’s inherited her Uncle Robb’s stomach, I think. I can’t wait to taste your cooking,” she said.

She was busy at the counter and her hair was hanging down her back. She’d arrived in her work clothes, tight skirt and soft blouse, but kicked off her heels that she said hurt her feet. She looked perfect…and irresistible.

Jon took a quick glance out the window to the backyard and saw the girls sitting on the swing set together now. They had been in the backyard chasing each other around and screaming like banshees when he’d pulled the chicken off the grill and he’d made his way inside where Sansa was heating up the rolls for him.

He felt a delicious tingle of anticipation and moved up behind her where she stood moving the rolls to a basket at the counter. He wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled at her neck.

“I’d rather taste you,” he murmured in her ear while simultaneously shocked at his boldness. Whoa… that sounded kind of raunchy. “Uh…I meant your lips, Sansa. Sorry, that came out kind of…”

“Which lips?” she replied coyly. Okay, that was raunchier. And I loved that!

“Oh, God,” he said as the grin spread across his face. “Don’t make me answer that right now with the girls here.”

“And where are the girls exactly?”

“Outside…at the swing set.”

“Hmmm…that sounds like a good place for them to be,” Sansa said in a sultry tone.

She arched back into him and tilted her head to the side, seeking his lips but he wanted to taste her skin a bit first. He kept his hands on her hips and started kissing her cheek, working his way down her throat.

She smelled like lemons and orange blossoms with a floral undertone. It was intoxicating to Jon. But what was even better was the way she melted back into him with a sigh. And then, the soft moans and whimpers Sansa was making as he continued gently kissing and nibbling at her neck tempted him to grind against her ass ever so slightly. She moaned louder then and her hand reached up and pulled his mouth to hers.

He gasped when he felt her tongue enter his mouth. Her hand moved up to grasp his hair, keeping his mouth where she wanted him and he was getting harder with each second at the way she was showing him what she wanted. His hands itched to moved up her slender form and cup her breasts but he wouldn’t…not now. And, he also feared he might bruise her backside with his erection if they didn’t quit.

“Sansa,” he groaned. “The girls…we need to stop.”

“I know…but I’d just like to say for the record that I don’t want to stop.”

“Me, either. Are we still on for tomorrow night?” he asked. “Please say yes,” he rumbled in her ear. He couldn’t stop from pressing himself more firmly against her as she answered.
“Yes…uhhh…most definitely,” she replied. “Mina’s going to hang out with…ahhh…my parents.”

They broke apart then and started setting the table. Sansa told him about turning in her notice and her boss’s shock.

“I honestly thought he might cry for a second there. He’s a funny man…strange, I mean.”

“Well, I hope you’ll like working at the school.”

“I’m sure I will.”

“And I promise to be professional and keep my hands to myself at work.”

Sansa smirked at him. “You’d better.”

“Well, as much as humanly possible, that is,” he added.

Sansa laughed then and went to call the girls in.

Lyarra ran in like a hurricane, washing her hands while still in full outdoor voice mode. Mina came in slowly and quietly with her head down. Jon felt her eyes on him during the meal on and off. She seemed a bit withdrawn though her appetite was healthy enough. Better than Lyarra who’d eaten half a hot dog and made gagging sounds at the asparagus, much to Jon’s consternation.

But when he would try to focus on Minisa or he gave her a smile, she’d look away without returning his smile like usual. It concerned him but he remembered how Sansa said Mina was often quiet and liked to think things through. He’d give her space and mention it to Sansa later.

“Did you find them?” Lyarra asked as she came back out to the swings.

Yes. “No,” Mina said.

“Well, they’re right there in the fridge. Dad doesn’t like for me to have a snack right before dinner. He says it spoils my appetite but I figured he’d let you have one.”

“It’s fine. I think dinner’s almost ready anyway.”

She’d been hungry from all the running around. She’d already finished her bottled water and Lyarra said there were cheese sticks in the fridge when she mentioned being ready to eat.

Coach Jon’s house was nice. It wasn’t as big as her grandparents’ house but it was bigger than the condo where she lived with her mother. He had a great, big backyard which Mina liked and a cool swing set.

She’d headed to the kitchen looking for the promised cheese stick when she’d seen them. Her mother was standing at the counter and Coach Jon was holding her from behind. He was kissing her neck and her mother was making noises like she had a tummy ache. Then, she’d leaned back and kissed him…on the mouth. It sounded wet, like when Uncle Rickon and Uncle Bran’s dogs would lick Mina’s face. But they both seemed to be liking it.
Minisa backed out of the room before they saw her.

She knew grown-ups did those kinds of things. Uncle Robb was always kissing on Aunt Margaery and sometimes she’d even seen Grandpa kissing Grandma. But somehow, she’d not thought about her mom and Coach Jon doing that. Maybe she was being stupid. Kissing was part of what adults did on dates, she’d heard.

But as she sat there eating dinner, she felt a funny little twist in her stomach when she looked at Coach Jon. He wasn’t Daddy but he’d been kissing Mommy and holding her close like in those romantic movies she knew her mom liked. Part of her knew her parents didn’t get along so well all the time but she couldn’t help but hope that maybe someday…

Don’t be stupid, Mina. Mommy doesn’t want to be married to Daddy or they would’ve got married years ago.

She wondered if her mom wanted to be married to Coach Jon instead. And just then, Mina didn’t know how she felt about that.
Falling

Chapter Notes

Long chapter but I hope you'll like it!

Rating update ;)

Jon peeked in her room that was barely illuminated by her nightlight. He walked to her bedside and looked down at his daughter. Lyarra slept peacefully, holding her beloved stuffed dog at her side. He had just wanted to make sure she was out before he turned in but he could not help sitting on the edge of the bed. He reached out a hand and stroked her silky curls. Faster than Jackie Chan, a small hand came up and batted his hand away as she made a grumpy little face. He snickered softly under his breath.

He remembered what it was like to hold her as a newborn. An hour would pass and he wouldn’t know it. He would stare at her face and try to memorize everything; the faces she made, the sound of her soft breathing, that sweet baby smell…when she wasn’t making a mess in her diaper. He loved the way her tiny hand clenched around his finger. One finger was all she could grip tightly.

“Besotted fool,” Val had laughed. “She’s holding your finger but it’s you that will be wrapped around hers for the rest of her life.”

“You’re not wrong,” he’d smiled.

Lyarra gave a sleepy sigh and settled more soundly into her pillow. Jon stroked his daughter’s face and whispered to the dead.

“I’m sorry you’re missing it, Val. I wish you could see her. I like to think that you can. You’d be so proud of her. I know it. Do you realize she’ll be eight in May?” He rubbed his face and continued. “She’s smart and funny and beautiful. She’s got promising keeper skills, too…just saying.” He rearranged Lyarra’s blanket and tucked Ghost more snuggly down beside her. “I wish you could meet Sansa. I think you’d like her. She’d be…” a good mom to our girl, a great one. “She makes me happy, Val. I’m afraid of getting hurt again. You hurt me. You really did…but I forgave you before Lyarra was even born. I don’t want to get hurt again. I don’t want to offer my heart to another woman and have her lob it back at me. But I don’t think Sansa would do that…and even if she does, she’s worth it.”

Sansa blinked as she turned on the bedside lamp and pushed her hair back out of her face. Mina stood in the doorway in her nightgown, clutching Lady to her chest.
“Are you alright, baby?” Mina shook her head. “You want to come lay with me?”

Okay, that’s a yes. Sansa couldn’t help but smile as Mina vaulted into the bed and started arranging her pillow, burrowing into the duvet and finding her stuffed friend a ‘comfortable’ spot. Sansa turned the lamp back off and snuggled down beside her daughter. Mina would be eight soon but Sansa relished these moments when her baby still wanted to be held.

“Want to talk?” Sansa asked.

“No,” Mina said at first. But it wasn’t long before she asked, “Mommy…do you love Daddy?”

Oh, shit. Sansa rubbed her eyes and sighed. “I… I love that I have you and he’s…” I don’t know what to say. I’m not coherent enough for this conversation this late. “Mina, I love your father because he’s your father and without him, I wouldn’t have you. But I’m not in love with him, baby.”

“Were you before though?”

“When I was younger…I think so. Back then, I think I did.” When I was young and foolish. “Mina, is this about me seeing Coach Jon?” Mina didn’t answer. She nodded though. “Do you…tell me what you think of Coach Jon.”

“He’s funny. He’s nice. I like him.”

“He likes you, too.”

“He’s handsome.”

“He is.”

“But would he…what if you married Coach Jon?”

“No one is getting married right now.”

“But what if…”

“Then, we’d be married and live together with you and Lyarra. Would you…how do you feel about that?”

“What about Daddy?”

Mina choked on the last word and started to cry, her sweet, young voice racked with guilt. Sansa held her daughter and smothered her own sudden wish to sob…for different reasons. She didn’t want her baby to cry. She didn’t want Mina to hurt on Harry’s behalf. She didn’t want to be angry at Harry for something he wasn’t even aware of…and she felt guilty for thinking he was not worthy of their daughter’s tears.

“Daddy would still be your dad, honey, even if I get married to Jon…or anyone someday. He’ll always be your dad. And you’d still spend time with Daddy just like you do now.”

“But Daddy would still be alone.”

“And you’re worried about Daddy being alone? Being sad?”

“Yes.” Sansa didn’t know what to say to that. She wanted to reassure her daughter that Harry would be just fine but she didn’t want to dismiss her daughter’s tender-hearted concerns too readily. But Mina saved her from any possible blunder by changing direction. “Do you love Coach Jon?”
“I… I think I…” I think I do but I don’t know if I should tell you that just yet.

“He makes you happy, doesn’t he?” Mina asked just as quickly.

*Like a wild hare sprinting off in different directions… leaving me disoriented,* Sansa thought with a small smile. “He does make me happy.”

“Okay.”

And just like that the conversation was over… and Sansa couldn’t really tell how it had gone. She laid there staring at the ceiling, wondering where the questions had come from and when they would come again. She thought of her feelings for Jon and Lyarra and what that might mean for her and Mina.

She was falling in love. And this time she wasn’t a girl whose head had been turned by a handsome, smooth-talking guy. She was a woman and falling in love with a man worth falling for this time. It was frightening but wonderful.

Sansa stroked her daughter’s hair and listened to her quiet, steady breathing.

“He makes me very happy, Mina,” she said to her sleeping child.

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Saturday morning had dawned chilly and foggy and a steady drizzle began before kickoff. The Crazy Poptarts were cold and their spirits were oppressed by half time as they were losing 3-0. All the girls were squabbling on the sidelines and Jon was concerned to see that Lyarra and Mina were bickering with each other.

He was trying to gather his troops and talk them up for the second half but also remind them that this was just a game and what he wanted most was for them to have fun.

*Heaven, help me,* he thought desperately when Abby started crying and Lyarra called her a baby.

“Lyarra! Apologize to Abby! And, let’s please just focus on…”

It was then, as though in answer to his silent plea, that help arrived in the form of Sansa and her parents carrying a 5-gallon thermos full of hot cocoa.

Jon gave Sansa a thankful smile as the girls stopped bickering and started crowding around Mr. Stark who was handing out cups. But she whispered, “Oh, no. This was all Mom’s idea.”

Needless to say, spirits were soon lifted and the girls rallied to tie. More importantly, everyone was getting along fine again after the game and Jon was relieved to see Lyarra and Mina with their heads together on the way to the parking lot, chatting as happily as ever.

“You saved the day, Mrs. Stark. I can’t thank you enough,” Jon said as he approached the older couple in the parking lot.

“Hot cocoa saves the day again, Cat,” Mr. Stark said as Sansa joined them. The girls were busy giggling together as Rhae chatted with Sansa’s brother and sister-in-law.
“You’re very welcome, Jon. I hope you’ll call us Ned and Cat,” she said.

“Thank you. I’m really thankful you had the idea to bring cocoa.”

“I raised five children, Jon. I know how they can get when it’s cold and rainy and things aren’t going their way. Hot cocoa is my preferred remedy for such days.” He knew Sansa’s parents were taking Mina for the rest of the day and stood by as Sansa kissed her daughter goodbye. Mina gave him a high five and he was glad that whatever had troubled her at dinner last night seemed to have passed for now. “I hope you both have a wonderful time tonight,” Cat said as Ned and Mina headed to the car. “Sansa, you can come whenever to get her tomorrow,” she finished with a knowing look at them both.

“Thanks, Mom,” Sansa said with a quick glance at Jon.

Her face bloomed into the most delightful shade of pink then and Jon’s own cheeks flamed as a thought invaded his mind. *Mina’s spending the night with them. And, Lyarra’s spending the night with Rhae.* He felt a restless stirring in his blood at the thought that he could stay the night with Sansa…the whole night with Sansa if…

*Don’t get ahead of yourself, Jon.*

When Saturday evening arrived, Jon stood in front of his closet wondering what to wear and what might happen tonight. He knew what he wanted to happen but he had meant what he’d said to Sansa last week. They would only go as far as she wanted and in the meanwhile he intended to enjoy his evening with her.

She had suggested dancing at a nightclub and while Jon would probably rather play chicken on the freeway than go dancing, he’d go for her. *Let’s just hope she doesn’t laugh too hard at me.*

He showed up on her door step thirty minutes later in a maroon dress shirt, dark grey jacket and black trousers with his hair slicked back. Sansa opened the door and he could not readily recall his own name. Her little black dress had short sleeves that were off the shoulder. Her hair was curly but pulled up in a fancy bun. With all the creamy flesh of her neck and shoulders on display, she was too tempting to resist by far.

Jon put his hands around her waist. “You are breath-taking,” he murmured in her ear before he kissed her neck right under her earring.

She shivered ever so slightly and Jon smiled to think he’d affected her in some manner since she was driving him mad.

“Thank you,” she replied, bussing him softly on the lips and looking up from beneath her lashes at him. “You look very handsome. Have you got your dancing shoes on?”

“Oh…” *I’d rather stay right here and kiss you all night. Will you be terribly upset when I tell you I can’t dance?*” he asked as she grabbed her clutch.

“All that fancy footwork you showed the girls the other night during practice and I’m supposed to believe Jon Snow can’t dance?” she teased.

“Football and dancing are not the same thing. And, I’ll amend my earlier statement and say I don’t dance well. How’s that?”
“I’ll take what I can get as long as I’m in your arms.” She laughed then and said, “Wow, that sounded kind of sappy.”

“I like sappy,” he said, grasping her hand to pull it up for a kiss. “And I really like the idea of holding you in my arms so let’s go dancing, love.”

“Love? That’s a new one.” Her eyes had widened and there was a bewitching but sweet grin on her face.

“Yeah…is that alright if I call you that?” he asked feeling slightly embarrassed but hopeful at the same time.

“Yes…I like it. I like for you to call me that,” she said as he held her door and she climbed into his Jeep.

Sapphire Isle was an upscale bar and nightclub and tonight it was jam-packed with people. They were suitably dressed to blend in with the crowd but Sansa was starting to regret suggesting this place. She’d never been but Jeyne had raved about it and she had been curious.

She hadn’t wanted to go to Spicy’s or Back Door because she remembered those places from her college days, or more specifically Robb and Margaery’s college days since Sansa hadn’t ever got to do much clubbing since she already had a toddler when she reached the legal drinking age. She didn’t want to suggest a place where most of the patrons would likely still be in school and thought this place would be more suited to grown-ups.

Now that she was here though, it seemed filled with pretentious sorts trying to impress each other with what they drank and who they were wearing.

_I would’ve been happier going back to Goal Burrito again_, she thought remembering the Mexican place that Jon and Lyarra had introduced them to after the zoo.

The music was blaring and frenzied sounding and the heated bodies on the dance floor made the whole place feel stuffy. Jon had a fine sheen of perspiration on his brow and Sansa could feel sweat trickling between her breasts. _And we’ve not even danced yet._

They sat sipping their drinks and watching the floor comfortably enough together but it was too loud to carry on a conversation. _I’d rather get to talk to him than listen to this crappy techno music._

She was about ready to suggest going somewhere else when Jon asked if she wanted to dance.

All the songs had a quick tempo with a thumping bass and Jon was adorably uncertain about what to do with his arms. Sansa pulled them around her waist.

“Just hold me and forget about everything else,” she said.

He smiled and swayed with her. The music wasn’t slow, the people around them were flailing their arms and gyrating with wild abandon but Jon held her in his arms and danced with her as though they were alone in the room. Sansa liked that just fine.
“This okay?” he asked. “I’m pretty rusty on the dance floor.”

“You’re perfect…just like this,” she replied.

Sansa laid her head on his shoulder and she felt his lips brush the shell of her ear and then his beard grazed the sensitive skin behind it. Sansa wrapped her arms around his shoulders tighter and tilted her head to grant him more access.

He kissed her neck next, soft little kisses down towards her shoulder. She wanted him to keep going. She wanted to lose this crowd…or maybe just run away with him.

She thought of her empty condo and the fact that neither of them had a daughter to pick up tonight, assuming Mina didn’t end up calling to come home. Please, baby…make it through tonight at Grandma and Grandpa’s.

Never before had Sansa consciously wished for her daughter to make it all night at a sleepover. She had never minded when her daughter wanted to come back home before the night was over. But tonight…tonight was going to be different. She could just tell. And the pessimist in her feared getting a call just when things were getting good.

“Are you okay?” Jon whispered. She’d been clinging tightly to him and lost in her thoughts and his kisses.

“I am,” she said as she turned her head to him to claim one of his sweet kisses for her lips…and another.

“Do you want to…” he began but then paused and reached down to his trouser pocket. “Shit,” he muttered as he pulled out his phone. “It’s Rhae,” he said reading a text. “Lyarra’s trying to talk her into letting her watch a movie that I’ve said no to already. Mind if I head outside where I can hear to settle this?”

“Of course not.”

He escorted her back to the little booth they’d been sharing and said he’d be right back. Sansa thought about grabbing his jacket and just following him for a moment but decided to wait for him to come fetch her. With the crowd, she feared she might miss him.

“Sansa Stark?” a voice said as she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up and her lip curled into a sneer for an instant before she remembered her manners.

“Oh, Joffrey…hey,” she said. Her eyes immediately began scanning the place, eager for Jon to return.

“Hey, yourself. Long time, no see,” Joffrey said sitting down beside her. He scooched across the bench…too close. “What brings you in here tonight? On the prowl, I hope. I know I’d remember if I ever saw you here before,” Joffrey said as he leaned in close and leered at her. She could smell the liquor on his breath.

“I’m here on a…”

“That’s a lovely dress,” he interrupted as he glanced down the front of it.

It wasn’t all that low cut but it showed a bit of cleavage and Sansa sat up straighter and cleared her throat to try and get him to stop making her feel uncomfortable with his staring.
She wondered how weird it would be if she crawled under the table to the other side of the booth to escape. Mina was fond of climbing out from booths at restaurants that way. Just tell him you need to go.

“Thanks. I was actually getting ready to go so if you don’t mind I’ll just…”

Joffrey’s hand darted up, and two of his fingers brushed the fabric of her dress...right across her breasts.

“What’s the rush, Sansa? Have a drink with me.”

“Move your hand, Joffrey…and my date is coming back any second.”

“Your date? I don’t see a date,” Joffrey scoffed.

“Can you see me now?” Jon asked as he magically appeared beside the booth and Sansa sighed with relief. “I’m sorry I left you alone in here,” he said to her.

Joffrey reluctantly stood and Sansa took the opportunity to jump up from the table and rush to Jon’s side. Jon’s voice was low and his eyes were intense but Sansa was not afraid that he’d got the wrong idea about her and Joffrey…just worried that he might punch Joffrey.

“It’s okay,” she said before wrapping herself around Jon and whispering in his ear, “Just get me the fuck away from him.”

“I’m Joffrey. Sansa ever mention me?”

“Uh, no,” Jon said with a dismissive shrug. “See you around, Joffrey.”

“Sure you two don’t want to stay and have a drink? I could tell you some things about Sansa, man.” Jon’s jaw clenched and Sansa begged him with her eyes to keep moving. “She’s got amazing tits…in case you’ve not checked them out yet,” Joffrey said next with a smirk.

Sansa’s eyes widened in disbelief and then she closed them for an instant. He had always been an asshole. Now he was a drunk asshole and Sansa wanted to wipe that smirk off his smarmy face.

Jon looked like a wolf ready to devour a deer. “Alright, you little shit…” Jon began as he started to grab Joffrey’s collar.

Sansa laid a hand on Jon’s shoulder though. He stopped and looked at her, the spark of rage in his eyes diminished at once.

“He’s not worth this,” she breathed into Jon’s ear. “Yes, Joffrey…my tits are pretty amazing and Jon can find that out all on his own without any help from you, especially considering you never actually touched them. You know, I really should devote more time in prayer every day to thank God that I never slept with you.” She turned to find Jon smirking at Joffrey now. “Let’s get out of here please. Take me to Goal Burrito and make me forget this place and stuck-up shits like him.”

“Gladly, love,” Jon said kissing her cheek. “Have a nice life, prick,” he said over his shoulder before he led her to the exit.
“Do you ever wish you could go back to a certain day and change something? A decision you made or something you said?” she asked an hour later while chowing down on her soft tacos and margarita.

“All the time,” Jon said with a smile as he sipped his Corona and dug into his enchiladas. “Does this have anything to do with Joffrey?”

“Yes…it has everything to do with Joffrey and others like him. I’ve had terrible luck…until now.”

He grinned and said, “I’ve had a few dates I’d prefer to forget and one girlfriend I really wish I could forget I ever met.”

“You don’t mean Val, do you?”

“No…her name was Ygritte. She was after Val and before Lyarra was born. Long story. No, actually a short story…but also a restraining order.”

“Oh, God!” she said and he started chuckling. She shook her head and said, “I had one of those, too.”

Jon’s laughter died at once. “What was his name?” he asked with a fierce look.

“Uh…a guy I went out with twice who went from polite…though a bit weird…to really weird.”

“Where is he now?” he asked next, apparently seething with rage.

“Jon, you look like you’re ready to commit murder or something right now,” Sansa laughed.

“Not funny, Sansa. If he was…”

“He moved away, alright? I’ve not seen him in three years. He’s probably found some other poor girl to stalk…not that he did much stalking!” she continued as Jon made a sound suspiciously like a growl. “Calm down. The restraining order did the trick, okay?”

“Okay,” he said begrudgingly.

“Sheesh.”

“Sorry…I just don’t like the idea of some guy harassing you.”

“I’m picking up on that,” she said wryly. She took his hand. “I really appreciate that about you, how caring you are. I’m not used to that. Joffrey and the others were nothing like you. And Harry…well, he wasn’t so concerned about making me feel secure or cared about either unfortunately.”

“Do you regret meeting Harry though?”

“Yes…and no. Is that strange?”

“No, Sansa. He’s hurt you in the past. He wasn’t devoted to you like he should’ve been. He didn’t give his all to being a partner and a father. But without Harry…there’d be no Minisa. And while maybe there’d be some positive things to say about not being a mom at such a young age and getting to finish school and all, I can’t picture you without her. She’s such an amazing little girl and you’re a terrific mother. It’s part of who you are and it’s how we met after all.”
“Thank you, Jon. Lyarra is wonderful and it’s hard to picture you without her. I’m glad our girls are friends and it led us to meet.” They sat there looking at one another and Sansa asked about something that she’d been wondering. “Do you think if Val had lived you two would’ve…”

He shook his head. “She broke my heart when she called it off so suddenly and…she wasn’t willing to stick out the long-distance thing for six months, you know? If I wasn’t worth the wait for that amount of time, I can’t see us lasting a lifetime. But…if she’d decided she wanted to try again later after Lyarra was born and if we’d kept living together, I can’t say for sure that I wouldn’t have been willing to try again. But I doubt we would’ve lasted.”

“But you don’t regret meeting her or falling in love with her?”

“No, I can’t say I really regret that. I have Lyarra because of her.”

“What if we hadn’t met through our girls? What if we weren’t parents or one of us wasn’t and we just met? Do you think we’d still…”

“I’d like to think if we’d met under different circumstances…say at work or through friends, the result would be the same.”

“What result?”

“That I’d want to ask you out and would eventually work up the nerve to do so. Hopefully, you’d say yes.”

“I think I would,” she said with a grin.

“I’d like to think that I’d want to spend time with you. Even without our girls, I think we have enough in common to enjoy each other’s company. I think our personalities are complimentary, too. I hope you…”

“I agree.”

“I’d like to think that I’d still be willing to take you dancing at snooty night clubs even though I’m not much of a dancer just because it’d be worth it to hold you in my arms.” Sansa sighed happily and he pressed on. “I’d like to think I’d…that I’d fall in love with you. I’m pretty sure I’d fall in love with you just like I already have,” he said as he ducked his chin.

Sansa’s heart, which had already been pounding, beat faster still and she drew a deep breath. He loves me. And I…I love him, too.

The server arrived unexpectedly to check on them and ask if they needed anything.

“We’d like the check and some to-go boxes, please,” Sansa answered before Jon could utter a word.

The rain had returned as promised and began pouring down just as they left the restaurant. They were both soaked by the time they reached his Jeep. They laughed together as they climbed in. Sansa’s hair had come down and was sticking to her shoulders and neck and Jon’s dripping curls were even more pronounced than usual and his shirt was stuck to him like glue.

Jon reached over to kiss her. A soft kiss at first that quickly became more ardent. Sansa inhaled his scent, a masculine fragrance that made her think of leather and pine.
“We’re soaked,” she said. They were and would soon be chilled to the bone despite the heat emanating from them both. “I need dry clothes and a hot shower.”

“I’ll drive you home,” he said. His tone and eyes asked the question.

“Yes, take me home, Jon. And then…”

“And then?” he asked hopefully.

“And then…take me to bed.”

The rain still fell as they pulled into the driveway. It had been a quiet ride back. Jon was concentrating on navigating the wet roads safely at night and Sansa was lost in reflections of what this step would bring. She did not doubt her decision but she was nervous. *It’s not as though I’ve invited that many men back to my house and even fewer have been invited into my bed.*

But with the rain, they were forced to make another mad dash to shelter which eased the tension. They pushed through the front door, breathless from their run and laughing. They were soon kissing, barely able to take their hands off one another. *I want this. I want you,* Sansa thought with a smile as her hands glided over Jon’s muscular shoulders and arms in his wet shirt.

She broke away from him long enough to fetch a couple of towels to keep them both from dripping all over the floor. They kicked off their shoes and kept kissing.

“We should get out of these wet things,” she said at last.

He nodded and Sansa felt the tight coil of desire and her butterflies fighting a small battle in her stomach with her tacos and margarita. *Don’t get sick. Calm the fuck down. I’m going to get naked in front of Jon though. I’m going to get naked with Jon. I’m going to have sex with Jon. Oh, God…*

He was quiet as he followed her down the hall to her bedroom. Sansa’s nerves increased. It felt strange having a man in her bedroom again but he was Jon and she trusted him.

There were clothes littering her bed where she had discarded them earlier as she had tried on different things before opting for her little black dress. She hurriedly tossed them in the closet with a sheepish smile. Jon only smiled lovingly back at her, letting her work through her nerves in her own way. She apologized for her unmade bed and he snickered.

“I’m not your mum,” he said.

“I know,” she laughed. “I’m sorry. I’m…”

“I know you are,” he said gently. “It’s okay.”

Next, she started to fret over what personal hygiene items she might have had sitting out on her bathroom counter top. She walked into the bathroom, staring at the make-up that was still scattered around from where she’d got ready earlier.

“Sansa,” he said softly from behind her. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for.”
She looked up in the mirror and could see him standing behind her in the reflection. Their eyes met.

“I want to. I want you. I’m just nervous, more nervous than expected. Jon, I’ve not done this in…God, it’s been a long time. And I’m nervous because it’s you and I don’t want this to spoil anything.”

“Sansa, I don’t want this to spoil anything either. I don’t think it will though because I love you.” He cupped her face and said it again. “I love you. We can take our time. There’s no rush. Whatever you want to do or not do is fine with me. I want you but you’re worth waiting for, love. You can take a shower if you’d like and I can sit in the living room and…”

“Jon,” she said turning to face him, feeling bolder ever second now. “I love you, too.” His smile when she said those words were enough to dissolve the rest of her nerves. “You’re soaking wet and I want to take a shower…but I want to take it with you.”

“I’d love that,” he said. “I, uh…don’t want to sound like I expected this but I did bring a condom if…”

“Just one?” she asked with little pout.

“Well, I…I mean, I could…” he fumbled awkwardly.

“Good thing I’m on the pill,” she smirked then.

“Christ, I love you!” he laughed as he dove in for a kiss. "I was afraid I was going to have to run to the store or something for a second."

She helped him remove his shirt and belt before he spun her around and unzipped her dress. It fell to the floor in a wet heap and his hands caressed her back. His lips soon joined his hands in their exploration.

“Your skin is so smooth, love,” he whispered in her ear. “You smell so good.”

Sansa closed her eyes to savor the feeling of his hands on her back, his lips and the soft scratch of his beard on her flesh.

His hands slid to her waist and she turned back to face him. Her hands sought his zipper and his pants soon joined her dress.

He pulled her into his arms for more kisses and there was no disguising his arousal. She pressed herself against him and moaned when he did the same. His kiss deepened, his tongue delving into her mouth before she explored his in turn. All while they held each other tight and Jon’s hard cock was pressed against her.

Sansa stepped back and removed her strapless bra. She felt a surge of sexuality and pleasure at the way his eyes flitted downwards to her bare breasts as he subconsciously licked his lips. His breathing grew heavy and she noticed the way his hands twitched.

“You can touch them, you know,” she grinned.

“Thank you,” he murmured in a tone that sounded something like sheer awe.

Sansa didn’t think anyone had ever made her feel so desired…and he hadn’t touched her yet.

His hands were still damp and cool from the rain but they were gentle, though rougher than her own.
He cupped her breasts reverently and then slid a thumb carefully across a nipple, making it stiffen.

“May I kiss them?” he asked as he raised his eyes back up to look at her.

“Yes,” she whispered, nearly desperate for his touch now.

Jon lowered his head and kissed each breast tenderly. His tongue flicked out to tease a nipple drawing a ragged breath from her. She twisted her hands into his wet hair. He lapped at one and then the other. Heat spread throughout her loins. Her panties were getting soaked and not from the rain now.

“Jon…” she moaned and tugged at his boxers.

He shoved them down before he got down on his knees and slowly, teasingly and methodically pulled her panties down. Sansa rubbed her thighs together in anticipation. He looked up at her with a wicked smile and he grasped her ass.

“Can I taste these lips now?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whimpered as she spread her legs for him.

He kissed her copper hair and nuzzled at her sex before his tongue swiped her folds and then quickly teased her clit. His lips rained down sweet kisses again before his tongue came back out.

‘Tell me if he’s as good a kisser as those pouty lips suggest,’ Marg’s voice sang in her head.

“Yes…God, yes,” she cried as his lips closed briefly on her clit before his tongue swirled around it.

Sansa felt weak in the knees and ready to fall over but he held her still. He licked and kissed and pleased her.

She felt one strong hand leave her hip and a finger entered her the next moment.

“Fuck…you’re so wet, love,” he rumbled against her mound.

The vibration from his voice increased the pleasure as he put his nimble tongue back to work. He sucked softly at her clit and fingered her. Another warm finger joined the first. Her head lolled back, her damp hair hanging down to her ass.

I’m going to fall, she thought idly. She did not care.

He spread her wider with his fingers. “So beautiful and sweet, love,” he whispered before she felt his tongue inside her, darting in and out with perfect rhythm.

Sansa rocked against his fingers and his face. Her hands came up to touch her breasts, her fingers tracing her nipples as she moaned and sighed his name.

“God, like that, beautiful,” he said looking up at her then. “You’re so fucking hot, Sansa. Come for me, sweet girl. I want you to shout my name when you come, love.”

His fingers curled slightly within her just then and he lowered his lips to her folds once more.

Sansa was falling, falling, falling…down, down, down.

“Jon…I’m going to…unnn…ahhh…YES! OH, JON! FUCK! JON!” she cried as her eyelids fluttered closed and white lights exploded behind them.
Her mouth formed an ‘O’ and she let go of her breasts and shamelessly grabbed his hair and held him to her as the waves of her orgasm rocked her. He didn’t stop what he was doing for an instant. He kept lapping at her until she shuddered through the last of her peak.

She felt limp when he stood with a groan and rubbed his knees. He gave his beard a hasty swipe and held her in his arms. She sagged against him, his strength a comfort in her boneless haze.

“I hope that didn’t hurt your knees too badly,” she said after a while. She felt loved and was still glowing from her release.

“I honestly didn’t notice until I stood up,” he said. “Sansa…you’re so gorgeous. You were so amazingly beautiful when you came. I want to see that again, love.”

“Jon…I love you. And can I just say that you were amazing and that was incredibly hot and wonderful?”

“You can tell me that all night long. I won’t get tired of hearing it,” he said smugly.

“Good. Let’s take our shower…and then let’s go to bed.”

He didn’t want this to end. He wanted to fuck her all through the night. Maybe he would if she let him.

The shower sex had been hot but was quickly over. They’d explored each other’s bodies with their hands, kissed and held each other under the hot water.

Then, Sansa had started soaping him up and running her hands up and down his shaft. He’d been ready to burst by then.

Once he was rinsed, he pushed her against the shower wall and she lifted a leg around his waist. She was so wet and tight. It didn’t take long at all for him to be grunting her name as he came. It’d been a long time since he’d had sex and his hand was no match for Sansa’s pretty, pink pussy wrapped around him so tight as she cried his name.

And now, they had dried off and made it to her bed. She rode him to her climax and he enjoyed every second of watching her. Her beautiful body atop his, her hair nearly dry again and tickling him when she’d lean forward to kiss him. His tongue tasting the salt of her sweat along with the sweetness of her flesh. It was nearly too good to be true.

He loved the moans and squeals she made as she took him in deeper and deeper, driving him to see how many times he could make her come tonight. But the feeling of her cunt fluttering around his cock again convinced him that he would not last much longer…at least not this round.

“Sansa,” he said, rolling her to her back and sweeping her hair back out of her face. “Please tell me I can stay all night so I can make love you again and again.”

“God, yes…you’re staying all night. Get back inside me now. I want some more of you,” she said still breathless from her exertions.
He kissed her and slid back inside her hot, wet walls that squeezed him so delightfully.

“Oh, fuck…Sansa,” he cried. His balls were already tightening up as soon as he started to move. There would be no more holding back. “I’m…unnn…going to come, love.”

He looked down at her face, this glorious woman he loved…who loved him, too. He couldn’t have been happier. Jon kissed her quickly before he reveled in the sight of her tits bouncing with his every thrust. The wet smacking sound of him pounding into her making him desperate. But it was her plea that drove him to his release at last.

“Come for me, Jon,” she chanted. “I going to come…uhhh…again…oh, Jon. I want you…unnn…to come, too. Yes! YES!”

She screamed out the last before her eyes closed and she sobbed with her climax.

“Sansa! Fuck…yes, love! Unn-ughh!” he shouted as he felt his balls empty out.

He held himself above her, mindful not crush her. He rested his forehead against hers while his breathing slowed. Her pupils were still blown wide for several minutes as she slowly floated back down to Earth with him.

He rolled off her and gathered her into his arms. She wrapped herself around him and nestled into his chest. She told him she just wanted to listen to his heart beating and Jon felt so loved and happy.

They laid there together, relishing this night. Whatever was ahead for them, Jon knew they could face it together. Their daughters and their love for each other was all that truly mattered. There was nothing he wouldn’t do to make Sansa and the girls feel loved, cherished and happy every day of their lives.

Tomorrow would bring them back to the realities of life and parenthood. But he was grateful for this sweet interlude to hold each other in the night, to know each other intimately and focus on their love for each other.

Sansa was growing sleepy and he was, too. But he couldn’t stop caressing her silky skin and dropping kisses along her shoulders and face.

“I love you,” he whispered as she started to drift off.

“I love you, too,” she replied so sweetly. “Promise to hold me like this all night.”

“I promise to hold you all night…and always,” he said.
Impact

Chapter Summary

Jon and Sansa wake early the next morning as Sansa gets an early morning visitor. Later, Jon is heading to pick up Lyarra when something unexpected happens.

Sunday morning dawned bright and sunny after last night’s rain. And, Sansa awoke to an uncommon occurrence for her. One muscular arm was lightly draped over her waist while there was something poking her butt. She smirked when she realized what that something was.

She stretched and relished the slight tenderness between her legs. Her foot caressed the hairy leg right next to hers and she felt his fingers flex to grasp her hip.

“Good morning,” he said in a croaky voice. He cleared his throat and said, “I’m glad to know I wasn’t just dreaming that I was laying here beside you.”

“You weren’t dreaming,” she said before she reared her ass back into him.

He groaned and his hand began untying her pajama shorts. “I want you, love,” he whispered in her ear. “May I have you now?”

Sansa’s smile widened and she flexed. “Didn’t I wear you out enough last night?” she teased as he started kissing the back of her neck.

“I thought I wore you out,” he said in a very satisfied tone.

“Look who’s all cocky first thing in the morning.”

“Cocky?” he asked before he pressed himself more firmly against her. Sansa moaned involuntarily at the evidence of his erection and Jon said, “Yeah, I think cocky works.”

She rolled over to face him when…

DING-DONG!

“What the fuck?” she scowled.

“Uh…you have company apparently,” Jon said reaching for his phone to check the time, “at 7:13 on a Sunday morning. Is the car pool here to take you church, my angel?”

“No,” Sansa sniggered as she sat up and reached for her robe.

“Want me to answer it? It’s too early for someone to just show up…unless it’s your parents with Mina.”

“Mom and Dad wouldn’t show up unannounced this early. I’ll take a look but I might have you answer, okay?”

DING-DONG!
“Someone’s impatient,” he said as he was already standing and throwing on his pants and undershirt.

Sansa peered out the bedroom window and gasped. “You have got to be fucking kidding me,” she muttered to herself. Right next to Jon’s Jeep on the driveway was Harry’s SUV. *What the fuck is he doing here? Now?* “It’s Harry,” she said to Jon as he came up behind her.

“He make a habit of dropping by like this?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’m right here.”

Sansa headed to the front door and opened it to find Harry dressed in jeans and a polo as though he was normally up and about at this time on a Sunday. He was holding Mina’s sweater that she’d forgotten at his house last weekend. He looked pensive.

“Hello, Harry,” Sansa said, surprised at how calm she sounded as she opened the door. “I thought you were traveling with work this weekend.”

“Hey, Sansa,” he said. “I, uh…brought Mina’s sweater back.” He handed it over and spotted Jon standing in the foyer behind her. “Hey, man,” he said with an uncomfortable smile.

“Good morning,” Jon said evenly.

“Well, thanks for bringing it back…so early…on a Sunday morning,” Sansa said, crossing her arms and preparing for some unpleasantness.

He never just dropped by like this. And she felt annoyed that he was here now…the morning after she’d slept with Jon for the first time and while Jon was still here. Not that she was ashamed of sleeping with the man she loved but it still rankled for Harry to be the first one to find out that their relationship had evolved.

“I’m headed to the airport, okay? I thought I’d swing by since you were so pissed about it being left behind,” he said. His defensiveness was kicking in already.

“I wasn’t pissed, Harry. I only mentioned it in passing over the phone.”

“Alright. Poor choice of words on my part. So…is Mina here?”

Sansa rolled her eyes and reminded herself to stay calm. She wanted to rage at his suggestion though. As if she’d be having Jon over to spend the night with her daughter at home so early in their relationship. Even Harry didn’t have any of his women over when Mina was with him. Did he honestly think she’d do that?

“No, Harry. She’s at my parents’ house.”

“Well…okay then.” Harry looked at Jon for a moment and then said, “Sansa…do you think we could talk for a minute?”

“I thought you were on your way to the airport.”

“I am. Just for a second. Alone?”

She looked back at Jon who was clearly waiting for an indication as to what she wanted him to do. She nodded slightly at him and he said, “I’ll go start some coffee.”
Once Jon had headed off to the kitchen, Sansa turned back to Harry. “Alright now. What is it that really brings you here so early? Were you just seeing if he’d spent the night?”

Sansa’s jaw dropped when Harry bluntly said, “Yes.”

She felt like a fish gaping at him for a solid minute before her outrage surfaced. “It’s none of your fucking business who I sleep with Harry,” she hissed.

“I know, Sans. I just…I’ve been thinking of Mina and us from when she was younger and I can’t stop thinking about all the ways I screwed things up with you and…”

“No,” she said violently shaking her head. “No! You do not get to do this,” she said jabbing a finger into his chest. “You do not have this privilege! Mina is our daughter and I will work with you as much as possible when it comes to the welfare of our daughter but you do not get any say in my relationship with Jon or anything to do with my love life.” Harry had adopted his best kicked puppy look but she was having none of it. “If you ever wanted a lasting relationship with me, you had nearly four fucking years to try and make it work! Four years, Harry! But you flitted in and out of my life from the moment you knocked me up! I’ll grant that you’ve tried to be a decent father in your own half-ass way for the past eight years but you never once made me feel like I really mattered to you once you got me pregnant. So, don’t come here now and act like you’re just realizing how you screwed up with me. You blew your chance years ago! I love him, Harry! I love him. I am in love with Jon Snow and not with you. I would hope you could at least be happy for me but if that’s too much to ask, I’ll only ask that you keep your distance. When we are not discussing our daughter or attending a function or event for her, I want you to stay away from me. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” Harry said with eyes that simmered with resentment and hurt feelings.

“And don’t come back to my house again unannounced.”

“Fine,” he said angrily. His mouth kept opening and closing in his fury. He started to go but then turned back around and shouted, “I don’t want you having him over to spend the night when our daughter is here!”

“Fuck you!” she screamed and she heard Jon coming back down the hall towards them. “Fuck. You,” she said more quietly but with every bit as much malice. “I will always place my daughter’s needs and care above my own desires just as I always have. And Jon does the same for his child! Now, I want you to get off my property and leave…now! And, have a lovely fucking flight!” she shouted as she slammed the door in his face.

Sansa bit her knuckle to keep from screaming again as she heard the tires squeal on the driveway. Her heart was pounding and she felt out of control with her anger. The hot tears were already spilling down her cheeks but Jon was there, holding her and speaking words of comfort.

She leaned into him, this man she adored who made it feel safe to be just a little weak, who made it okay to want to be held and comforted. She wondered how she’d lived so long without that kind of love and support. She wondered what she would do without him.

Harry’s obvious jealousy was ridiculous. He had no right to feel that way. He’ll get over it, she told herself. He didn’t really want her. He just didn’t like the idea of losing her for good.

But she thought of her talk with Mina the other night and how Mina had asked about her and Harry ever getting back together. She hoped Harry would not let this argument and his possessive feelings prompt him to say things to Mina that would lead to problems in the future.
Mina would have enough to deal with trying to accept a new father figure and a sister in her life if things between Sansa and Jon continued to progress. She didn’t need her own father stirring up shit and making her feel like she was betraying him if she allowed herself to love Jon.

Jon led her into the kitchen and had poured her a cup of coffee. She sat there staring at it, trying to recapture the happiness she’d felt earlier before Harry’s visit.

“Son of a bitch,” she said under the breath.

“Yeah,” Jon nodded in agreement. “Hey…this is damn fine coffee, love.”

Her eyes narrowed at his mischievous grin and clumsy attempt to redirect her mood. “Well, I didn’t make it,” she said, smiling despite herself.

“Yeah, but you bought it. I may have to switch brands.” He reached for her hand across the table. She let him take in and breathed deeply when she felt him sweep his thumb across her knuckles.

“You’re not alone, Sansa. Not anymore. I’m hoping we can maintain an amiable relationship with Harry but you don’t need to be frightened of him.”

“I’m not frightened of him per se. More concerned about him making issues with Mina.” She groaned and said, “Maybe I should just let you deal with him from now on.”

“I would if I could. Of course, I might end up punching him and then what would Mina think of that?” he joked. “We’ll figure this out. He’s got some insecurities to work through.”

“Why? Why now?”

“Uh…have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately? You are the most amazing, beautiful woman on this planet. And you’re the mother of his child. He had you and he fucked it up. I’d hate myself if I was him. But Harry just…”

“Wants to lash out? Wants to see if he can woo me back?”

“Maybe.”

“Not happening. Not now, not ever.”

“Well…for this morning at least, let’s just hope he can cool off while he’s gone. When’s he due back?”

“Thursday…unless his plane crashes,” she said sourly.

“Sansa,” Jon said wincing at her callous remark.

“I’m sorry. That was shitty of me to say. And I didn’t mean it.”

“I know, love.”

They spent the next thirty minutes sitting at the table and talking about other things, mostly the girls but also his mother’s wish for him and Lyarra to travel to England for a visit over the summer. She cringed when he mentioned her asking them to stay for three weeks but hoped he didn’t notice. He did of course.

“I’m not leaving you and Mina for three weeks, Sansa.”

“She’s your mother, Jon…and Lyarra’s grandmother. If you want to go and visit, I understand. It’s
not like I wouldn’t wait for you.” He looked up from his coffee and she saw the sweetest look of relief. She remembered what he’d said about Val last night not being willing to maintain a long-distance relationship for six months. “I’d wait for you, Jon. I’d wait for you as long as you asked me to, honey.”

“Honey?” he repeated with a grin.

“Yeah…is that okay?”

“Yeah, I like for you to call me that.”

Mina stirred the pancake batter while her grandfather fried the bacon. Uncle Rickon came in from walking Shaggy, sat down at the table and started reading the paper.

“Is the coffee ready, Dad?” he asked without looking up.

“Yes, it is,” Grandpa Ned replied, looking back at his youngest son.

“Well, could I get some?”

“No one’s stopping you.”

The two men looked at each other for several seconds before the younger man grinned and stood up to pour himself some.

He sat back down with his coffee and asked, “Are you making me some eggs, Little Red?”

“No, Uncle Rickon. Grandpa and I are making pancakes and bacon.”

“I wanted eggs, too.”

“Well, if you want eggs, you can come help us,” Mina replied.

“That’s my girl,” Grandpa laughed. “He’s spoiled rotten by your Grandma and your mother, you know.”

“I am not!”

“I’ll make you some eggs, dear,” Grandma said coming into the kitchen while holding her cell phone. Mina laughed at the way Grandpa sputtered angrily while Uncle Rickon gave him with a smarty-pants look. “Minisa, sweetheart? Your father is on the phone.”

Grandpa gave Grandma a strange look. “Why’s he calling before 8 o’clock on a…”

Grandma shushed Grandpa and Mina happily took the phone.

“Hi, Daddy. Did you leave for your trip yet?”

“Not yet, Princess. Daddy’s at the airport but I wanted to hear your voice first.”
Mina sat down next to Uncle Rickon and Shaggy stuck his head in her lap. She scratched his ears and then absently started to twirl her braided red hair.

She liked when her father called her. He didn’t call all the time but it always made Mina feel special when he called just to talk to her. And lately, he’d been calling more often which was nice.

“Will you bring me something back from New York, Daddy?”

“Don’t I always?”

*No, not always.* “Yes, Daddy.”

“Mina…are you going to miss me?”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever thought about staying with me for…”

He trailed off and Daddy sniffled for a second. Then, he was quiet. Mina thought he sounded strange, like he was upset maybe. *Maybe he’s afraid to get on the airplane. I’d be scared, too.*

“It’s okay, Daddy,” she said, thinking maybe he just needed someone to tell him not to be scared.

He gave a funny little laugh…almost like a cry. “Have you talked to Mommy today, Princess?”

“No, Grandpa and I are making pancakes right now.”

“Oh…that’s great, baby. What do you want for your birthday?” Mina rattled off her usual plea for a dog, a *real* dog. “We’ll see, baby. Mommy always says no to that.” Then, she asked for a couple of other things she’d like.

“I’d like a poster of the US Women’s team…and a Manchester United scarf.”

“A what?”

“A Manchester United scarf. They’re my favorite premier league team.”

“I didn’t know you had a favorite, uh…premier league team.”

“Well, it’s Lyarra’s favorite team and Coach Jon’s. Uncle Rickon and I are going to watch some of their game together after we eat breakfast until Mommy gets here.”

Daddy didn’t say anything for a minute but Mina didn’t notice at first because Uncle Rickon was whispering, “*Who’s the spoiled one around here?*” to her. Mina stuck out her tongue at him which made Uncle Rickon choke on his coffee as he laughed. She whacked him on the back until Grandpa came over to see what all the fuss was about.

“Are you still there, Daddy?”

“Yeah, Princess. Listen, it’s almost time for me to board my plane. I love you. I’ll see you next weekend, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy. I love you, too.”
“Ohhhh, Sansa…like that, love. Fuck, your mouth is so hot,” Jon cried as her head bobbed up and down over his cock. The wet, slurping sound of her mouth on him was driving him wild and he could feel his balls getting tense, ready to explode. “Do you like this…uhhh…do you like sucking my cock, sweet girl?” She hummed an affirmative as her hand began stroking the lower half of his shaft. Jon ran his hands through her beautiful, long hair. It felt like silk and her mouth was so wet and hot on him. His eyes rolled back and he had to support himself with his arms. “I’m going to come, love. Get up here and ride me,” he begged.

They had showered and dressed right after finishing their coffee. Jon had already called Rhae to say he’d be headed over to get Lyarra soon. Rhae had to be at work at 11 this morning and he’d said he’d be there by 8:30 to give his sister a break before she had to go in.

“There’s no rush,” Rhae had said. “As long as you’re here by 10:30, I’m good. Enjoy yourself this morning,” she’d finished knowingly.

“How do you just know?” he’d asked.

“I can hear it in your voice. You’ve been sounding like a man long overdue for quite a while and now you sound like a man that finally got some,” she’d whispered.

Jon had blushed at his sister calling him out that way but then he’d said, “I’ll see you in a bit.”

But then Sansa had started kissing him as he went to retrieve his shoes in her bedroom and one thing led to another. She kissed his neck and had him hard all over again. She unbuckled and unzipped his pants, shoving them and his boxers down just far enough for his cock to spring free before she pushed him down to sit on the edge of her bed.

And now his gorgeous, sexy girlfriend was on her knees as he sat there and wondered if she’d mind if he came in her mouth.

He bit his lip and tried to urge her to climb up on him again. He wished she’d been wearing a skirt so he could just grab her and have her straddling him with minimal effort and zero time wasted.

“Don’t hold back, Jon,” she said. “Come in my mouth, honey. I want to taste you now,” she moaned.

She swirled her tongue around the tip and then took him back in her mouth, deep into her mouth. She hollowed out her cheeks as she sucked harder and Jon felt his cock touch the back of her throat. He grunted and she moaned again in response. And, Jon’s resolve to hold out was lost between her sucking, watching her head bent over his lap and the added sensation of her moans.

“Unnn…fuck!” he shouted as he came.

He was breathing like he’s just returned from a run and his heart was pounding. Sansa sucked him clean and made a show of swallowing before she licked the corners of her mouth reminding him of her with her lemon cake. He collapsed backwards on the bed as though he’d passed out and she laughed.

“Come on, lazy. We’ve both got girls to fetch.”

“Sansa…I am going to be good for nothing all day.” She nudged him in the ribs and climbed up next
to him. Jon tugged his boxers back up and pulled her close. “I wish we could spend the whole day together, love. All four of us.”

“Me, too. But…”

“Yeah, stuff to do and all.”

They said their farewells soon after and Jon climbed into his Jeep to head towards his sister’s house. He yawned several times. He’d had a long though wonderful night.

He already knew he didn’t want to spend another night without Sansa in his arms but he’d have to deal with it. With the girls, they’d have to take things slow. This wasn’t just about him and Sansa falling in love. And they couldn’t just jump into staying over at each other’s places and fucking all night, every night. They had to be parents to their girls and work to blend together as a family before he could ever hope to get to the point of holding Sansa every night.

He was stopped at a red light when his phone rang and it was Lyarra asking if he was coming yet.

“The match, Dad! It’s starting!” she screeched in a hysterical tone.

“I’m almost there, baby. We’ll head home and watch, I promise. Tell me what you and Aunt Rhæ did last night,” he said to take his daughter’s mind off football for half a second.

She was chattering about the movie her and Aunt Rhæ had picked after he’d settled the argument about the one she wasn’t allowed to watch when the light turned green.

Jon started to pull into the intersection talking to his daughter and he didn’t see the pick-up truck blow through the red light to his right until it was too late to do anything.

As the Ford F-250 t-boned his Jeep, Jon was briefly aware of the horrendous sound of crunching metal, the airbags deploying and his daughter’s startled scream over the phone before everything went black.

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Sansa felt Mina’s grip tighten in her hand as they made their way through the automatic doors.

They’d nearly returned home from her parents’ house when she got the call from Jon’s sister. Sansa hadn’t really thought twice before driving straight to the hospital. She looked down at her daughter’s frightened face and thought maybe she should have taken her back to her parents before coming here.

Too late now.

Sansa swallowed hard and kept the tears back with a steely determination not to let them fall just yet. Rhæ had said he was going to be okay. That was what mattered. That and Lyarra.

It had been difficult to understand anything Rhæ said when she’d called because Lyarra had been screaming hysterically in the background. Sansa’s heart ached for her. His sweet daughter had lost her mother in an automobile accident.
Perhaps bringing Mina’s not the dumbest thing I could have done, Sansa hoped.

Sansa checked at the information desk to see where he was. He’d still been in the ER when Rhae had called but Sansa suspected he might have been moved by now.

After she learned he’d been moved to a regular room on the third floor, she led Mina to the elevator and punched the button.

She kneeled before her daughter, lightly fingering her braid, before she said, “Baby, Lyarra’s going to be sad and scared. Her Aunt Rhae says Jon is going to be okay but he’s bruised and has a few cuts. He got a really bad bump on the head, too, and he might be sleeping. Can you be a good friend to Lyarra and just hang out with her? She might not feel like talking. She might be upset or even act a bit mad but none of it’s your fault. Can you be patient with her? Just let your friend know that you’re there if she needs you?”

“Yes, Mommy,” Mina said steadily.

“I knew you could. You’re such a tough girl like Aunt Arya.”

“And you, Mommy.”

Sansa hugged her daughter, grateful for her child’s empathetic nature and the silent fortitude she seemed to display at times like these.

_She’s seven. How can you ask this of her? _Sansa thought guiltily as the doors opened.

_Because Lyarra needs comforting and Mina would want to be here for her friend, _her heart answered.

They headed down the hall. Before Sansa could even make it to the nurse’s station, she spied Rhae haranguing a police officer outside a room about the driver of the other vehicle.

“Where is that guy anyway? Was he drunk?” Rhae said in an agitated tone.

“Ma’am, please…the investigation is still on-going. We’ll do everything we can to prosecute the other driver if he was in fact intoxicated but for now let’s just focus on the fact that your brother is very fortunate…”

“Very fortunate? He’s got a serious concussion and…”

“Ma’am, I’ve worked accidents for twenty years. Side impact collisions are often very serious. And his Wrangler versus a large pick-up that was exceeding the speed limit? Well…he’s very lucky. And it’s fortunate no one was riding in the passenger side when he was struck,” the officer said meaningfully before trailing off as he noticed Sansa and Mina approach.

“That fucking Jeep!” Rhae shouted. “I’ve told him a dozen times to get something…”

“Swear jar, Aunt Rhae,” a small voice said behind her.

It was then that Sansa noticed Lyarra was sitting in a chair in the hall holding a stuffed animal. She was still in her pajamas and she looked so small and frightened. Sansa fought down her tears again as she looked at his sweet little girl. And, she understood Rhae’s frustration and anger bubbling up out of her fear for her beloved brother. Sansa had three brothers and a sister. She would’ve reacted much the same.
Rhae turned to Sansa then and started crying. Sansa held the petite woman that she’d only met a handful of times and let her cry before Rhae pulled back and wiped her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Rhae said as she shook with sobs. “I’m an emotional wreck right now.”

Sansa assured her that she completely understood and looked over at Lyarra. She tried to give the poor child an encouraging smile and was pleased when Mina sat down next to her. Lyarra’s stuffed animal was a fluffy, white dog and Mina had Lady. She could hear them discussing their favorite little friends and she asked Rhae if she could see Jon now.

“Of course. I know he’ll want to see you. He’s been sleeping on and off but the concussion is to blame for that. They’ve run some tests and say he’ll recover. They just want to keep him here overnight to observe him but they’re saying he can probably go home tomorrow. I’m going to have to go into work for a little while. I need to call Theon to see if he can watch Lyarra for a bit this afternoon. She doesn’t need to stay here all day.”

“Don’t be silly, Rhae. Lyarra can come home with Mina and I for the day.”

Sansa wanted to stay with Jon at the hospital but she knew what his priority would be. It was the same as her own…the girls.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes…if that’s alright with Lyarra.”

“Lyarra, honey,” Rhae said. “Would you mind hanging out with Sansa and Mina for a while today?”

“I want to stay with Dad,” Lyarra said stubbornly.

Sansa sat down on the other side of Lyarra and said, “I know you do. I’d want to be with my dad if he was hurt, too. But right now, your dad needs to rest. He wouldn’t want you sitting around this hospital all day worrying. He loves you so much. He’d worry about you sitting here being sad and if he’s worrying about you, he can’t rest like he needs to.”

Lyarra nodded and Sansa gave her a hug. “They won’t let me see him,” Lyarra whispered in her ear.

“They won’t?” Sansa said looking to Rhae.

“I just wasn’t sure,” Rhae said. “He’s got some cuts and bruises. He was a bit confused earlier.”

“Do you want to see him, Lyarra?” Sansa asked. “Even with cuts and bruises?”

“Yes.”

“May I go see him for a minute and then come out and get you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, sweetie. I’ll be right back.”

Sansa stood, leaving Lyarra and Mina to talk while Rhae watched over them. She pushed open the door. The curtain was pulled around his bed and the lights were dimmed. She pulled back the curtain silently and observed him for a moment.

His handsome face had some scratches from shattered glass and the airbag. His left hand was bandaged. His left temple had a nasty bruise from where his head had hit the driver’s side window
upon impact. But he was just lying there looking like the same man who had woke up in her bed not so many hours ago.

“Jon,” she said softly.

If he was sleeping soundly, she’d let him sleep. But just as she was noticing, not for the first time, how full and lush his eyelashes were...far more full and lush than any man had a right to enjoy with no effort whatsoever, his rich, dark eyes fluttered opened and he smiled at her.

“Sansa,” he said.

“So, you recognize the woman you slept with last night? Well, there’s a good sign.”

“It’d take more than getting run over by a truck to forget you, love.”

“How are you feeling?” she asked tenderly as she lightly kissed her forehead.

“Like I’ve been run over by a truck,” he chuckled and then winced.

“Ribs?”

“Yeah, they think I might’ve cracked one or two. I’m okay, love. Where’s Lyarra?”

“She’s out in the hall with Mina and Rhae. She wants to see you. I told her I’d bring her in after I saw you...if that’s okay.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see her.”

“I’m going to take her home with me in a bit and let you rest if you don’t mind.”

“Thank you, Sansa.”

“Of course. I love you, Jon. I love her, too. I’m so glad you’re going to be alright,” she whispered as a few tears escaped at last.

He looked like he might cry as well for a second but instead he stroked her cheek and said, “I love you, too,” with a gentle smile.

Sansa went out to fetch Lyarra and when she came in she rushed to her father’s side. Sansa could tell he stifled a pained grunt with her excited hug. She started asking him dozens of questions and telling him how scared she’d been. He waived off her worries and minimized the scary parts. He apologized for scaring her. He asked after her instead.

“Who won the match?” he asked after a bit as Lyarra was starting to visibly relax. “I’m sorry if you missed it.”

“We won, 2-0. Rashford and Pogba scored. Mina told me. She watched it with her uncle.”

“Oh, that’s good. Another fellow Man U supporter to join us then,” he said with a delighted grin making his daughter smile.
Sansa drove them to Lyarra’s house to grab some fresh clothes and told Lyarra to get whatever she might want. She said that she could spend the night with them if she wanted or her Aunt Rhae would come and get her later if she preferred.

“I think I want to stay with you.”

“Okay, sweetie.”

Mina had gone to the kitchen to mooch some snacks later while Lyarra sat on the edge of Mina’s bed and pulled out the photo album from her backpack. Her dad had made it for her years ago. It was pictures of her as a baby and little kid.

There was one from when she got Ghost on her 4th birthday. She’d always wanted a real dog but her dad had said maybe sometime.

Most of the pictures were of her and her dad but there were some of her mom as well. Her dad had scoured his stuff for every picture he had of her. He’d even written to some of her mom’s cousins to find pictures of her as a girl.

Her mother had had beautiful blonde hair and her father had said she had the same blue-grey eyes as her.

“What are you looking at, sweetie?” Sansa said from the doorway.

“Just some pictures,” Lyarra said.

Sansa walked into the room and stroked her hair back out of here face. “You need anything,” Sansa asked.

“No.” Sansa started to leave but then Lyarra said, “They’re pictures of my mom…in my photo album.”

“Oh? May I see?” Lyarra opened the book and started showing Sansa some of her favorite ones. “She was very beautiful, Lyarra.”

“That’s what Dad says. He says she was smart and funny, too.”

“I’m sure she was.” Lyarra pointed to a couple of her father that she really liked and Sansa smiled. “These are some very special pictures, Lyarra. Did your dad make this for you?”

She nodded. She felt an ache in her chest and said, “She died in a car wreck.”

“I know,” Sansa said taking her hand.

She didn’t want to cry now…but really. But sometimes trying to keep from crying hurt worse than crying itself did.

If she’d been with Theon, she wouldn’t have. He would’ve been doing silly stuff to make her laugh anyway.

But Sansa was a mom. She wasn’t her mom but she was…well, it was okay to cry in front of Sansa.

And Sansa held her and let her cry without saying anything except that Daddy was going to be fine and he’d hopefully get to come home tomorrow.
When Lyarra was feeling better she asked, “Do you love my dad, Sansa?”

“I do. I love him a lot.”

“Good. Dad needs…I’m just glad he’s got you, too, now.”

She sat there a few more minutes wiping her eyes and Sansa handed her a tissue to blow her nose. She kissed the top of her head…just like her dad might do.

“Mina wanted me to ask if you wanted to watch ‘Mulan’ with us,” Sansa said then.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”
Aches and Pains

Chapter Summary

Jon is discharged from the hospital.

Chapter Notes

This entire chapter covers one day. I know that might sound dull but I wanted to focus in on the dynamics of some different relationships following Jon's accident.

I hope you'll enjoy it :)

Sansa unlocked the door and helped him carry his things inside the darkened house. Each step was painful but was also drawing him closer to his recliner. It would be worth it. To relax in his comfy chair and put his feet up would be heavenly right now.

The hospital bed had been uncomfortable and all the sounds and people there made relaxation very difficult. But here in his quiet house, he knew he’d find the peace he needed…and Sansa was here with him.

Jon stifled his groan of relief as he sat down at last and wondered how soon he could take some more Tylenol…or have a beer or two.

He’d been warned that he’d be in a good deal of pain for the next few days but he hadn’t taken that warning seriously enough apparently. This was very similar to how he’d felt after his surgery to repair his ACL in college…except worse.

He tried to keep his grunts of discomfort to a minimum and smile for Sansa’s sake. Although he suspected his smile was more of a twisted grimace and he could feel sweat beading on his brow from attempting to maintain this façade.

Sansa had taken both the girls to school that morning as Lyarra had spent the night with them. She had let Lyarra talk to him over the phone first though. She hadn’t wanted to go to school. She knew Sansa was coming to see him and she wanted to come, too.

“Lyarra, I’ll be home waiting for you once school’s out. I want to see you, baby. Daddy misses you so much but I’m still stuck here for now. I don’t know how long it’ll take me to get discharged. I promise I’ll see you tonight.”

“You promise?”

“I do. Besides, I’d really like it if you’d go visit Ms. Tarth today. She’s worried about me and you can reassure her that your dad’s okay. Alright?”

“Alright, Daddy,” she’d said brightly. Lyarra always loved having some sort of mission to accomplish.
He’d already called Brienne and asked her to check on Lyarra during the day. She said she would and said she’d speak with Lyarra’s teacher as well. He figured this way Brienne wouldn’t have to seek Lyarra out…though she would’ve anyway.

Sansa had arrived at the hospital after dropping off the girls. He couldn’t have been more delighted to see her. She was supposed to be working out the last week of her notice at her old job before starting at the school next week but she’d called her boss and told him she’d be taking the day off.

“I don’t want to cause any trouble for you, love.”

“You’re no trouble and he can get over it. After all the nights he made me stay late and never comped me the time…what’s he going to do? Fire me?”

Getting discharged had been a hassle. He’d been ready to crawl out of his skin in his eagerness to leave but left waiting until the unit’s doctor could clear him and then the neurologist could stop by for a final assessment as well.

Once he’d finally been discharged, she’d driven him home.

“Need me to do some laundry or something?” she asked once he was settled in his chair with a pillow and some water.

“Uh, no,” he said, slightly embarrassed at the thoughts of Sansa folding his underwear. He didn’t want her to feel like she had to be his maid either. “I can finish that up later.” As in next week when I feel like moving again.

“Jon,” she said seriously, kneeling beside his chair. “It’s okay to admit you’re in pain and need some help. I won’t think any less of you, you know.”

“Here I was thinking I was doing such a bang-up job of hiding it.”

She shook her head and laughed before kissing him lightly on the cheek. “No, you’re not, honey. You can save your meager acting skills for the girls. You don’t have to pretend with me. I took the day off so I could take care of you. Let me, okay? Now…how’s your head feeling?” she asked gently ruffling his hair.

It was something new to have a woman fussing over him that wasn’t Rhae or his mother. He couldn’t say he minded though. She wasn’t just any woman anyway.

“My head is hurting…badly. And I would really appreciate it if you could check the washer. I think there’s a load that needs to be moved to the dryer.”

“I’m on it,” she said with a satisfied smile. “You stay put.”

“Alright. Thank you, love.”

“You’re welcome,” she said before gliding off towards the laundry room.

He watched her walk away and wondered if he could somehow convince her to get in bed with him before it was time to pick up the girls.

I might die of pain first…but it would be worth trying anyway.

His phone started vibrating in his pocket and he sighed when he saw who was calling. He’d meant to call her this morning but various hospital workers had been coming in and out of his room since
7AM to check this or that.

Then, once Sansa had shown up with some clean clothes of his own and looking absolutely radiant, all other thoughts fled.

And partly, he hadn’t called her because he knew she’d flip out.

_Rhae_, he thought hanging his head. Of course, his sister would call her. And now he was likely in trouble…on top of her flipping out.

He had barely uttered his greeting before Lyanna was screaming in his ear.

“WHY AM I JUST NOW GETTING A CALL FROM RHAE TO SAY YOU WERE NEARLY KILLED IN AN ACCIDENT YESTERDAY?!”

“I’m…what? I wasn’t nearly killed! Did Rhae…”

“No…she said you were fine but that YOU LOST CONSCIOUSNESS AND GOT HIT BY AN ENORMOUS TRUCK AND THE OFFICER SAID YOU WERE LUCKY TO BE ALIVE AND…”

“Mum…I’m fine. I’m…” he said, putting his hand up to his aching head. “Please stop shouting.”

“I’m booking a flight!”

“What? No! You don’t have to…Christ, Mum. It’s just a…”

His head was pounding. His shoulder was throbbing. Everything was sore. He was not prepared to handle a hysterical mother right now.

“Rhae said you had a concussion! Are you experiencing any memory loss? Have you been nauseous? Did they run a CAT scan at the hospital?”

“I…No…uh…”

He couldn’t answer a barrage of questions just now. He just wanted peace and quiet. He looked up and saw Sansa standing in front of him, gesturing of the phone. He gratefully handed it over.

“Hi, um…this is Sansa. I’m…I’m Jon’s girlfriend,” she said glancing nervously at him.

He gave her a small smile…and then wanted to kick his own ass. _Jon, you moron!_ He hadn’t mentioned her to his mother. He hadn’t talked to his mother but briefly over the past couple of weeks. And, in all honesty, he’d been scared to mention Sansa too soon. Scared of getting his mother’s…and his own…hopes up too soon.

“Yes, he’s going to be fine…I just got him home from the hospital and he’s feeling very tired and sore right now…yes, ma’am, I was actually going to fix him some lunch and then suggest that,” she said with a wink. “Yes, ma’am…Pardon?…Yes, Sansa…that’s right…Uh, Sansa Stark…well, we started dating, uh…three weeks ago,” she said glancing his way again. This time there was uncertainty in her eyes. “No, we met at soccer…right…Well, Jon’s coaching my daughter and we met…yes, I have a little girl Lyarra’s age.”

Sansa moved away with his phone and Jon stood to follow her, aching head be damned.

“Yes…I’ll have him call you later…It was lovely to talk to you, too. Good-bye.”
“Sansa…” he said reaching for her. She handed him his phone and turned towards the kitchen.

“I’ll go start lunch,” she said in a falsely bright tone.

“Wait. Please, love…let me explain.” She turned around and he saw the tears in her eyes. “I don’t talk to her every day. She’s an ocean away and I’m bad about calling sometimes. I don’t…I love my mum but I tend to…I didn’t mention you or Minisa because I wasn’t ready to share anything yet. Shit, that sounds all wrong!” he said, rolling his eyes and then wincing because even rolling his eyes fucking hurt. “When it comes to my love life, my mum is like Rhae…times ten. She’d be calling everyday wanting to know how things were going and I just wanted a chance to see where we were before mentioning anything.” Sansa took a deep breath and let him wrap his arms around her waist. “Please, believe me when I say I love you. I love Mina, too. I’m so happy with you. I’m sorry if that was awkward or hurt you. I didn’t mean for you to be the one to tell her we were dating. I just…I’m…”

“I can understand that,” Sansa said, sparing him from continuing to trip over his words. “My mom has been all over me ever since she found out about the zoo trip. It’s still hard for me to believe that we’ve not really known each other all that long. I can’t imagine…I can’t imagine not being with you now. Does that frighten you?”

“No, love…that delights me. I feel the same about you,” he said kissing her softly on the lips.

Her mouth parted and he kissed her deeply, pouring his love and affection into that kiss, eager to show her how much he cared even if he could be an utter idiot at times. Sansa moaned into his mouth as he pulled back enough to rain little pecks along her bottom lip while his arms held her tightly.

“So, you want some lunch?” she breathed at last.

Her face was flushed and Jon knew what he’d prefer to eat just now.

“Later,” he said huskily, pulling her towards the hallway and his bedroom. “I’ve got you here at my house alone. The girls won’t be dismissed for nearly three hours.”

“Jon…your head is hurting and you just…”

“I’ll live.”

“You were literally hit by a truck yesterday.”

“You said you wanted to take care of me,” he pouted.

“I did,” she laughed. “Nurse Sansa is here to take good care of you,” she said in a deeper, sultrier voice. Jon groaned and started kissing her neck…and then she put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back a step. “And Nurse Sansa listened to the doctor’s discharge instructions thoroughly.”

“No,” he whimpered.

“Yes, Jon. No moderate to strenuous physical activity until you’re clear of concussion symptoms for 72 hours.”

“I could be really still for you. You could be on top and…” he pled.

“She specifically mentioned no orgasms, too. All those endorphins…”
“Fucking hell,” he grumbled.

“Come on, Mr. Snow. Be a good little patient. I’ll make you some lunch and get you another dose of acetaminophen. Then, I think you could use a nap.”

“I’m not three,” he groused.

“Then, don’t act like it and be so stubborn. And if you’re good, I might nap with you.”

His eyes brightened with interest again. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yes…and if you’re really good, I might take that nap with less clothes on.”

“Yes…God, yes,” he murmured, carding his hands through her hair and holding her close again. “I’ll be very good.”

“My good little patient,” she purred while biting at his ear.

He moaned and whispered, “And if I’m extra good, can I fondle your tits, Nurse Sansa? Please…I’d really like that.”

“I, uh…Jon!” she said when his hands started doing just that. Jon smirked when he saw the blush creeping up her throat and the way her eyes widened and her breath hitched. “Will you let me put my hand down your panties, Nurse Sansa? I’d love to frig you with my fingers and suck on those gorgeous tits of yours. The doctor didn’t say I couldn’t bring you to a climax, right?”

His thumbs were sweeping over her nipples. She’d worn a t-shirt and soft bra and he could feel the stiff peaks with every swipe now. He looked up and saw her eyes had dilated. She was chewing on her bottom lip. *I’ve almost got her convinced.*

She took his hands and guided them to her hips. His heart was ready to beat out of his chest. Her other hand cupped him through the athletic pants he was wearing. He was already hard as a rock and he jerked in her hand as soon as he felt her wrapped around him.

“Fuck,” he sighed, leaning his head against hers.

“That would be lovely. But, not today,” she said with a devious smile.

“Huh?”

“You make me feel so desired, Jon. I love that and I love you but…not today.” She gave him a perfunctory kiss and walked away. “I’ll make you a sandwich,” she called over her shoulder.

“Sansa…” he cried.

“And then medicine.”

“Oh, come on…” he begged.

“And then a nap!” she hollered from the kitchen.

“Dammit,” he groaned and gingerly made his way down the hall with only his headache and boner for company.
Two hours later though, he was smiling again. The food and medicine had driven away the headache and Sansa lay in his bed and in his arms. She’d left her shirt on…as punishment, she’d said. But she had stripped out of her jeans at least.

He’d napped for nearly an hour. It was far more peaceful than the past 36 hours in the hospital had been.

When he woke feeling Sansa’s soft, warm body in repose next to his, he glided his hand along her thigh and then slipped it down her panties. He leaned over to kiss her neck hoping to have her half way to her peak before she woke up enough to stop him.

“Jon…don’t make me call your mother,” she teasingly warned.

“Shit. I was hoping you were still asleep. Okay,” he said resignedly, moving his hand back to her hip. She turned and kissed him. “This is wonderful anyway, Sansa. Just getting to hold you like this is wonderful,” he said pulling her close.

“Good,” she said, kissing his nose. “I’ve got to get up soon to pick up the girls. I can bring them here and make everyone dinner if you think you’re up for that.”

“That would be heavenly. I would love to have all my girls here with me tonight.”

Sansa smiled softly and stroked his beard. “How’s the head?”

“It’s better…right now anyway.”

“And the rest of you?”

“Still sore as fuck.”

She made a sympathetic sound and kissed him once more before getting up. “Want to watch a little TV while I’m gone?”

“Yeah. I’ll be bored by myself and don’t feel like sleeping anymore right now.”

He returned to the living room and got settled while Sansa clicked on the TV. “How about a replay of yesterday’s Match of the Day?”

“Perfect, love,” he said happily. “Oh! This is where Pogba scores I think,” he said more excitedly.

“Jon…no screaming at the TV, okay? You already know the outcome of the match.”

“Yes, Nurse Sansa.”

Lyarra had rushed to his arms as soon as Sansa had got the door unlocked. She’d been chatting all the way home from school about seeing him and nearly tackled him in the recliner when she reached him. He masked his yelp of pain as excitement to see her.

Mina had been quiet when they entered the house. She hadn’t seen him the day before and Sansa
knew her intuitive child was concerned by his appearance.

“He’s going to be just fine,” she murmured in her daughter’s ear while Jon asked his own daughter about school and praised the science work she pulled from her backpack to show off.

“Hello, Mina,” he said once Lyarra climbed out of his lap and skipped off to her room.

“Hello, Coa-…Jon,” she said. She paced slowly over to him and looked him up and down. “What hurts the most?” she asked.

He glanced up at Sansa and she nodded to him. Tell her the truth. She can handle it. “My head did at first but now my whole body is sore,” he answered.

“I’m sorry,” Mina said before she leaned down and gave him the gentlest of hugs.

Lyarra was sweet but spirited and full of energy. Mina was softer, loving and careful of others when they were hurting.

Sansa’s breath caught in her throat as Jon’s arms encircled Mina. She couldn’t see her daughter’s expression but she could see his. Tears formed in her eyes but she smiled at him.

“Thank you, Mina,” he said hoarsely.

“Baby…why don’t you and Lyarra work on your homework together and then you can watch some cartoons. I’ll figure out something to make for dinner in a bit.”

“Okay, Mommy. I’ll see you in a little bit, Jon.”

He nodded and Sansa could tell he was too moved to speak. Once Mina headed to Lyarra’s room, Sansa sat on the arm of the recliner and kissed the top of his head.

“I love you,” she said. “We can make this work in time, can’t we?”

“I’m sure of it, my love,” he replied.

“Here, girls…pass out the plates, napkins and silverware,” Sansa said to Mina and Lyarra after she called Jon and Theon in from the living room.

Jon looked very tired but he continued to put on a good front for the girls anyway. Theon had called offering to bring them dinner and Jon had accepted saying he didn’t want Sansa to have to do everything for him today.

Despite his initial flirtatiousness, she liked Theon and it was clear that he was a good friend to Jon and an adored uncle-figure to Lyarra.

Sansa was transferring the bucket of fried chicken to a serving platter when Theon came in to fetch drinks. He snickered when he saw what she was doing.

“It’s just another thing to wash,” he said.

“It looks nicer this way,” Sansa replied with an arched brow.

“Well, we couldn’t have my chicken looking shabby. Should I move the mashed potatoes into a proper serving bowl instead of this Styrofoam container?”
“Maybe,” she laughed. Theon sauntered over to steal a roll as she moved the green beans into a serving dish. “Now, I see where Lyarra learned her bad habit of sneaking food before dinner.”

“I am proud of all the bad habits I’ve taught that girl, you know.” Sansa smacked his hand when he made to grab for another roll. “Ow! Do you beat Jon like this?”

“Only if he misbehaves,” she smirked.

“Oh, if I were Jon, I’d misbehave for you all the time, Sansa,” Theon teased.

“Don’t be lewd with my girlfriend, Theon,” Jon said from the doorway. “Sansa, do you need any more help?”

“No, go and sit. We’ve got this.”

He grunted his acknowledgement and turned back into the dining room.

“You know he’s going to need some help later this week,” Theon said once Jon was out of earshot.

“I know that. What do you think I’m doing? I’ve got to go to work tomorrow but I’m going to get the girls to school and Rhae’s picking up Lyarra. But I’ll be here every night. We’ll go get a rental in a few days when he’s cleared to drive again.”

“Sansa…I didn’t mean it like that,” Theon said as he finished transferring the potatoes. “I can tell you’re taking good care of him. You’re awesome and I’m completely envious of my dork of a friend to have a gorgeous woman like you taking care of him.”

“Oh! Well, thank you, Theon,” she said blushing.

“What I meant is he’s going to need some help with the team. He’ll still be sore Thursday. Too sore maybe for chasing them around the field.”

“Well, I guess he could cancel this week’s practice?”


“Maybe it’ll rain and he won’t have a choice.”

“Maybe it won’t but maybe he does have a choice.”

“Who? You?”

“Sure, me.”

“Oh, Theon…that’d be so nice of you.”

“Good, you’re on my side. Now, convince him.”

“Why should he need convincing?”

“Because he has a hard time letting go of responsibilities and accepting help. Because he’s stubborn.”

“You do make a good point there,” she said as they moved into the dining room to join Jon and the girls.
Lyarra laughed all through dinner at Theon’s jokes and teasing. Mina was hesitant at first to join in the fun. She was used to her uncles teasing her and making her laugh but she’d only met Theon once before. However, she soon got over her initial hesitation and was laughing along with her friend as the meal progressed.

Under the table, Sansa sought Jon’s hand once he’d finished eating. They shared a look and she felt his hand return the pressure of hers.

*Is this what it could be like? The four of us together every night for dinner with occasional friends or family to entertain and to entertain us in return.*

She wanted that. She wanted them to be a family. She nearly gasped aloud at a sudden pain from that thought. It was as though a hand had reached into her chest and started squeezing her heart. It ached…but in a good sort of way.

She thought of his mother’s call from earlier. It had hurt to think he hadn’t mentioned her but then she had to remind herself how short a time they’d truly known each other. And she could see that he might have a valid excuse based on what she’d heard of Lyanna on the phone. A loving mother but one that wanted all kinds of things for her son and probably wasn’t afraid of expressing it loud and clear.

She looked over a Jon again. His dark eyes soft and sweet as he stared at her. She already loved him so much. Why did that frighten her?

*Because it’s real…and that means you have something else to lose now besides Mina.*

The accident had frightened her. The thoughts of losing him at all frightened her.

But as she continued to listen to Jon and Theon squabble over some development in the world of soccer and watch their girls’ eyes shining with laughter at the men’s theatrical antics over their favorite sport, she knew she’d give anything to hold onto it all, no matter what.

Sansa had helped convince Jon to let him help with the team just as he knew she would.

In return for that, he’d magnanimously offered to help clean up the kitchen and enlisted both girls to help him.

He glanced out towards the living room at one point sitting side by side on the couch, holding hands. Knowing Jon and from what he’d seen of Sansa thus far, he knew their kisses would remain chaste with the girls in the next room but he did his best to keep the girls occupied. He prided himself on being a good wing man after all.

“So, shall we practice slide tackles on Thursday then?” he asked the girls as he passed the clean serving platter to Lyarra to dry while Mina finished clearing the table.

“Slide tackles aren’t allowed at our age, Uncle Theon.”

“What? Well, no wonder I never see you do that then. Thank you, Mina,” he said taking the last of
the dishes and opening the dishwasher to load.

“We can put the stuff in the dishwasher for you, Uncle Theon,” Lyarra said.

“Yeah,” Mina said. “We did that last night at my house after dinner.”

“Well, aren’t you two good little helpers? I never did shi—...I never was much of a helper at your age. My poor mom had her hands full.”

“Swear jar,” Lyarra hummed as Mina loaded the silverware.

“I stopped myself!” he argued.

“Half then.”

“Oh, for fu—...I mean, alright...alright!” Theon went ahead and coughed over a dollar knowing he’d owe again soon enough. “I’d say your dad is trying to get me to fund your college education with that thing if I didn’t know he had to contribute from time to time as well.” Mina laughed while Lyarra put the jar back on the shelf with a grin. “I guess you’ll be wanting to start your own,” he said to Mina next.

“Only if I get to spend the money!” she said mischievously.

“I’ll be in debt to you both then.” Theon sat down, determined to keep his mouth closed for the remainder of clean up time. And save myself a little money.

But as he watched the girls work together, he couldn’t help smiling at them…and saying something.

“Your mom and dad are so lucky to have you both. I always fought with my sister when we were kids. You’ll make a terrific family together.”

Both girls froze in the act of what they were doing and looked at him, their eyes wide and mouths agape. Mina glanced at Lyarra just as Lyarra did the same and then they looked away. Mina’s face quickly became inscrutable but Lyarra looked confused…and then a bit upset.

Oh shit...Theon, you idiot. Jon is going to kick my ass.

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**JON**: Please, love.

**SANSAS**: Fine. They’re blue.

**JON**: Dark blue or light blue.

**SANSAS**: Really?

**JON**: Humor me.

**SANSAS**: Dark blue, navy blue. Happy?
JON: No because you’re there and I’m here. Are they silk or cotton?

SANSA: They’re lacy but I think they’re a cotton-poly blend.

(silence).

SANSA: You’d better not be jacking off.

JON: I’m not. I’m just picturing Nurse Sansa in her lacy blue undies getting ready to examine me. I’m definitely not jacking off…yet.

SANSA: Was Lyarra ok after we left?

JON: Yeah. Why?

SANSA: Mina was very quiet on the ride home. I just hope the girls are doing alright with everything. Lyarra was very worried about you yesterday.

JON: I know. She asked me to tuck her in and read her stories. She never asks for that anymore. I’m not complaining but we read ten books. It took an hour to get her settled.

Before Sansa could respond, Jon heard the sound of Lyarra’s bedroom door opening.

JON: Shit. She’s up. Gotta go. I love you.

SANSA: Love you. Get some rest.

“Daddy?”

“Come on in, baby,” Jon said as he laid down his phone. “You okay?”

She didn’t answer, just stared down at her bare feet peeking out from her pajamas. She had Ghost clutched under her arm and her hair was a mess. Her eyes looked puffy.

“Come here,” he said, already preparing for the impact when she launched herself at him.

But she didn’t. She stayed right where she was.

“You’re in love Sansa now…aren’t you?” she said staring at the floor still.

“Yes, I am,” he said carefully. His daughter raised her eyes and he could see tears. “Oh, Lyarra… please come here.” That’s more like it, he thought as she jumped onto the bed and fell on top of him.

He ignored the agony and held her close. “I love her, Lyarra. But remember what I said before? That doesn’t mean I don’t love you, baby. I love you so much. I will always love you. You’re my girl. I’ll never stop being your father.”

“I was afraid you were going to die,” she sobbed.

“I know. It was scary. I’m so sorry I scared you.”

He clutched his daughter and felt his eyes fill with tears. Shit. He didn’t want to break down now. It would upset her more. He had never cried in front of Lyarra…not since she’d been old enough to understand that he was crying anyway.
“What would happen to me if you died?” she sobbed harder.

Jon wiped his eyes and told her, “You’d be okay. You’d be loved and taken care of. But, baby…I’m okay. I’m right here and I’m going to be just fine.”

She stopped crying at last and Jon didn’t mind that she wiped her face on his t-shirt. He stroked her raven curls and kissed the top of her head, enjoying that fact that right now she wanted to be held even if he hated the fears that brought it about.

“Can I stay in here tonight, Dad?” she whispered at last.

“Of course.”

“And if you get married to Sansa some day and she sleeps in your bed with you…will you still let me come to you at night?”

Half a dozen thoughts fleeted through his mind at that but there was only one answer to give. And, Sansa was a mother. She would feel the same.

“Always,” he answered.
Building Something

A week had passed since Jon’s accident and it seemed to pass in a whirl of activity for everyone but himself. He hated being stuck at home and feeling like an invalid the first few days.

By the time Saturday morning’s match came though Jon had recovered well enough to sit on the sidelines and coach his team with Theon’s assistance. He still wasn’t up to sprinting out onto the pitch like normal but he was there at least.

Theon had been a much bigger help at practice on Thursday than Jon might wish to admit but he’d admitted it freely all the same and thanked his friend repeatedly.

But when the girls won the day’s game, he fervently wished that Theon wouldn’t yank off his Liverpool jersey and start twirling it over his head. At least he had another shirt on under it.

“Put your fucking shirt back on, douchebag,” he hissed under his breath before the girls thundered over to give them both high fives. “All right, girls. Let’s line up to high five the other team,” he said next as Theon sheepishly threw his jersey back on.

He looked across the field to where Sansa stood with her parents, Robb and Margaery and Rhae. He waved to the all but he had eyes only for Sansa.

If he was thankful for Theon’s assistance this past week, it was nothing compared to what he felt for her and all the ways she’d taken care of him and Lyarra both. All week she’d driven him around to appointments, picked up Lyarra most afternoons and cooked them all dinner each night.

He was shaking the other coach’s hand when he saw Harry striding across the field towards him. He’d been at the match but kept his distance from Sansa and her family.

Oh shit. I’m in no shape to kick your ass right now if you’re wanting to start something.

“Hey, Jon,” Harry said. “You got a minute?”

“Sure,” he said neutrally.

He hadn’t liked him showing up at Sansa’s last weekend. He hadn’t liked what he’d heard of their argument. And the fact that his visit had wound up making her cry…well, that wasn’t something Jon could tolerate at all. But Harry hadn’t really done anything to him…other than the fact he had failed to treat Sansa like the queen she was. Which Jon in turn couldn’t seem to help but take personally.

He gestured for Harry to follow him back to the coach’s sideline. He needed to grab his gear. Most of the girls had already made their way over to their parents and Lyarra was riding on Theon’s shoulders as he carried her over to Rhae. Whatever Harry wanted to talk about, Jon would rather they talk away from the girls.

“I’m sorry about your accident by the way. Mina told me all about it when I picked her up Thursday night after my flight.”

“Uh…thanks. I’m doing better now.”

“That’s good. So, listen…I just wanted to say that despite what happened last weekend…”

“When you showed up at Sansa’s on Sunday morning?”
“Yeah. Despite that, I’m hoping that we can all try and get along.”

“I’d prefer that, too.”

“Great. I’m planning on being at Mina’s party next Saturday. I just kind of wanted to know if you’d be there, too.”

“I’ll be there,” he said. “Lyarra and all the girls from the team are invited. I’m bringing Lyarra and another one of the girls from the team.” And I’d be there anyway, he added in his own mind.

“Okay.” Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and Jon wondered if the conversation was over until Harry spoke again. “I guess you spend more time with her than I do anyway lately,” he sighed, looking over at Mina with Sansa and the Starks.

Jon felt a twinge of something. Sympathy? Guilt? How would I feel if Val were alive and had another man in her life that spent more time with Lyarra than I did?

But it was hard to judge that. Val was dead. Jon had raised Lyarra on his own. There weren’t any other men out there to take his place in his daughter’s heart. And Harry was to blame for his regrets and mistakes anyway.

“She’ll always be your daughter, Harry,” he said sincerely. “I love her. I do. But I’m not trying to take your place. I would never try to steal your girl from you.”

“Yeah…alright. Just my other girl,” Harry grumbled.

Jon bristled at that and said, “Sansa’s not your girl. Not in a...”

“I know that! Sorry, I shouldn’t have said it. Fuck.” Harry dropped his head and kicked at the grass for a second. “This is hard. I didn’t mean that really though, okay?”

Jon nodded and decided to change the topic before Harry could say anything else that might tempt him to hit the sorry son of a bitch. “So… I thought it was your weekend with Mina.”

“I’m getting her tomorrow morning for the day. I’ve got a ton of shit to catch up on at the office after being out of town most of the week.”

Jon could hear the defensiveness creeping back into his tone and wanted to defuse that. “I’m sure you do. I’m dreading walking into work on Monday morning after being off unexpectedly this past week.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Mina said something about you guys going car shopping today.”

“We are.”

“So… what are you thinking about getting?” Harry asked in a breezier tone, a we’re-both-guys-and-can-talk-about-cars kind of tone. Jon wanted to get along with the man but he did not want to be buddies.

“Not sure just yet,” he said with a shrug as he saw Sansa and Mina coming over.

Harry and Sansa kept their distance from each other. She was still angry about last week’s fight. Jon couldn’t blame her. While Mina chatted to her father about the goal she scored and their plans for the next day, Sansa walked over to him.

“What’d he want?” she whispered.
“Nothing much. He asked if I was coming to the party next week.” Sansa rolled her eyes and he said, “Don’t worry about it, love. I think he was trying to play nice. It’d be much easier that way, right?”

“Right,” she said with a smile. “I’ll just let you handle him from now on.”

“Well, considering that I felt the urge to punch him a time or two, I’m not sure I’m up for that,” he chuckled.

Once they bid everyone adieu at the fields, they got the girls and piled into Sansa’s sedan to grab some lunch before they headed to the car dealership. He was still waiting on the insurance but he was eager to get the process started and part of that was finding something that he liked and could afford for his next set of wheels. He was glad for Lyarra to have her friend to keep her occupied and grateful to have Sansa’s input.

While they stood in the showroom, he wound up taking her aside and confessing that he wanted to find something the four of them could ride in together easily with some room to spare. He hadn’t expected her to get emotional over that but she did.

“It’s a Honda Pilot, love. I’m not fond of the color either honestly but there’s no need to cry over it.”

“I’m sorry,” she sniffled. “It’s stupid of me to cry. It’s just…it’s like we’re…” She gestured helplessly between them.

“Building something together?” he asked. She nodded and started wiping her eyes again. “We are,” he said tenderly as he stroked her cheek. She nuzzled her face against his palm and he wanted to kiss her…but that could wait for now.

The girls had been busy climbing in and out of the showroom models and making guesses about how many soccer balls it would take to fill the each one. They hadn’t seen her cry but both girls eyed Sansa closely when they called them over to look at another vehicle. Jon just knew they could both tell she’d been crying.

It turned out to be the first true test of his relationship with Minisa. Sansa had told him that she liked bringing things up in her own good time…and normally when you were least expecting it.

“Did you make my mother cry today?” she asked sharply after dinner that night when they were alone in the kitchen.

Sansa had taken a crying Lyarra to the hall bathroom to try and get chewing gum out of her hair after Jon had given up and suggested getting the scissors. He’d received scandalized and affronted looks from all three of them for that. But it was nothing compared to the daggers Mina was shooting his way now.

Jesus Fucking Christ…if looks could kill. “No, Mina. Your mom got sort of…well, not sad really. More like she got a bit emotional at the thoughts of something we were talking about with the cars. Pass me that sauce pan,” he said as they stood next to the sink together. Mina handed him the pot but kept giving him the side-eye. “I swear to you, Mina…I don’t ever want to make your mother cry, alright? I mean, occasionally, I might on accident…because I can be a bit…”

“Because men are idiots.”

“What?!?” he yelped.

He couldn’t help but laugh when she told him that’s what her Aunt Arya always said. He assured her
that him being an idiot wasn’t to blame…not this time.

“Do you normally talk to adults this way?” he asked with a raised brow.

She dropped her eyes and said, “No…sorry. Will you tell me why she was crying?”

“I guess because I told your mother I wanted to find a vehicle large enough for the four of us.”

Mina’s nose scrunched up and she asked, “Why would she cry about that?”

“Beats me. But, you said men are idiots and I’m a man so I guess I probably don’t understand completely,” he chuckled. She gave him an exasperated look so he cleared his throat and tried again.

“I think it made your mom kind of happy but kind of nervous at the thoughts of us…you know, being kind of like a…a family.”

“Oh.” He handed her the saucepot. She was quiet and chewed at her bottom lip as she dried. She threw the dishtowel over her shoulder and looked at her feet before asking, “Are you going to marry my mom, Jon?”

“Oh…” Where is Sansa? Holy fucking shit. He was on his own though. He drew a deep breath and started again. “I love your mom, Mina. I think that I’d really like to maybe…someday…uh, later on…when we’re…” Mina’s eyes turned back on him and widened with impatience. “Someday…yeah, I’d like to. If she’d…”

“Okay then…someday. But not yet, right?”

“No, not yet,” he said. “I’ve not actually asked your mother to marry me or anything, you know.”

“I know that.” She grinned mischievously and said, “I won’t tell.”

“Okay.”

“Jon?”

“Yes, Mina.”

She turned on her most radiant smile and asked, “Have you ever thought about getting a dog?”

A few days later, Sansa was settling into her new position at Chelsea Elementary. The work was rewarding enough in its way and the hours were certainly better. Sansa was overjoyed at the thoughts of finally finishing her degree by year’s end. She had shared her goal of graduating with Brienne who was extremely supportive. And, while dealing with a multitude of students and parents on Brienne’s behalf was different than just the handful of clients Mr. Baelish usually had come by, she found she was enjoying it.

The other ladies in the office were very nice though she immediately had a feeling that she had not been deemed safe to ‘discuss’ things with yet as she was a) still too new and b) dating the assistant principal. She figured she’d win them over in time. She missed Jeyne in a way but not enough to regret leaving her old job.
She could tell the rest of the faculty and staff loved Jon which she could certainly understand. He was fantastic with all the kids and courteous and friendly with everyone working there. There were a few other men who worked at the school but it was predominately women and Sansa had already received more than a few lingering stares from some of the single teachers. Word gets out quickly. Not that she minded because the way his face lit up when he saw her made her smile like an idiot in return and was enough to depress even the most tenacious pursuer of Mr. Snow.

Every day this week Jon had been standing outside greeting students at drop off when she arrived. It made her feel all warm and tingly inside the way they all seemed to want his attention. Several asked where he’d been last week. She knew he was a great father. She had seen how terrific he was with the girls on the soccer field. But she was still floored at how wonderful he was with so many different kids, ranging in age from five to eleven.

And something about it made Sansa feel a tug and pull for something she’d not thought about in a long time…having another child someday. A baby…with Jon.

Seeing all the young faces at school was a pleasure. It was certainly better than Mr. Baelish’s leering smirk. She liked seeing Lyarra there every day as well. She was considering applying for a transfer for Mina to the school. It would simplify things though she hated to pull Mina away from her own school and friends.

Thursday evening at practice found Jon back on the field with girls though Theon was still there to help. After practice, they’d agreed to separate for the night. Other than when Harry had had Mina on Sunday, it was the first night the four of them had not been together for dinner since Jon had come home from the hospital. It was good in a way because, as much as she loved him and Lyarra, she’d not had much one on one time with her daughter.

Mina must’ve been thinking the same because she came to Sansa’s room after she’d been tucked in for the night.

“Mommy?”

“Yes, Mina.”

“Can I spend the night in here?”

“Well, it’s a school night.” They normally did their ‘sleepovers’ on the weekends. But Mina was looking so sweet holding Lady and nervously twisting the hem of her nightgown. “But…I guess it’d be okay. Come on in,” she said pulling back the covers.

Mina crawled into bed and settled Lady between them and then put her hands behind her head. Sansa couldn’t get over the fact that her daughter would be turning eight on Saturday. It seemed like such a short time ago that she was a tiny little thing nursing at her breast.

It was bittersweet to remember that time. She’d been such a young mother. Mina had been premature and that had compounded Sansa’s already enormous anxiety and coupled with the guilt that she was already doing everything all wrong. Her family had been incredibly supportive but she’d felt lost all the same.

“Sansa, newborns can be difficult in some ways…but it’s a special time and it goes by so quick,” her mother had tried to assure her when Mina had been ten days old and Sansa was hysterical from exhaustion and feelings of inadequacy.
But that had made no sense to Sansa back then.

*So quick? When will it be over? When can I sleep again or go anywhere? I spend twenty hours of my day with my boob in her face or changing messy diapers. I’m nineteen and my life is already over.*

She didn’t like to remember what she’d felt like back then. She had been exhausted and still healing. Mina hadn’t taken to nursing right away and it’d been a struggle that made Sansa feel like a failure…a big, fat failure already at motherhood.

*“It’s breastfeeding. It’s supposed to be the most natural thing in the world and I can’t do it!”*

*“You can, darling. It takes time, Sansa. You’re both new at this. Just because it’s what nature intended doesn’t mean it’s simple from the start for everyone. And if it’s too much and you switch her to the bottle, it’s not something to feel bad about,”* her mother had said soothingly as she’d sobbed in her old bedroom.

She’d went home to them after five days at the apartment with Mina crying night and day which led Sansa to crying night and day and Harry complaining that he couldn’t think straight between the two of them. She was already becoming acquainted with how little effort Harry was willing to give.

Her family…her mother especially, had been her rock in those early days. How she could’ve survived it without them, she did not know.

But she would acknowledge her stubborn streak made her determined to keep trying. As she grew more adept at handling a baby, she wanted to show them that she could do this. *By myself if I have to,* she’d thought angrily one night when Harry had gone to visit a friend…and stayed out till 2AM drinking.

When Harry had jetted around the eight-month mark for a time, she’d went home to live with her parents again…but she refused to give up and let them take over for her. She would be a good mother come hell or high water and she wouldn’t burden her parents or her siblings by giving up or quitting.

She stared at her daughter, now sleeping peacefully on the pillow next to her, and wondered what it would be like to experience motherhood again. Now that she was older, what would that be like? And what would that be like with Jon as the father and part of their lives, there to share the load and give her support?

*Someday…maybe…we might find out.*

“*Oh, this is so nice of you guys to offer!*” Sansa exclaimed as Robb, Margaery and Rhae all descended upon Sansa’s condo the following night when her, Jon and the girls were clearing away dinner and suggested going out. “*You don’t have to do this.*”

“Yes, we do,” argued Margaery. “*My niece will be eight tomorrow so we need to take the Birthday Girl and her friend out for some ice cream and debauchery.*”
“What’s debauchery?” Lyarra asked as Sansa rolled her eyes at Marg.

“Um…bowling,” Robb said quickly.

“Ice cream and bowling?!” Mina shouted with excitement.

“Awesome!” Lyarra joined in. “It’s Rock n’ Roll Bowl night!”

“I’ll get my purse,” Sansa said as Jon started to grab his shoes.

“Excuse me? We didn’t invite you two,” Marg said, tossing her hair and giving Sansa a look.

“Yeah,” Rhae chimed in as she ruffled her brother’s hair where he’d sat down on the couch with his shoes. “You two will need to find your own debauchery tonight,” she added with a wink.

“Rhae…” Jon said in warning.

“Wait…I thought Sansa and Jon were coming, too,” Robb said, clearly not part of this aspect of the plan.

“Why can’t Mommy and Jon come?” Mina pouted.

Sansa smiled at her sweet daughter. She knew immediately what her sister-in-law had concocted with Rhae, no doubt as a gift for them as much as the girls so they could have a couple of hours alone on a Friday night. She didn’t really want to define debauchery for her daughter though.

“It’s okay, baby,” Sansa said. “Mommy is tired from a long week at work. Jon and I can hang out and watch some TV here until you all get back.”

Mina seemed reassured. Lyarra was already telling her aunt which flavors of ice cream she wanted. Robb was clearing his throat and staring at his wife. Jon was turning pink.

“Uh…back by ten, alright?” Jon said as they moved to the hallway to go. “They’ve got a match in the morning.”

“Yes, Coach!” Margaery called in a sing-song voice.

“Have fun, you two!” Rhae laughed.

“Christ,” Robb muttered as he closed the door behind them.

They stood frozen in the hallway until they heard Robb’s Range Rover pull out of the driveway.

“What do you think…two hours maybe?” Jon asked with a sly look.

“At least.”

“Oh, fuck me,” he growled before pulling her bodily against him and diving in for a kiss. Sansa’s gasp of surprise quickly became a moan as he slid his tongue into her mouth and his hands gripped her waist tightly. “I think I love your sister-in-law,” he said when they broke for air.

“I think I love your sister,” she giggled in response.

“I’ve been wanting some time alone with Nurse Sansa for a long while now,” he said huskily while nibbling and sucking at her neck.
“Oh, good…Nurse Sansa wants to take good care of Mr. Snow,” she said as she carded her hands through his curls.

“Oh, you do take good care of me. It’s time I return the favor.”

She ground her pelvis against him. He was hard and Sansa’s panties were already getting soaked. “Uhhh…want to take me to bed, honey?”

“No…I want to take you right here,” he rasped. “And then I’ll take you again in the bed.”

*God, that voice…that tone.*

He backed her up against the wall and lifted her skirt like a man possessed. She couldn’t complain one bit. She loved the way he wanted her. All this time they’d spent together since his accident…they’d not had sex. Between him healing and the girls always being around, there’d been no time for this, no time alone at all other than the day he’d come home from the hospital.

Sansa had missed him like this. They’d shared their one night nearly two weeks ago. And while that night had been wonderful and they’d made love more than once, she needed him now. She wanted him desperately. She’d even fantasized about running off to a storage closet at school with him for five minutes, or maybe locking his office door and bending over his desk. Those were just fantasies though. They couldn’t do that and risk losing their jobs. But now they were alone at her house and the girls were not here.

Jon slid her panties down and helped her step out of them. She busily worked at his belt buckle and pants. He brought her panties up to his nose and sniffed them.

“Fuck…you smell sweet, love.”

Sansa’s breath got shorter. She was throbbing with need. She wanted him inside her…now.

She shoved his pants down and they dropped to the floor. He jerked his boxers down next and then pinned her against the wall, pulling her leg up around his waist. When he pushed himself inside of her, she nearly wept with joy.

“Jon…I’ve missed this so much.”

“Me, too,” he said.

He thrusted slowly in and out several times, nearly withdrawing from her before he sank all the way back in. He was looking down at where they were joined, fascinated by watching himself disappear inside of her apparently. When he looked back up at her, his pupils were blown and he looked at her with such reverence. It made her heart pound all the faster.

“Sansa…will you think me awful when I tell you that I’ve been tempted to call you into my office on some pretense all week so I could bend you over my desk and fuck you?”

“No,” she laughed. “I…ahhh…I’ve imagined something…uhhh…similar.”

“Good,” he said with an impish grin. “Promise to tell me all about your wicked fantasies later?”

She nodded and grasped his ass, urging him on. “Harder, Jon,” she moaned.

He started thrusting more rapidly and they were both panting before long and no longer talking. He took care of her first with his thumb brushing her clit, making sure to bring her to her orgasm. He
waited for her to shout his name before he worked towards his own finish.

When he came at last as she clutched his shoulders and her cunt was still spasming with her climax, Sansa watched his face, trying to memorize the sweet look of bliss and relief he found while buried inside of her. It was an expression she’d like to see on his face far more often…nightly perhaps.

He slumped forward into her and kissed her brow once he could breathe normally again.

“Bed now?” she asked as she twined her arms around his neck.

He didn’t answer. He just scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom. She laughed aloud and wondered when she’d last felt this young and carefree. *A long time ago,* she thought.

They stripped out of their clothes completely and laid down next to each other. They spent time exploring each other’s bodies just by touching, caressing and kissing. It wasn’t long till he was hard again. He kissed her lips sweetly with his cock pressed against her thigh. Sansa laid back and thought he’d climb on top of her.

“Wait…roll over, love,” he said. “Lay on your stomach for me.” Sansa complied, shooting a look over her shoulder. “I just want to give you a massage,” he said.

He got up on his knees and did just that, working her neck, shoulders and back with gentle pressure. He was not a masseuse but he did well and Sansa felt delightfully limp after he was done.

“*Mmmm*…that was lovely,” she said as she sighed and stretched.

“I just wanted to pamper you a bit…after all the ways you’ve taken care of me the past two weeks.”

“I loved it. I like taking care of you…and I like you taking care of me.”

“I’d like to take care of you always, love,” he said softly.

His fingers were sweeping through her hair and she could feel his breath on her back. She shivered with longing but her heart melted with happiness at his words.

“Careful…I might let you.”

He started kissing her back, resting on his knees and forearms above her. He kissed his way ever downward. When she felt the soft scrape of his beard on her ass, she reached for her phone on the nightstand. Jon was nudging her thighs apart when he realized she was tapping on her phone.

“Uhh…what are you doing, love?”

“Just a sec,” she said. She sent her text to Margaery and then showed it to him earning a chuckle.

**SANSA:** *We’re going to need at least 20 minutes notice before you bring them back.*

“That alright with you?” she smirked.

“Fuck yes,” he said before he lowered his head.

His tongue teased her clit and he sank a finger inside her pussy. Sansa grasped her pillow tightly and moaned, losing track of any other practical thoughts.

They both snickered later when they saw Margaery’s response.
MARGAERY: Tell Jon I expect that you’ll be thoroughly debauched when we return;)

It's My Party...

Chapter Summary

Mina's birthday brings some drama.

Chapter Notes

This chapter shifts between different points of view, including Harry's for the first time.

Many of you hate Harry which I totally get (I'm not a fan either) but I'm writing a flawed human being (not a caricature of a villain) so I hope he comes across as such here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The coffee had gone cold and the hangover lingered. The guys from the office had wanted to go celebrate the big deal they’d closed and who was Good Time Harry to say no? He wished he had now though.

Rough looking and bleary-eyed for you daughter's big day. Christ.

Those guys…they were all single with no kids. They were a few years younger. They all looked up to him. They thought he had it all figured out when nothing could be further from the truth.

When the pretty redhead had walked into the bar alone, they’d all made eyes at her and took turns trying out their best lines.

Amateurs.

Harry knew what to say to a girl like that. Big eyes, big dreams…with very little love in her past. She was young and lonely. Harry was just lonely.

He’d bought her a drink but stayed purposely aloof. When she got curious enough to initiate a little conversation, he started talking about her, giving her his best smiles and all the attention. He asked about her, making her feel special, keeping it all about her interests and plans.

An hour’s worth of his time and an earful of chatter, a price he’d gladly pay to get some. The benefits were two-fold. Harry got some tail and all those guys from the office looked at him like he was some sort of god when he walked her out the door to a waiting taxicab.

It had been a swift and needy fuck though. She wasn’t experienced enough to know how little effort he was willing to give her. He wasn’t into her. He just stared at her hair. It was the wrong shade of red. He’d whispered her name but thought of another. He wondered how it had all slipped away from him. But deep down he knew.

You lost her…and she’ll never be yours again.
He’d crept out of the stranger’s bed that morning before six. He had things to do today. He thought about leaving her a note…but decided against it. He didn’t have any interest in seeing her again.

As Harry sat alone at the kitchen table trying to wrap Mina’s birthday presents, he wondered if he was brave enough to face this day.

He’d never considered himself a coward…but perhaps that was because he’d never given the matter much thought. He wasn’t afraid to tell some loud-mouthed jerk to shut the fuck up. He wasn’t afraid to come to someone’s aid if they needed help. If he saw an old lady getting mugged, he’d chase down her mugger. Well, if the guy had a gun or was built like a linebacker maybe he’d just make sure she was alright. He wasn’t a complete idiot.

This morning though he wondered if he’d been telling himself a story all these years.

He thought of Sansa, the first pretty redhead he’d seduced. Looking back, he saw all the ways they could’ve been more, could’ve been special. Even if they’d wound up apart in the end, he thought maybe they could’ve had something more than Mina between them now. If only he’d tried. If only he’d be brave enough to risk a bit more of himself for her.

But he’d been young and foolish and valued his freedom over his girlfriend and the daughter they made together. College wasn’t the time to be tied down to one girl and a baby, he’d told himself. There were plenty of girls out there he hadn’t fucked yet, his frat brothers had said.

Sansa loved being a mom so he told himself it was okay to let her do it all. It was a bit rocky for her at first but he’d barely noticed since he’d been so focused on how little sleep he was getting from listening to Mina and Sansa cry all the time. And soon enough, she was juggling Mina like a pro and making him feel incompetent because he still struggled with a diaper change. And she had her family to help her.

The Starks…he knew none of them would ever consider him good enough for her.

As Mina moved out of diapers, he realized how fun kids could be…for the fun, easy stuff at least. He loved Mina, loved spending time with his princess. What an ego boost to see someone’s whole face light up when they saw you. Harry was a hero in Mina’s eyes even as he avoided the disappointment and then out-and-out disgust with him that he saw in her mother’s eyes.

He’d been a fool though. He’d lost Sansa…for good now. He could tell it. The way her and Jon were together…an ignoble jealousy sprouted like wildfire every time Harry saw them. That guy was head over heels for Sansa. Who could blame him? Harry had her and he lost her. He almost wished he’d never had her at all when he realized what he’d lost.

Coach Jon this, Coach Jon that. Mina liked him. Harry suspected it wouldn’t be long until she loved him.

**Will she still love me, too? Of course, she will. Don’t be such a weepy ass.**

Harry rose from his wrapping job and reached behind the breadbox for his little bottle of shine that Chett, one of the boys from work who hailed from Appalachia, had given him as a present last Christmas.

He added a splash to the cold coffee, and then another. He took a sip and grimaced. He braced himself for the day.

Mina’s 8th birthday; surrounded by her friends and the Starks…Sansa…and Jon.
Sansa woke up early with a smile lighting her face. Her hand reached across the bed seeking and half hoping. Nothing. No one was there. She smiled all the same though.

Last night with Jon had been so wonderful...and needed. God, she’d need him so much and he’d needed her, too. She wished he was still here in her bed but of course Margaery, Robb and Rhae had brought the girls back at ten o’clock.

They’d managed to make it to the sofa and turn on the television before they returned. Sansa had changed into her pajamas and Jon, delightfully naughty man that he was, was fingerling her pussy and clit and sucking at a nipple when they knocked. Sansa had just started to climax and Jon waited for her to finish. He drawled in her ear that he could feel her cunt squeezing his fingers just like it had his dick a little while ago.

“Unnn…fuck, Jon…that was…God, that was good,” she’d panted. “But they’re here,” she’d whined next.

“Be right back. Better pull yourself together, love,” he’d said before he licked his fingers salaciously in front of her.

He rose and adjusted himself before answering. His hair was a mess. Her hair was a mess.

The girls were oblivious just as children their age should be but Marg and Rhæ’s knowing grins made Sansa and Jon both blush scarlet. Robb huffed and went to the kitchen for ‘water.’ Jon had followed him to avoid his sister’s well-intentioned innuendos.

He left with Lyarra soon after and the others were right behind him. They’d exchanged a hasty kiss good night by the door as Rhæ walked her niece out and Mina had gone to brush her teeth.

“See you on the pitch tomorrow, love,” he’d murmured before he headed out the door to where his daughter waited.

Sansa stretched, still a bit sore from wall sex and then the rest of their activities in the blissful interlude of alone time that her Marg and Jon’s sister had sprung on them.

How soon till I can ask for that again without seeming too wanton or neglectful of the girls?

She brushed off her desires though and remembered why today was extra special. Minisa was eight today. Her little girl was going to have a birthday party hosted by her grandparents and she was excited.

For her own part, Sansa was worried how things might go. Her family would all be there. Family that didn’t care much for Mina’s father and weren’t afraid to let him know it. Please Arya...be good for her sake, sis.

Harry would be there. God only knew what he might say or do. She nearly laughed when she remembered last year’s birthday at Chuck E. Cheese when she’d been worried about Harry showing
up…and actually forking over half the cost of the party as promised. This year she’d almost welcome that being her biggest fear.

He’d been strange since Jon had entered her life. He didn’t really want her she thought. He just didn’t like knowing he’d never have her again.

Harry was a lifelong charmer. His mother raved about it…as though that was a major achievement, to be able to bend people to your will with your looks and your wit. He prided himself on being able to win people over easily. Truthfully, it was what made him a successful salesman and businessman.

And, it was that same charm that had helped him seduce a college freshman with no sexual experience to fall into bed so quickly with him. It was also how he’d talked her into letting him ‘fuck her bare.’ She was ashamed at how she’d thought that was sexy when he’d said it back then.

“I’ll pull out, Sans. I promise. You can’t get pregnant if I’m cumming all over your belly, sweetling. I’ll get you off first though, babe. I’ll make it good for you, too.”

God, what a fool I was.

Minisa, the voice in her head reminded her. *Minisa was the result. And you can’t stay angry about that.*

Sansa jumped out of bed then. It was her daughter’s day. Her mother and father would be there to help her celebrate along with her grandparents, aunts and uncles. Her friends would be there and Jon…Jon would be there, too.

Jon and Lyarra laid in his bed together watching the morning match while ignoring the fact they really needed to get up.

Everton scored in extra time to pull ahead and they both groaned. Neither liked seeing Man U get beat but they harbored a bit of a soft spot for Everton as it had been Tim Howard’s team until recently and Lyarra was a huge fan of the U. S. keeper. And Rooney had started there. There were rumors he might return there to end his premiere league career.

Lyarra begged to watch the post-match analysis. Jon knew he should say no. He needed a shower and they both needed breakfast. Their game was at 10 that morning.

But she was so sweet, snuggled up against him with Ghost in her arms. Her raven curls were soft against his cheek, softer than his. Her blue eyes implored him.

“Just a bit more, Dad.”

“Yeah…alright. Just a bit more, baby.”

*How am I ever to say no to either of you?* he thought with a smile as he recalled Mina’s big blue eyes when she asked if he’d ever considered getting a dog. *I’m such a sucker for these girls…and Sansa.*

A dog…the thought had crossed his mind…more than once. He had the space, big backyard. His job
didn’t take him out of town and he didn’t work late hours. He was more than capable financially of caring for a dog. He wondered what Sansa would think. A dog was a lifelong commitment. Her input was needed.

And there was England to consider this summer. If he and Lyarra went to visit his mum, he couldn’t just send a new family member off to the kennels a few weeks after getting him or her.

Listening to the commentators discuss the match, he thought of his mother’s plea. She wanted to see him and Lyarra. How would she feel if he invited Sansa and Mina though? He wanted to go in a way. Lyarra hadn’t seen England yet and he wanted to take her. He wanted her to see her grandmother, too. But he had no wish to leave Sansa and Mina for two or three weeks.

What would Sansa think if I offered to take them with us? Even if they only came over for part of the time? Is it too soon? Would she even wish to go? Would Mum drive her batty?

As if on cue, his phone rang.

“Hello, Mum,” he answered.

“Well, that was disappointing,” she said flatly.

“Yeah…well…they were trying to…”

“Oh, don’t give me that. They were favored and they blew their first half lead and then let them come back and beat them. They were shit the entire second half. Mourinho had better watch himself. Why did he sub in Fellaini in the 85th? We were on the attack and…grrrr! The lads at the pub were calling for his head.”

Jon laughed that his mother had started watching matches at a local pub with men his age and younger rather than sit at home to watch in comfort.

His poor stepfather didn’t care much for football. He followed Leeds United in a half-hearted way… but mostly because he was in fact from Leeds.

“What does David think of you spending all your time with younger men at the pub, Mum? You’re not turning into a cougar on him, are you?”

“Jon…mind your tongue,” his mother admonished.

“A cougar? How could Grams be a cougar, Dad?” Lyarra asked, chortling at the image of her grandmother as a big cat no doubt.

Shit. “Um…just a joke, baby,” he said to Lyarra while his mother cackled on the other end of the phone.

“David’s just grateful I’m no longer sitting at the house shouting myself hoarse at our telly,” his mother added. “So, cheer me up, darling. Tell me you are coming over in June.”

Jon extracted himself from Lyarra and took the phone into the bathroom with him. This discussion would need to happen between the adults involved before they sprung it on the kids.

“Yeah…about that. I’d like to come over…”

“Oh, Jon! I’m so glad. David and I were just…”

“But…I’d like to talk to you about it and maybe see how you’d feel about something I’d like to do.”
I wish I may

I wish I might

Have this wish

I wish tonight.

Mina opened her eyes and looked out across the field.

It’s not night, silly. It won’t work.

It’s my birthday. It might.

“All ready with that wish, Mina?” Jon asked kindly.

The game would be starting in a few minutes. He’d gathered the team together to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to her. Lucy and Nalia couldn’t come to the party later and Coach Jon always made a point of celebrating things like birthdays or lost teeth or new pets as a team.

“Make a wish, Mina,” he’d said once the girls had finished singing. And Mina had closed her eyes and made one.

“I’m ready,” she said eagerly.

He gave her a high five and told the girls where he wanted them to start. Mina took her place at forward and scanned the crowd. Daddy waved at her brightly. He was laughing with another dad. Mina didn’t know him. He was a dad from the other team. At least, he’d found someone to sit with.

Mommy had looked cross when he’d come over to speak to them that morning. Mommy was with Grandma, Grandpa and the rest. She had lots of family by her side. She still looked cross though and kept giving Daddy mean looks.

It’s my birthday. Please, don’t fight. I should’ve wished for that, she thought sadly.

Twenty minutes later though, Mina wasn’t worried about her parents and the tension between them. She had scored a goal…on her birthday. Just as she had wished for. She didn’t score every game. She wasn’t the best player on the team. That was Lyarra. Mina didn’t mind that Lyarra was the best. She didn’t mind that Nalia was better than her and maybe Julie, too. She was just happy to score on her 8th birthday.

“Woo!” Daddy shouted loudly. “That’s my girl! Way to score a goal for your old man, princess!”

He was elbowing the dad next to him…the dad with a daughter playing on the other team. Mina didn’t think the dad wanted her daddy there next to him now. She wished Daddy would sit down and not yell again.
I didn’t score it for you. I scored it for me, Mina thought with a touch of bitterness she didn’t fully understand.

Jon subbed her out soon after and when she raced to the sideline she hugged him. He only gave a brief hug in return. He was busy coaching.

But she stood beside him and asked if she could hold his clipboard. Assistant manager. That’s what Jon called it when he let one of the girls on the sideline hold his clipboard. “You’re my assistant manager. Keep me in line, okay?”

He let her hold the clipboard now and she tutted when he started to argue with a call the ref made.

He smirked and looked down at her. “Alright,” he said under his breath. “But it was a bad call.”

“Doesn’t matter. We have a good attitude and don’t let bad calls get us down,” she said, parroting his words.

“You’re absolutely right. Eight years old and brilliant already,” he said. Mina beamed at him and he continued. “Was that your wish by the way? To score?”

“It was,” she smiled.

“That’s fantastic. Scoring is great but on your birthday? That makes it even better,” he said warmly as his hand gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I’m proud of you. You did awesome, Mina.”

She felt a zippy little thrill at the thought that Jon was happy for her and proud, too. And, he was happy that she’d got her wish but more than that, he understood what it meant to her.

“Thanks, Jon.”

“Open mine!” Abby shouted enthusiastically that afternoon while Mina stood at her grandmother’s large oak dining table with a stack of gifts in front of her.

It was thrilling to be the center of attention in a way…but a tad embarrassing, too.

Nine of her classmates had come, including Tom who she liked and his friend Jacob, who was there mostly so Tom wouldn’t be the only boy. Most of her soccer team had come as well.

Mommy kept thanking Grandma for hosting them all and acting weird. Grandma kept patting Mommy’s face and telling her to stop worrying so much.

Grandma Anya had come with Daddy. She was always kind to Mina but she wasn’t the same as Grandma Cat. She stayed by Daddy’s side and kept whispering to him. Daddy didn’t seem to like it.

Mina had gone to find Aunt Arya for Grandma at one point and overhead her in the kitchen with Uncle Bran and Uncle Robb.

“You’re right, Robb. He’s definitely been drinking,” Uncle Bran said.
“That fucker,” Aunt Arya hissed.

“Arya…” Uncle Robb groaned. “There are kids all over the house. Watch the language.”

“Sorry.”

Mina had backed out of the kitchen and disappeared to the garage for a moment. She didn’t know what the conversation meant. She just knew it made her uneasy.

Grandpa had come out to retrieve more sodas and bottled waters and found her.

“Why are you hiding out here, Birthday Girl?”

“No reason,” she’d lied.

Grandpa was always so kind. He wouldn’t want her to be upset on her birthday.

She’d rejoined the party after that. The hamburgers, hot dogs and cake were consumed. The party games had been played and now all that was left on the big agenda, as Grandpa called it, were the presents.

Jon was speaking with some of the other grown-ups from soccer in the corner as Mina carefully unwrapped Abby’s present. He looked up at her and smiled. She smiled back. He was still her coach…but he was more than Coach Jon now.

“Thanks, Abby!” she raved as she held up the three pairs of soccer socks; one was covered in moustaches, one with puppies and one pair was rainbow striped. She loved them. Mommy liked fancy shoes. Mina liked crazy socks, especially crazy soccer socks.

Lyarra stood by her side and took notes. She’d appointed herself Mina’s secretary for the gift opening.

“What for?” Mina had asked when Lyarra had pulled out her strawberry-scented pen and Snoopy notepad.

“I write down who gave you what to help you remember for when you write your ‘thank-you’ notes.”

“Mommy always just remembers who gave me what,” Mina had said.

“Well, Daddy never can. He always writes it down for me. He says he’s my secretary.”

“Oh…okay. You can be my secretary,” she had agreed. It made her feel sort of extra special.

The pile of wrapped presents dwindled as the opened gifts were moved to the China hutch behind her.

Tom gave her a butterfly necklace and Mina's cheeks were hot when Uncle Rickon whistled. Grandma slapped his arm and told him to hush. Mommy smiled but Daddy and Jon both looked displeased. Maybe they didn’t realize Mina liked butterflies…and the boy named Tom.

“Here’s the next,” Grandma said pushing three wrapped presents her way.

They were from her dad. She could tell because he had bought a huge roll of Dora the Explore wrapping paper when she was little and he still hadn’t used it up. She didn’t care. It made her grin to remember watching the cartoons with her dad when she was smaller.
Daddy was watching. He looked a bit worried. She gave him a bright smile to show him she didn’t care that he still wrapped with Dora paper.

The first gift was an American Girl doll she’d wanted. She knew they were sort of expensive but Daddy bought her one every birthday and Christmas. She smiled and hugged the doll to show Daddy she loved it. She knew Mommy would’ve bought whatever book went with the doll for her. They always did that…like a team.

The next was a poster of the U.S. Women’s team as she’d requested. And it was signed by several of the players. All the girls on her team and several of Mina’s classmates were wowed by that. Even Jon was impressed and asked Daddy where he’d got it. Daddy just shrugged and said the internet.

She opened the final gift and her face went blank. Lyarra let out a loud guffaw at her side until Jon told her to be quiet kind of harshly. Lyarra stopped laughing at once.

It was a Manchester City scarf…the arch rivals of Manchester United.

*He didn’t know the difference. Daddy doesn’t know the teams. He doesn’t follow soccer. It’s an easy mistake to make.*

She told herself all of that but still felt hurt in a way.

“Um…thanks, Daddy,” she said.

She saw his face cloud with concern. He realized something was amiss. He just wasn’t sure what.

“Open ours,” Lyarra prompted. “My hand’s tired. I won’t have to write it down.”

“Lyarra,” Jon said suddenly. “She can open ours later.”

But the present was right there in Lyarra’s hands and Mina wanted to open the gift her friend had brought. She giggled when she saw the wrapping paper. It wasn’t wrapping paper at all. It was comics from the newspaper.

Lyarra rolled her eyes and said dramatically, “Dad’s such a nerd. He makes me read the comics after I open presents because reading is ‘fun’-damental. Ugh. Then, be sure to recycle it or Dad will get upset.”

She saw Mommy come over to talk to Daddy. She wasn’t cross looking now. She looked a bit sad and was trying to say something nice. Mina could just tell. Mommy was almost always nice to everybody.

“Come on,” Lyarra urged.

“Mina…wait,” Jon said now.

She looked up at him, his dark, brown eyes were asking her to stop. But he was on the other side of the table and she’d already half unwrapped it.

She opened the small shoebox inside the comics and pulled out a Manchester United scarf. Just what she’d wanted.

“Oh! I love it! Thank you, Lyarra! Thanks, Jon!” She clapped and threw it around her neck, looking down at the fringe, running it through her fingers happily.

“You’re welcome,” Jon said softly as Lyarra grinned at her.
Mina was still admiring her present as she heard the loud slam of the front door. Her head jerked up along with the other children to see the grown-ups all looking upset and worried.

Not all the grown-ups were there. Daddy had left.

“You go to him. I’ll go to her,” Sansa said.

Jon shook his head and said, “What am I supposed to say? Sorry I usurped your gift?”

“I don’t know!” Sansa said in exasperation. She leaned in to him for a kiss and a hug of reassurance. He gladly gave it. “Anyahas the keys. He can’t leave. He’s out there brooding.”

“And this is supposed to make me want to approach him?”

“He’s not violent, Jon.”

“How often does he drink, Sansa?”

“Not often. At least…he didn’t back when we were…”

“So, you don’t really know, do you, love?”

“No.” She lifted those big blue eyes up to him…imploringly. God, help me. I’m like goo when it comes to the three of you. “Please, Jon,” she pleaded.

“Alright, alright…I’ll go talk to him.”

Harry had stormed off in a fury over the stupid scarf. Jon had tried to get the girls to stop when he realized Harry’s easy-to-make mistake.

Then, Mina had started to cry as soon as she realized her father’s feelings had been hurt. Some kids wouldn’t have been aware of the incident. But Mina was Intuition’s favorite child and she just knew what her father was feeling. She was also blessed with a great deal of empathy—or cursed depending on your point of view.

The other children had been shooed out back to play games with Rickon and Bran, Cat’s two unwilling party game wranglers. And now their niece wasn’t even participating. But one look from their father had sent the young men hustling to entertain the young party guests.

Harry’s mother was a mess, weeping about how anxious her son had been about coming to the party and how miserable he’d been over so many things. She’d eyed Jon with clear hostility and he could practically hear Sansa’s sister Ayra grinding her teeth to keep from shouting at the older woman.

God, help me, he thought again. This is awkward as fuck. And why do I have to talk to this guy? Better me than Sansa though.

“Hey,” Robb said as he headed towards the front door to search for the errant father.

“Hey.”
“You going to look for Harry?”

“Yeah. Sansa asked me to.”

“Want me to come along? I’ve known him a lot longer than you.”

“Yeah. That would be…thank you, Robb.”

“Sure thing.”

The two men found him sitting on a bench in the gazebo in Catelyn Stark’s flower garden. He’d been crying but his face was set like stone at the moment. He scoffed at their approach and asked if they’d been sent to kick him out of his daughter’s party…and out of her life.

“No, Harry. We’re just…concerned about you,” Robb said. “It’s not like you to come around when you’ve been drinking.”

“I’ve not…” he started to object but both of them gave him incredulous looks. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I was hung over from last night…and nervous about today. I had a little in my coffee to take the edge off. I…I’m not a drunk or anything, alright? Christ, Sansa will probably try and get my visitations limited now, won’t she?”

Jon didn’t answer that. He wasn’t sure what Sansa was thinking right now. Probably how unhappy it made her to see her daughter’s father smelling of liquor at a soccer match and her birthday party. Probably wondering if she could trust this man to stay sober around their daughter. And mostly worried that her little girl was hurting over her father’s hurt feelings.

“Harry…Mina mentioned the scarf to Lyarra so I bought her that. I didn’t mean to…”

“And if I’d written the fucking name down correctly, she’d have two Manchester Whatever scarves and I wouldn’t feel like such a loser.” He sighed and said, “I am a loser. You already know that. You’ve got her now. I lost her. I’m the loser that let her go.”

Jon didn’t know what to say to that. He wasn’t sure what Sansa was thinking right now. Probably how unhappy it made her to see her daughter’s father smelling of liquor at a soccer match and her birthday party. Probably wondering if she could trust this man to stay sober around their daughter. And mostly worried that her little girl was hurting over her father’s hurt feelings.

“Harry…Mina mentioned the scarf to Lyarra so I bought her that. I didn’t mean to…”

“The poster was cool,” he said to try and lighten things up.

Harry laughed ruefully. “Yeah…it set me back a pretty penny, too.” He shook his head and said, “Jon…I may not like you all that much at the moment but I won’t deny you’re good for them. I don’t know if I ever was.”

“You are. You can be, Harry.”

“He’s right, man,” Robb added. “She’s your kid. If you want to make things work, I know you can. Mina loves you. She talks about you all the time when she’s over here.”

“She does?” he asked in disbelief.

“She does,” Robb affirmed. “It’s a bit annoying really. But it’s funny in a way because Arya has to keep her mouth closed about you in Mina’s presence which drives her insane.”

The three of them chuckled uneasily at that. Another step…how many left to go?

Jon put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Look, Harry…I won’t lie to you. I don’t like you drinking if you’re going to be around her. I don’t want to see that again. I love Sansa and I love Minisa. I’ll do
anything to protect them. But as long as you’re sober and trying, I will never say one negative thing about you to your daughter. I’ll do my best to have a friendly relationship with you. But today is supposed to be about Mina…so can we please go back inside and see her?”

Harry glanced at the hand on his shoulder and Jon wondered if he was about to smack it off.

Instead, he stood and nodded. “Let’s go.”

Well, it could’ve gone better. It could’ve gone worse, Sansa thought as she sought out her daughter.

From the moment she’d smelled the alcohol on his breath at the game this morning, Sansa’s guts had been clenched in anxiety, waiting for a scene.

In her vexation, she’d told Margaery who had immediately told Robb and soon every Stark was aware.

He’d likely sobered up some by the party some but the smell was still on him. Anya had looked like a frightened doe. She wasn’t used to her golden boy acting like such an idiot in front of others.

If only you ever tried to truly see him, you’d not be so surprised.

He wasn’t one to drink all that much though. Never in the AM either. Sansa worried that this was something new to be addressed. She prayed it was just an isolated incident though.

Doesn’t matter right now. Mina’s what matters.

“Mina…baby,” Sansa said from the doorway of her childhood room, the room that was now Mina’s when she spent the night.

Her daughter was curled up on the bed, the sobs were still quaking her small frame. Sansa sat beside her.

“I want Lyarra to leave,” her daughter sniffled.

“Why?” Sansa was caught off guard. She didn’t expect Lyarra to receive any of Mina’s anger.

“She laughed at Daddy’s gift,” Mina huffed.

Oh…of course. “Mina…it’s not really fair to be mad at Lyarra over that. It was perhaps a bit insensitive of her…but she didn’t mean to be cruel.” Mina started to cry again and Sansa pulled her into a hug. “It’s alright,” she cooed.

“I hurt Daddy. I thought mean things,” she wailed.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, baby. It’s okay to be mad sometimes. It’s okay to be upset with people we love. Daddy will be okay. Jon went to talk to him.”

“I don’t want Jon to talk to him. I want Jon to leave!”
“Mina…”

“I can’t have him here. I hurt Daddy because I was nice to Jon.”

“No, baby. Daddy was upset over the present…and other things. He made a mistake is all. He’ll get over it.”

“I love Jon,” she said in a broken little voice that cut Sansa to the quick. Sansa drew a deep breath to speak but Mina continued. “I love Jon…and that hurts Daddy. I can’t love them both. I love Daddy more.”

“Mina…love doesn’t work that way.” She pressed her forehead against her daughter’s and reached for a tissue to wipe away her tears. “Our hearts are made for love, my sweet one. There’s no limit to how much love a person can feel and no limit to the number of people we can care about in our lives. Jon and Daddy are two separate people. You can love them both. You don’t have to love them equally…and you needn’t ever feel guilty about it.”

Mina raised her blue eyes to hers, searching for a lie or a trick. “Is it really that simple, Mommy?”

*No, not exactly…but close.* “Yes, Mina. You can love them both. And they can both love you. And Lyarra can be your friend…and someday maybe she’ll be more than just your friend.”

“Like a sister?”

“Like a sister.”

“You and Aunt Arya don’t fight much,” Mina said with a hopeful smile.

*An only child. Maybe she’ll learn someday that arguing with loved ones isn’t the worst thing there is. Indifference is worse.*

“We did when we were girls.”

“I wouldn’t want to fight with Lyarra…ever.”

“Maybe you won’t. Who can say for certain?”

They sat on the bed talking until Harry walked in. Jon was behind him. He lingered in the doorway watching. Sansa knew he wouldn’t leave and was glad of it.

Harry sat on the bed next to Mina. Sansa watched them embrace and Harry said the right things for a change.

“Daddy’s very sorry for running off,” he said. “I want you to be happy, princess. I’ll try harder, Mina…to be the kind of dad you deserve.”

“It doesn’t matter, Daddy,” Mina said, happier now that he had come to her. “You’re here now. And, I liked the colors of the scarf. Maybe I can follow them, too. Just because Jon and Lyarra like United doesn’t mean I can’t follow City, too.”

Jon chuckled from the doorway but said not a word.

Harry’s face was streaked with tears and Sansa felt more sympathy for him than she had in a long while. Maybe he didn’t deserve her pity…but she had a great capacity for love and forgiveness in her own heart. He looked at her over the top of their daughter’s head and Sansa took his hand.
“We’ll work together to make things right for her,” she whispered.

He gave her grateful nod and hugged their daughter tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all of you who are following this story. I am overwhelmed by the number of subscribers for this fic and, as always, I love hearing from you in the comments.

Just a quick word-I’ve got several WIPs going but I’m also trying to work through my Season 7 thoughts/concerns by writing one-shots and shorter fics to help maintain my passion for writing this ’ship. Writing multiple chapters on the same story day in and day out just doesn’t work for me anymore, especially since my chapters tend to be long. I need a bit of distance between chapters to embrace each story with fresh eyes so please respect my process and bear with me on the updates. I’ve waited nine months and longer for updates on stories that I enjoy reading but I try not to go more than a month between updates on most of my works and its usually less than that.

Finally, thanks so much for reading my works. It makes posting them worthwhile :)
The Bonds of Sisterhood

Chapter Summary

Lyarra has a rough Saturday and Mina steps in to help a flustered Jon. Sansa and Jon discuss some plans and desperately need some time alone together. Mina plans her own field trip. And then the girls have a sleepover at Jon's.

Chapter Notes

Alright, I'll warn you all...there's not really any smut in this chapter. But there's plenty of bonding moments between our four main characters and some of Arya so I hope you'll like the chapter anyway!

It had not been a great Saturday so far. It had not been a good one at all in fact.

Man U had lost this morning which probably should've been a sign that it would be a…well, Uncle Theon would’ve called it a shit day but then he’d owe Lyarra money for saying it.

A sucky day. Maybe Dad wouldn’t be mad if I called it that.

She didn’t say it though. It was better to be safe than sorry especially when Dad had burned the eggs this morning on top of the fact Lyarra had forgotten to empty her laundry hamper when he’d asked last night so she didn’t have any clean soccer socks. Of course, Dad had managed to get a pair clean but he said somewhat gruffly that she should be thankful they had an afternoon game.

At lunchtime, Dad had realized they were out of peanut butter and frozen chicken nuggets. He seemed to be having a rough day, too…and he needed to go grocery shopping apparently.

He’d insisted that Lyarra eat something besides crackers and cheese before her afternoon match and the two available options were fish sticks or chicken salad. She wasn’t crazy about fish sticks but with enough ketchup they were tolerable. She still sat there making gagging faces to express her displeasure. She toned it down however when Dad started scowling and getting a bit red in the face. The fish sticks were okay honestly. Chicken salad on the other hand would’ve involved actual throwing up.

And speaking of throwing up…Aunt Rhae was supposed to come watch her play today but then she’d caught some nasty bug Dad had said and she was super sick at home. Poor Aunt Rhae…and poor me. Aunt Rhae had promised to take Lyarra to see a movie after soccer but that wouldn’t be happening now. Dad had said he needed to cut the grass this afternoon so no movie today.

Mina would be spending the afternoon at the zoo with Sansa and her dad. Mina had said her father had some special stuff to talk over with her mom and needed some time with them both. Lyarra’s dad had understood but Lyarra didn’t exactly. Sansa made Daddy happy. And Daddy made her happy. Mina’s dad had better not try and do something stupid like kiss Sansa and mess things up. What if he tried to steal Sansa away from her dad? Lyarra didn’t want him to go back to being alone and sad
sometimes.

Plus, Lyarra was kind of jealous that Mina got to go to the zoo with both her parents while she got
the not-so-exciting jobs of picking up sticks before Dad mowed and then setting the timer on the
microwave every twenty minutes so she could bring him water. And Dad would be out there for
ages—at least an hour. He refused to get a riding lawn mower because he said it was like exercise to
push mow. But that took forever. And what was the point of a big yard anyway if you didn’t even
have a dog?

Lyarra kicked her foot in frustration at the thought and then stubbed her toe.

“Dang it,” she muttered…and then looked around to see if Dad had heard her.

It was also supposed to be really hot and humid today. It was early May but today they might break a
record temperature-wise. Lyarra didn’t like the heat all that well. It made her naturally curly hair all
frizzy and some of the girls at school would tease her and call her Fuzzball when that happened.

And playing soccer in the heat would make it worse and Dad tried but he wasn’t the best at braiding
it to make all her curls behave. Sansa could braid hair. She could even French braid her own hair.
Lyarra wondered if she could teach her how to do it someday.

Mina didn’t like the hot and humid weather either. She said too much sun made her freckle
something awful and she burned easily. She also said hot and humid weather was only good for
going swimming and eating ice cream. Lyarra had to agree with that.

“Almost time to go, baby,” Dad called from the doorway.

“Okay,” she said, pulling on her shin guards and socks. He’d washed the red pair. She really wished
he’d washed the purple pair. Those were her lucky socks. Oh, well, she thought with a sigh. Let’s get
out there and win anyway.

They were playing Coach Thorne’s team today and Lyarra knew her dad really wanted to win
though he’d never say it out loud to the team. She didn’t know why but there was some sort of
tension between Coach Thorne and her dad. They’d worked together at one time but Lyarra had
been a baby back then.

For the past three seasons though, Coach Thorne had been coaching his granddaughter’s team in
their region. She was the same age as Lyarra so they always played each other. His granddaughter
was nice but Coach Thorne was kind of loud and seemed mean. And Lyarra could tell he didn’t like
Daddy and Daddy didn’t seem too crazy about him either.

So…Lyarra wanted to get her dad a win today. She should’ve known based on the day she’d had so
far that it might not go so well.

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“Lyarra! No shoving!” Coach Jon yelled from the sideline in frustration.

The ref blew the whistle and gave Lyarra a warning. Jon sent Abby in to sub his daughter out. Mina
held out the clipboard for Jon to make a couple of quick notes and then he handed it back with a
brief smile and a ‘thanks.’

“That one’s your girl, isn’t she?” the other coach said with a nasty sneer.

Jon just ignored him.

Lyarra stomped over to the side and gave her father an ugly look. Mina eyed Jon nervously. She’d given her mom those looks before. It usually didn’t end so well.

Lyarra sat down as far from her dad and Mina as possible. She started pulling clumps of grass out and letting them fall across her feet.

Mina looked at her mom across the way. She looked worried about Lyarra but Uncle Robb and Aunt Margaery were busy talking to her.

They were losing 3-0. It wasn’t fun to lose but Jon had said for them to do their best and not worry about the score. Minisa knew that Lyarra was competitive and didn’t like losing but something had just seemed a bit off today with Lyarra from the start. And, Mina could tell it was upsetting Jon.

Jon had seemed frustrated today, too. When they’d been warming up, the other coach had come over and said something to him. There’d been a tightness to Jon’s smile after that and Mina suspected the coach had been rude. The other coach, Coach Thorne, sounded kind of mean anyway the way he yelled when his players made a mistake. Mina was glad he wasn’t her coach.

"Mommy would never date a mean man like that. He’s Grandpa’s age but not nice like Grandpa... and not at all handsome like Jon."

Play resumed and Mina saw Jon looking over at Lyarra. He was probably thinking about having a talk with her. But he looked angry and she looked angry. Talks didn’t normally go so well when both people were angry, Mina had discovered.

“Here,” she said in her best grown-up voice while handing Jon back the clipboard, “let me go and talk with her.” Mina laid a hand on his arm and patted it the same way Mommy might do. “I’ll see what’s wrong...besides the score.”

Jon’s lips twitched into a smile that he quickly tried to hide and he said, “Sure, Mina. Maybe you could talk to her and remind her we’re just here to have some fun, okay?”

Mina walked over to where her friend sat pulling at the grass and muttering to herself. She didn’t say anything. Maybe Lyarra just needed to let off some steam. That’s what Grandpa would say when Mina got mad. He’d say she had a Tully temper like her grandmother and just needed to cool off. Of course, Grandma would say that some Starks were known to have quick tempers at times and Grandpa would laugh.

“Tough game, huh?” she finally said after a few minutes had passed in silence.

“Yeah,” Lyarra said. She’d stopped pulling up grass and was just sitting with her elbows on her knees and her hands under her chin.

“There’s still a lot of time left though.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll bet your dad will send us both out there again soon. Maybe one of us can score.”
“Yeah.”

“I don’t want to lose…but I’d like for us to score one goal if possible.”

“We might not lose,” Lyarra said.

“We might not. But we’ll have a better chance if you’re out there playing and not sitting here because the ref called a foul on you.”

“I know. It’s been kind of a bad day that’s just getting worse. I really wanted to beat Coach Thorne for Dad.”

“Is he mean to your dad?”

“I’m not sure. Dad has never said. It’s just clear they don’t like each other.”

“Hmmmm…well, I don’t know why anyone wouldn’t like Jon. But I think he’ll tell us all he’s proud of us even if we lose as long as we try hard and are good sports. That just seems like something your dad would say.”

“Yeah…that’d be something he’d say. Thanks, Mina.”

Lyarra seemed more like herself after that and Jon sent them both back out to play. They didn’t win but at least the other team didn’t score anymore and their team got two goals. So, at least it was closer…for a loss.

Mina saw Mommy smiling at her from the sidelines. She came over and hugged them both when the game was over.

And while Jon kind of grimaced while shaking the other coach’s hand, he smiled at the team and told them he was proud of how well they all played and gave them all high fives. She even saw him and Lyarra messing around and laughing together as the four of them walked to the parking lot. Mina thought that was an improvement at least.

It had been two weeks since Mina’s birthday and Jon was driving to Chelsea Elementary in his new Pilot on a Monday morning while trying to engage Lyarra in some conversation about her own upcoming birthday. Lyarra, however, was not much of a morning person unless there was football to watch.

Saturday had been a bitter pill to swallow. Thorne had been the assistant principal at the first school where Jon had taught and he had taken a strange dislike to him from the start which had never made much sense to Jon as he’d tried his best to get along with everyone at Elm Tree Elementary. Maege Mormont had been the principal though so at least Thorne’s bile, while something to learn to tolerate, hadn’t managed to threaten Jon’s career.

Since Thorne had retired from the school system, Jon had imagined he’d seen the last of him. Until he started coaching his granddaughter’s team. Life is just full of these happy coincidences, he thought sarcastically.
Lyarra grumbled in response to his suggestion of a party…for which he was grateful as Jon wasn’t much of a party planner. And after the drama of Mina’s, he wasn’t certain he wanted to host one anytime soon.

But despite her sour mood for part of Saturday, Lyarra was normally a cheerful and outgoing child once she was fully awake. And before they reached the school, Lyarra was awake enough to engage in their conversation at last.

“Dad, could I have a sleepover for my birthday instead?”

“Uh…how big a sleepover are we thinking about?” he asked, suddenly breaking out in a cold sweat.

He wanted to give his daughter the birthday she wanted but he’d been told rather pointedly by three different parents in the past year or so that they couldn’t allow their daughter to spend the night in the home of a single father. Lyarra didn’t know why those friends hadn’t been allowed to sleepover but she’d been disappointed more than once. And while he could respect other parents’ right to their opinions and concerns, it had still stung.

“Just Mina,” Lyarra said.

“Oh? Yeah, that’d be fine with me. I’ll ask Sansa today and see if it’d be okay with her.”

“Okay, Dad,” Lyarra said happily. Jon smiled in the rearview mirror at her and couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief as he was fairly confident that Sansa would agree and didn’t even think Harry would raise an objection. However, Lyarra surprised him with an addition to the invite. “Maybe Sansa could sleep over, too.”

“Huh?”

“It’d be fun to have her hang out with us all. We could watch movies. That way you wouldn’t be bored. Just don’t spend the whole night trying to kiss her…especially in front of us.”

“Oh, Lyarra…that’s sweet, baby, but…”

“And we could get pizza and then do manicures or something. Sansa knows how to do French braids, too. I’d like for her to braid mine that way. Not that you…uh…”

He chuckled and said, “No, I get it. Dad’s not the best at braids…at all.”

“Sansa could even have my bed and Mina and I could camp out in the living room.”

“Uh…maybe.” *My bed’s big enough to share. God, don’t tempt me.*

“Or she could just hang out until it started to get late and then go home.”

“Right…right,” he said.

They parked and Lyarra headed inside to find her friends while Jon stood out front to greet students and help open car doors in the drop off line. Sansa arrived a few minutes later with coffee for them both. She was wearing a lovely turquoise dress and heels and looked like a daydream. She had her red hair twisted up in a fancy braid like Lyarra had mentioned. It was shining brilliantly in the morning sunshine. Jon had to quash the desire to pull her into his arms and kiss her breathless in front of everyone.

He gratefully accepted the mug of coffee and cursed the reality of Monday morning. Public displays
of affection were off limits during school hours.

“At least until you marry her,” Brienne had joked.

“Thanks,” he said warmly to Sansa. She smiled and took up post about three spots down. As the line dwindled and they headed inside he asked, “Did you think any more about the trip?”

“I did,” she replied. But there was a hesitancy to her tone that concerned him.

“Well…would you like to…”

“Jon?” called Brienne from the parking lot. “Could I get your help for a minute?”

Two parents had apparently had a minor fender bender and were trying to out shout each other as Brienne valiantly sought to mediate.

“Sure, Brienne,” he said while Sansa stood there twisting her hands together. “Can we talk about this at lunch, maybe?” he asked.

“Okay,” she said before she ducked inside and Jon went over to help Brienne settle the argument.

Jon didn’t typically eat lunch in the cafeteria. He normally worked through lunch helping supervise the students while the teachers had some time to enjoy their food in relative peace and then ate in his office alone later. However, since Sansa had started, he had sometimes joined her at the staff table.

She was sitting with Randa and Shae and the three of them were laughing together when he approached. They immediately ceased all conversation and looked at him in varying states of amusement. Sansa’s cheeks were pink and Shae was smirking at him. Randa looked ready to burst into giggles.

“I feel like I’m in high school again trying to talk to a girl while her friends sit there ready to start laughing at me.”

Sansa seemed to read his frustration and discomfort though and excused herself from her co-workers asking if he’d like to sit outside at one of the picnic tables. He nodded and followed her to the exit as Randa and Shae started laughing again.

There were four large picnic tables set outside for when parents or grandparents came to eat with their kids. They were often popular during nice weather but today at least they were alone out here.

“I’m sorry about them,” Sansa said once they sat down. “We were just chatting about men in general. It wasn’t aimed at you but I’m sure it seemed that way.”

“It’s okay,” he said just happy to be alone with her. He looked around and decided that holding her hand should be acceptable enough here. “I’m kind of used to feeling like a third wheel around here anyway.”

“I wouldn’t want to make you feel that way, honey,” she said sympathetically.

“I know,” he grinned and then kissed her hand. “Sansa, I don’t want to pressure you about England but I would like to book the flight before it starts to get too close.”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry I’ve been putting you off.”

“If you don’t want to go…or you’re having…” He couldn’t bring himself to say second thoughts.
Things had been fine lately...he thought. But then they’d had precious little time alone together since
the night before Mina’s birthday. Harry had started counseling on Friday and he’d asked Sansa to
spend some time with him and Mina on Saturday when he had her to talk through a few things while
their daughter enjoyed the zoo. He seemed committed to dealing with some of his issues and Jon was
glad of it.

And then Rhae had been sick so they’d agreed to just spend time together with the girls on Sunday.
And during the week there was homework and soccer and just everyday life stuff to do and neither
had asked any family or friends for a date night.

We desperately need a date night...and a sleepover that doesn’t involve French braids and
manicures would be good, too.

“I’m not against the idea of the trip, Jon. It’s just that it’s a big trip and I’m worried how your mother
will feel about you bringing the woman you started dating a couple of months ago and her daughter.
She’s not seen you or Lyarra in over a year, you said.”

“I told you Mum was fine with it. She’s just happy I agreed to come at all. Trust me, she’d be
hunting you down if she came over here. She wants to meet you and Mina. And yes, that should
probably scare you because Mum can be batshit crazy when it comes to me finding my happily ever
after but I swear that over all she’s a very nice lady. And I’m not just saying that because she’s my
mum.”

Sansa laughed and squeezed his hand. But when her laughter died, she asked, “And what about the
expense?”

“What expense? Oh, you mean the airfare and such?”

Sansa rolled her eyes now. “Yes, Jon. Plane tickets for four instead of two overseas and even if we
stay with your mom and step-father, we can’t just eat them out of house and home. And I’ve never
been to the UK. I’d want to see the sights and...everything costs money, Jon,” she finished a bit
bitterly.

He knew she had struggled financially in the past with her bills. The Starks wouldn’t let their
daughter or granddaughter go hungry but Sansa was proud and would only accept so much help.
Her previous job didn’t pay all that great and even with Harry’s child support checks, money would
be an issue for Sansa. The job at the school wasn’t going to make anyone rich for certain either.

“You don’t have to worry about that, love,” he smiled reassuringly. “I’ll pay for everything.”

He thought that might make her smile again. He was mistaken however.

“I’m not asking you to…I can pay for...” she sputtered, obviously offended now.

“Sansa, love...tell me what to do. I don’t want to piss you off and I don’t want you to feel like you
can’t come with us if you’d like to just because of the money. I want this to work. I want to do
whatever you’ll allow me to do for you and Mina, too.”

She relaxed then and said, “Alright. I’ll try not to be too sensitive over this. If we go, I want to help
with what expenses I can though, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Have you asked Lyarra how she feels about this? It’s her trip too and her grandmother.”
“No. I was waiting to speak with you.”

“Talk to her. See what she thinks and if she’s okay with it…then I’ll talk to Mina.”

“Deal. Speaking of the girls, Lyarra has asked to have Mina over for a sleepover as an early birthday celebration this coming weekend.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. Sure, Mina can sleepover if you feel up to handling them both.”

“I handle the team alright. I think I can manage our two for an overnighter,” he laughed. *Our two...I like that.* “Actually…Lyarra also asked if you could sleepover, too.”

“Oh, she did, did she?” Sansa asked with a sly grin.

“I swear, she did. I didn’t suggest a thing!”

“Alright…I’ll consider it. But if we do that then I’m afraid we’ll need to be on our best behavior, Mr. Snow.”

“Until the girls fall asleep?” he asked hopefully.

“No, Jon,” she said laughing and smacking his arm. “Best behavior all around. I don’t want the girls to know we’re sleeping together anytime soon.”

“We wouldn’t technically have to do any sleeping.”

“Jon!”

“They’ve seen us kiss.”

“Yeah…and that’s kissing. Not the same thing and you know it.”

“Okay,” he groused playfully. “I know…and you’re right.”

On Friday, Arya answered the phone on the fourth ring and Sansa heaved a sigh of relief.

“I need a favor!” she said frantically into the phone.

“Well, hello, Sansa. It’s nice to talk to you, too, dear sister. It’s lovely weather we’re having today...”

“Arya, can you please take Mina to her pediatric well visit today? The appointment’s been scheduled for a month but Mom’s allergies are horrible and she sounds like death. Dad’s gone up to Uncle Benjen’s lake house to help him today, Rickon’s got an exam and everyone else is at work. I hate to ask to take off on such short notice and...”

“I thought you said your boss was nice.”

“She is. She’s really nice but I’ve only been here a few weeks and...” she whispered into the phone as the other ladies filed in.
“And you’re sleeping with your other boss.”

“Arya!” she yelped and then put a hand over her mouth so Megga and Randa wouldn’t hear her hissed reply. “Yes…I’m sleeping with him but that’s not really what matters right now. Please…”

“What time?” Arya drawled.

“Nine o’clock. And you’re the best!”

“I know.”

Sansa hung up and immediately Randa informed her that Brienne had her own appointment scheduled today and wouldn’t be in until late today.

_I could’ve just asked Jon_. Brienne was extremely easy to work for but Sansa was so used to Mr. Baelish it was hard to adapt to a boss that didn’t scowl when you asked for a favor. Well, it’s handled now and who knows when I might need to ask for another favor?

Later that morning, Sansa was busy filing away papers in the file room when she felt a pair of warm hands cover her eyes.

“Guess who, Miss Stark,” he breathed in her ear and Sansa shivered at his deep, husky tone and the feel of his solid body behind her.

“Jon,” she sighed forlornly. “Don’t get me in trouble.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t plan on it. I just couldn’t resist,” he replied as he uncovered her eyes and stepped away.

It was difficult at times working together. Not in a bad way. Just in a I-really-want-to-be-free-to-touch-you kind of way. She turned to face him and couldn’t help but smile at his boyish look of remorse.

“It’s alright,” she said.

“So…you got any plans tonight?” he asked.

“Not exactly.”

“Great! Cancel those nonexistent plans. Think you can get someone to watch Mina?”

“I could probably bribe a family member or two. Why do you ask?”

“Because Rhae is better and asking if Lyarra still wants to see that movie.”

“Oh…so you’re free tonight?”

“I am,” he said moving a bit closer again. His hand grasped her own and his thumb stroked the back of her hand. "I'll have the house all to myself, too."

“Time all alone at your place?” she asked, quite intrigued at the notion. “What kind of girl do you think I am, Mr. Snow?” she teased.

“I like to think you’re my girl,” he answered with a heated look and that wicked glint in his eye. _Damn...the panty dropping voice and the smolder._ “But I’d gladly take you out if you prefer, Miss Stark. I can be a complete gentleman, you know. We could see a movie or go eat. I’d even take you
dancing. Whatever you…"

She cut him off with a soft kiss on the lips. “Your place,” she said with a smile when she moved back again. “I like the idea of us alone at your place.”

“Yeah?” he smirked. She brushed her thumb along his bottom lip and drew some satisfaction from the way he shivered now. “Oh-kay…my place. I’ll make you dinner.”

“And then?” she asked coyly. Her hands were still on his shoulders from the kiss. She tugged him a bit closer and felt his hands move to her waist. She was desperate to press herself up against him…to see if he was getting hard because she was already getting wet at the mere thought of being alone with him tonight. “What would we do after dinner?”

“Well…after dinner, I’d like to…”

“Oh, there you are!” Megga said from the doorway. They both jumped apart at the intrusion and Jon dropped his hands from her waist like he’d been burned. “Your sister’s here with your little girl, Sansa. She’s so adorable.”

“What?!” Sansa asked coming out of her lusty fog a bit quicker than Jon.

“Yeah, she’s…”

Sansa didn’t wait for Megga to finish. She just headed up to the counter where sure enough, Arya stood with Mina.

“What’re you doing here? I thought you’d take her to school.”

“Well, you’re welcome,” Arya huffed. “And she’s a perfectly healthy eight-year-old by the way.”

Sansa hung her head and said, “I’m sorry. Thank you, Arya. But why did you bring her here?”

“You didn’t say if I was taking her on to school afterwards and Mina said she could have lunch with you after her appointment.” Mina was biting her lip and looking anywhere but at Sansa. “Hey, Jon,” Arya said as he reappeared from the file room looking more than a little flushed.

“Uh…hey, Arya. Hello, Mina,” he said to them both.

“Minisa Hardyng,” Sansa growled at her daughter.

“I’m sorry, Mommy. I just wanted to see the school where you work and where Lyarra goes…and where Jon works and…” her daughter said helplessly. “I’m sorry, Aunt Arya. I lied to you. Grandma was supposed to take me to school after my appointment and I knew it. I didn’t have any lunch plans with Mommy.”

The other ladies in the office were all watching raptly and Sansa had pity on her daughter…or at least didn’t wish to give them a show.

“Let’s go outside for a minute,” she said to her daughter and sister.

Ten minutes later, a very remorseful Mina and an amused Arya followed Sansa back inside where Jon was still hanging around up front…no doubt interrupting the gossip-fest of the three ladies with his presence alone.

“So, we’re going to eat some lunch outside at the picnic tables after Mina’s gets a little tour of the school…if that’s alright with you, Mr. Snow.”
“Um…of course, it is.”

“Thank you. You’d be welcome to join us if you like,” she added.

Sansa led her daughter and sister through the halls and pointed out the 2nd grade classrooms and which one was Lyarra’s. She then showed them the library, art room and gym before they headed to the cafeteria.

Sansa wasn’t happy about Mina’s deception but she realized that her daughter was curious about the school.

*I might not be such a bad thing if she saw the school and had lunch with us. Perhaps she might be open to the idea of a transfer in the Fall if Brienne would help me with getting that. It’d make mornings less hectic if we were heading to the same destination. And if we ended up living somewhere else…*

They weren’t there just yet. But she’d told Jon over the phone last night that they’d go to England with him and Lyarra over the summer. It was a big step. Sansa had never been abroad. Mina hadn’t even flown before and now they’d spend two weeks of their summer staying with Jon’s mom and step-father.

So, moving in together at some point might not be too much of a stretch eventually. She didn’t want to give up her condo anytime soon though.

*One step at a time…that’s the motto here, right?*

After the tour, Jon and Lyarra joined Sansa and her two visitors at the picnic tables outside. Lyarra was delighted to see Mina at her school. She told Mina all about life at Chelsea Elementary. Then, the two girls started discussing their plans for the sleepover the next night.

Arya made polite conversation with Jon. Far politer than Arya had ever bothered to do with any other guy Sansa had dated in the past. Sansa couldn’t help but smile. Her sister was not very giving with her approval but it was clear she approved on Jon.

When Sansa walked the girls back inside so Lyarra could rejoin her class and Mina could meet her teacher briefly, she looked outside and noticed Arya and Jon talking. From their expressions, it was clear a more serious conversation was happening now though it seemed to be an amiable one.

Arya came in soon after and took Mina off her hands. “So…am I taking this girl on to her school or to my place?”

“Take her to school, please,” Sansa said. Mina’s groan was immediately silenced when she caught the look in her mother’s eye. “She’s missed a good portion of the day but at least she can get any assignments to make up over the weekend. That is unless she’d rather be grounded and disappoint Lyarra by missing the sleepover tomorrow night.”

“I’ll go to school! Please take me to school, Aunt Arya,” Mina immediately said.

“Alright then,” Arya said.

After they left, Sansa found Jon still sitting outside enjoying the spring breeze. He had already disposed of the rest of their lunches.

“So…” Sansa said taking a seat again, “I guess I should ask what my sister was saying to you out here.”
He chuckled to himself and said, “She just wanted to know what my intentions were regarding her big sister.”

“She didn’t.”

“She did,” he said. “She also informed me that she’d castrate me if I ever hurt you.”

“Well, that sounds like Arya.”

“Yeah well…she also informed me that she liked me and hoped that we could make things work for the four of us.”

“That also sounds like Arya,” Sansa smiled.

“And when I mentioned that I was hoping to take you out tonight, she offered to babysit Mina.”

“Oh? Well, she is a very good sister.”

“Yeah,” he said with a cheeky grin. “We are both blessed with good sisters. So, about those plans…”

Sansa was interrupted from responding by her phone. It was a text from Arya.

ARYA: He’s a keeper, Sans. Don’t screw it up…or I might have to hurt you.

That sounds like Arya.

Saturday night arrived and the pizza and breadsticks had been devoured along with a ridiculous amount of soda. But half way through ‘Rapunzel,’ the girls asked for popcorn.

“No one ever feeds these girls,” Jon lamented, earning giggles from the three of them. “Sansa will you help me out for a minute?”

“Sure.”

When they reached the kitchen, he made a swift decision. “We’ve got about five minutes before they come looking for their popcorn,” Jon said as he rushed her into the pantry.

“Jon!” Sansa squealed in surprise as he shut the folding doors and attacked her mouth with his own. “We were…mmm…alone here…for nearly two…hours last night.”

“And?” he queried before he started tracing along her jawline with his lips.

“And we had sex twice.”

“And?” he asked again as his thumbs grazed over her nipples through her flannel pajama top. “You’re so fucking adorable in these,” he husked against her throat. “How am I supposed to resist you?” he asked next as he started sucking on her neck.
“Don’t…leave…ahhh…a mark…Jon.” His head popped up and he returned to her lips instead. She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him away. “I wore the least sexy thing I own. I had no idea my pink puppy dog pajamas would be such a turn on for you.”

“Everything you wear is a turn on for me,” he growled.

“I can tell,” she said meaningfully while glancing down towards his crotch.

“Shit,” he muttered. He’d already changed into a pair of running pants and a soft tee for the sleepover and now he was obviously aroused.

“Best behavior, Jon.” He put on his best pout but quit that when she added, “Or I’ll go home.”

“Okay,” he said dejectedly. “I thought one quick, little make-out session in the pantry would be alright though.”

“Well…you do make a good point,” she grinned now. “One little make-out session shouldn’t be so bad.”

He smiled widely and wrapped his arms back around her and proceeded to kiss her breathless just as he’d done last night. Like he wanted to do every damned day for the rest of his life.

They were both panting when Lyarra called from the living room, “I don’t here the popper. Are we out of popcorn, Dad?”

“Uh…No!” he said a bit shrilly as Sansa nipped at his collarbone. “We’ll be right there!”

“Are you two in there kissing?” Lyarra asked next.

"I'll bet they are," Mina said knowingly.

“Um…maybe,” he answered. He could hear the girls shriek with laughter from the other room.

“Gross, Dad. Leave poor Sansa alone…or we’ll be forced to send you to your room.”

“Can Sansa join me there?” he whispered.

Sansa snickered into his chest and he kissed the top of her head.

“Better listen to your daughter, Jon.”

“Yes, dear,” he answered. “Popcorn is coming, girls!” he shouted.

“And you’re not,” Sansa said quietly as she laughed.

"Ha...ha."

He didn’t mind though. And he was on his best behavior the rest of the night.

After the movie finished, he hung back and watched the three of them together as Sansa gave lessons in braiding hair and then they polished each other’s nails. He wondered if Val and Lyarra would’ve done stuff like this together. He was glad to have a daughter but he felt woefully out of his depth at times.

However, seeing her tonight with Sansa and Mina and the way they whispered, smiled and giggled together made him extremely grateful for what they had. He wondered at the bit of luck that had
made him Mina’s soccer coach and brought them both into his life and Lyarra’s. He never would’ve guessed in February when Margaery had come to registration with her dozens of questions that he’d be meeting the love of his life because of that.

*The love of my life? Yeah…I think she is. Holy shit.*

Sansa looked up at him just then and his chest felt tight with emotion. He smiled at her and her eyebrow arched as though she could tell it wasn’t just a typical smile. He nodded at her, hoping it would convey that he was fine.

*I’m good. Just completely, head-over-heels in love with you.*

She smiled in response and returned her attention to the girls.

He thought of texting Theon to see what he was doing as the manicures and hair braiding wore on… along with all the talk about cute boy singers and actors that made Jon cringe inwardly to hear coming from Lyarra and Mina. But he sat there patiently and just enjoyed them as they enjoyed their girl time.

Once they’d had their fill of that, they asked him to join them in a game of Scrabble and then Jon was placed in charge of building a blanket fort for the girls to camp out in the living room.

When construction was complete, Jon laid down on the air mattress he’d pulled out for himself and placed it next to the couch where Sansa was laying. He reached for her hand in the dark as the girls’ breathing became slow and steady. He kissed it once and held it until Sansa fell asleep. He finally released her hand sometime in the night while he slept peacefully beside her.
Summer break approaches and Sansa meets Rhae for brunch. The Crazy Poptarts cap off their season and then Chelsea Elementary's 2nd graders enjoy Field Day.

Rhaenys Targaryen was a beautiful woman in her early 30s and the manager of a large retail store. Jon had said she had her mother’s looks and dark hair and didn’t resemble the father they shared one bit. Sansa would have to agree based on the only photo she’d seen of Jon’s father. He appeared an austere man with silvery blond hair and strange indigo eyes. He was handsome in a way though his features were sharp. Jon had definitely taken his looks from his own mother.

Jon had said his father sent his child support faithfully but had had very limited contact with his son the entire time he’d been a boy. They had even less contact now. It was telling that Jon had been determined to be involved in his own child’s life from the moment Val had informed him of her pregnancy. He and Val had already broken up and she had told him she didn’t want anything from him, that she’d only wished to let him know. But that wasn’t Jon. His mother had raised a young man that was quite different than the man that had fathered him.

Rhaenys wasn’t her father either. She had sought out her younger half-brother when she’d turned eighteen and learned of his existence. Though her mother had been pained by her father's betrayal, Elia had not tried to dissuade her daughter from meeting Jon. He’d been fourteen then and nervous about meeting his half-sister but they had warmed to each other quickly and formed a bond despite the awkwardness of their situation. Sansa was glad of that, glad he had some family beyond Lyarra and his mother in his life.

She’d arranged this brunch with Rhae for a specific purpose but also to have an opportunity to get to know her better. Jon and Lyarra had already spent a good deal of time getting to know the Starks. Sansa felt it was important to get to know his sister better in return.

“So…what do you think, Rhae?” Sansa asked as she finished her lemon pastry at their patio table of the bustling downtown restaurant.

It was nearly June and quite warm but pleasant enough beneath the umbrella. This was the last week before school would be out for the summer and today was the last game of the season for the Crazy Poptarts.

“What do I think?” Rhae asked with a coy smile. “Well…I think Jon’s going to love everything about your surprise.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. A weekend away for the two of you. Why wouldn’t he love it?”

“I know. I just worry about what the girls will think. And I know he worries about being away from
Lyarra and…”

“She’s going to have a terrific time with her Aunt Rhæ and Mina will have fun with her Aunt Arya. We could even get together maybe if your sister’s game, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Rhæ.”

“No, thank you, Sansa. Do you have any idea how happy you make my brother?”

Sansa smiled and felt a blush coming on. “Um…happy, right?”

“Yeah, happy…over the moon happy. He loves you. Therefore, I love you. He was so lonely before and now he’s not but it’s more than that, Sansa. Finding you has been…it’s meant so much to him. And he loves your daughter, too. You’ve both brought a lot to him and Lyarra. I hope you understand me.”

“I do. I feel the same about him and Lyarra, Rhæ. I’d practically lost hope of ever finding romantic love. He makes me so happy. I convinced myself that Mina was enough and that I was…content. But now my life is so much fuller, you know?”

“I’m glad for you both,” Rhæ said as she squeezed her hand across the table. “So, go have some time for just the two of you. Have a good time shopping and tasting wine and all that other boring grown-up stuff I’m going to tell Lyarra you two will be doing.”

“We’re going to stay at a cabin in the mountains, Rhæ. We might go hiking but we’re not…”

“All the boring grown-up stuff I’m going to tell Lyarra you two will be doing, Sansa,” she said with emphasis and her eye brows raised.

“Oh…right. Gotcha,” she laughed.

She had told Jon she would pick up drinks, napkins, cupcakes and such for the party they were having at the soccer fields that afternoon to celebrate the end of the season for the Crazy Poptarts after their final game. She’d mentioned meeting a friend for brunch as well and left Mina at his house with him and Lyarra to watch a replay of a MLS game now that the Premiere League had finished their season.

But she’d also wanted to line up child care for next weekend for her and Jon to be alone for thirty-six glorious hours at her Uncle Benjen’s lake house retreat. Shopping and wine tastings were not part of those plans though.

*The plan is sex…lots and lots of sex. Along with some sweet romantic moments naturally.*

Just as she and Rhæ were set to leave the restaurant, he texted her.

**Jon: Everything set for the party?**

**Sansa: All set.**

**Jon: We could’ve helped you.**

**Sansa: Thanks but I was meeting an old friend for brunch anyway. See you there.**

**Jon: Okay. Love you.**
Sansa: I love you, too.

“I feel bad lying to him,” Sansa said showing Rhae the texts.

“You’re not lying exactly. We shopped for the party and you had brunch with a friend.”

“An ‘old’ friend?”

“Well, I’m older than you so there you go.”

“Yeah?” Sansa asked with the grin.

“Yeah,” Rhae said, putting an arm around her shoulders. “I’d call myself an old friend that’s almost like a sister.”

The team was delighted to end their season with a win but Jon was just as delighted at how many of the girls came up to say how much they’d miss their teammates and playing this summer. He said he hoped to see them back at the fields in the fall and that he’d miss seeing them every week.

He gave high-fives and passed out their medals with all the solemn dignity the occasion called for as parents snapped pics of their player and some asked him to pose with their daughter.

When it came to Mina though, he got more than a high-five. He received a loving hug and Sansa asked to get pictures of him with Mina and Lyarra both. Harry had come to attend the last match and the end of season party and even offered to take a picture of the four of them together. Jon in turn asked if Harry wanted a picture with Mina…which he did.

“How are you doing?” he asked Harry after the pictures were done and as Sansa and Rhae called the girls and their siblings over for cupcakes.

“I’m alright. I could be better but I’m working on things,” Harry said honestly. “Sansa says you’ll be leaving for England in a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah. We got the flight booked and we’re heading off on the 17th. We’ll be back the 1st.”

“That’s great. I’ll miss seeing Mina but then my mom and I are taking her to the beach for a week around July 4th.”

“Sansa told me. I hope you’ll enjoy your time together.”

“Thanks, Jon,” he said.

Sansa had spent a lot of time talking to Mina’s other grandmother. This was the first time Harry had wanted to take his daughter somewhere out of town and the first time he had asked to have her more than two nights in a row so she’d been apprehensive. Jon felt a bit apprehensive as well but he wouldn’t say it to Harry. That was part of why Anya Hardyng would be traveling to the beach with her son and granddaughter.
Sansa wanted to believe that Harry wouldn’t do anything irresponsible like getting drunk while he was in sole custody of their daughter but she wasn’t willing to take that chance. He was attending therapy and making progress but this was a big step. Her trust…and Mina’s had been violated more than once in the past and Harry accepted that winning it back would take time.

Jon worried but he knew it wasn’t his place to say yes or no and he did want Mina to make some good memories with her father over the summer.

He had some ideas of his own about ways the four of them might make some fond memories but he hadn’t shared them with the girls yet. He knew better than that. He was hoping to discuss it with Sansa sometime soon and wondered if she’d be amenable to his plan. It would have to wait until after their trip though.

“Here you go, Coach,” Mina said from beside him.

He looked down to see those sparkling blue eyes just like her mother’s staring up at him with an infectious grin on her face. She held up a cupcake for him, white cake with green frosting and a plastic soccer ball ring stuck in it. Mina was already wearing the ring from her own cupcake along with a healthy smear of green frosting around her lips and some even across the bridge of her nose.

How do they manage to get frosting everywhere?

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he murmured, taking the proffered treat but then setting it down. He reached for a napkin and automatically started wiping off her mouth.

He noticed the way she stiffened slightly and saw her eyes narrow. Lyarra would be furious at him for doing such a ‘dad’ thing in front of her teammates.

“I’m not a baby!” he could practically hear ringing in his ears.

But you’ll always be my baby.

He stopped wiping and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Mina,” he said, handing her the napkin to take care of her own face.

She took the napkin from his hands and delicately wiped off the rest of the icing. Her eyes never left his though. He sheepishly gestured at her nose and she rubbed that clean, too.

She smiled at him then and said, “It’s okay…Dad.”

She said it in a teasing tone but the impact reminded him of being t-boned by that big ass pickup truck. He gaped at her until she laughed and scampered off to her friends as though she hadn’t just gutted a grown man by calling him dad. He looked around the covered pavilion where the other parents were milling around chatting. He wondered if anyone would notice the tears that he was desperately trying to keep from falling.

Christ…get it together. Theon would have a fucking field day seeing you like this.

Sansa and Rhae were talking with Abby’s mother who was holding her wriggling toddler, a little boy that dearly wanted down where the girls and the siblings that were old enough were running through the grass, screeching and laughing and playing.

Julie’s mother joined them with her new baby that had been born about a month earlier. He saw Sansa’s face morph from an expression of polite friendliness to one of besotted rapture as she cooed at the baby. The mother handed the little bundle over. It was her fifth child from what Julie had said
and the woman seemed perfectly happy to free her arms if only for a minute or so. The other women gathered around Sansa and a couple of the fathers as well.

Sansa glanced his way just then with a smile upon her face. He felt one of those blasted tears in his eyes escape despite his efforts and roll down his cheek. He saw the concern cloud her features immediately but he waved it off with a grin whilst quickly wiping at his eyes. He gestured towards the afternoon sun that was blinding anyone facing west. Sansa seemed reassured and returned her attention to the newborn.

*Just the sun in my eyes. I'm not crying or anything. Yeah, right.*

He turned back towards the fields where the band of girls raced across the grass, nearly breathless from the exercise now. Julie, Nalia, Abby, Tansy, Beth, Rylie... every one of them were special to him in a way because he always got attached to his players.

But the two that led the pack were Lyarra and Mina. His girls.

*You'll always be my girls.*

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Monday morning arrived and Jon stood in the middle of his bedroom with just his athletic pants on. He held up the next piece of clothing he needed to put on and muttered a curse.

*Field Day. Okay. This is for Field Day,* he told himself with a groan as he finally donned the offensive shirt. *The kids love Field Day. You love the kids... every last one of them. They are counting on you. Brienne is counting on you to run things. Sansa would laugh at you for being this silly.*

He looked in the mirror and groaned again. Blue and gold with ‘Go Chelsea Lions’ printed across the front. It was supposed to be hot today but...

*Fuck it,* he thought. *I'll wear it... but I'm doing this, too.*

He yanked off the staff shirt Brienne had had made for Field Day and pulled out his oldest, thinnest Man U t-shirt and put it on before slipping the Chelsea Elementary shirt back on over it.

*There!*

“Glory, glory, Man United! Forever United, Dad,” Lyarra said in a sing-song voice from the doorway.

He chuckled at his daughter busting him and nodded. “That’s right.”

Lyarra was wearing her class shirt. Each class had a different color shirt to help differentiate them when there was a crowd of a hundred 2nd graders and their parents out on the school’s fields this morning. Third graders would be having their Field Day in the afternoon today.

“At least you get to wear red,” he said, pointing to her shirt.

“Yes. Another reason I like Mrs. Glover.” Lyarra flopped down on his bed and waited till he’d
pulled on his tennis shoes before she gave him a gentle reminder to not embarrass her. “So, no freaking out if I fall during the three-legged race. No calling attention to me if I win. You can cheer but…not too loud, you know? No…”

“Yes, baby. I’ll do my best to not embarrass you,” he smirked.

They grabbed their things and headed to school. He saw Sansa’s car was already in the parking lot. She wasn’t out front waiting for him like she sometimes did though. He greeted students and opened car doors until Randa came out to find him.

“Jon, we’ve got a problem.”

His first thought was Sansa naturally and he rushed inside. However, he soon realized nothing was wrong with her. She saw her talking to a grimacing and obviously ill-tempered Brienne. His boss was leaning against the front counter of the office and telling them all to calm down and leave her be.

She’d went for her early morning workout at the gym and apparently been injured.

The ladies all stared at him. As if I can get her to do anything...

“She’s being stubborn, Mr. Snow,” Shae said.

“She needs to sit down,” Sansa added.

“That animal attacked her,” Megga chimed in.

“What?!” Jon cried.

“Megga!” Brienne snarled. “No one attacked me. Go…go find something to do, alright? Jon…I need a bit of help to my desk and I’ll be fine.”

“I helped her get inside this morning,” Sansa said.

Jon had Brienne put an arm around his shoulder and Sansa took the other side. They eased Brienne down the back hall to her office. Once she sat down with a grunt, Jon saw her swollen foot.

“Brienne, this is ridiculous. You’re going to have to stay off that foot. You should probably go home. You should probably get that checked out first actually,” Jon said.

Brienne scowled at him and then grimaced in clear agony when she removed her dress shoe.

“Shut it, Jon. I’ve never missed Field Day. I’m not missing it now just because that oaf at the gym decided to trample on my foot whilst following me around…the idiot.”

“He’s still trying to ask you out?” Jon grinned.

“I don’t know if he intends to ask me out. He keeps following me around the gym though…constantly.” Brienne rubbed her swollen ankle and suppressed a groan. “He just…stares at me. It would give me the creeps if I wasn’t confident I could take him in a fight.” Jon started chortling under this breath until Brienne’s baby blues cut him like a knife. “Oh…sure…laugh. How would you like it if Sansa was being followed around by some giant of a man that couldn’t take a hint?"

Jon sobered at once and said, “I wouldn’t like it one bit.” He heard Sansa’s soft laugh. He smirked next and said jokingly, “Sorry Brienne…but perhaps you could give the poor ginger a chance.”

“Fuck you, Jon.”
“Swear jar, Brienne,” he gasped in faux horror.

“Double fuck you,” she hissed.

An hour later, Jon was busy organizing his helpers and volunteers. He could see Megga and Sansa setting up Brienne in a chair under a nearby shade tree so she could at least oversee everything like the Queen of Chelsea Elementary…which she was.

Megga was fussing over a box to prop Brienne’s foot up with until Jon noted that decisive jerk of Brienne’s chin indicating she’d had it up to here with being mollycoddled.

Both women left their fearless leader at her observation point and started setting up the water cooler station. Jon had his own preparations to make but he would occasionally dart glances over at Sansa only to see Megga always in her ear tittering away like a magpie.

Sansa was in capri-style yoga pants and the staff t-shirt. Jon tried to quash the libidinous thoughts that kept creeping into his mind as she watched her moving gracefully about the field. She looked absolutely gorgeous with her long red hair pulled up in a ponytail that bobbed and bounced with every step she took.

Speaking of bouncing…

“Hey, Jon!” Ami Frey, the school’s music teacher, shouted as she jogged over towards him.

He suppressed a chuckle at the way the jaws of the two dads that were helping him set up the sack race dropped in unison when they saw Ami run. She had huge breasts and wore very little in the way of supportive undergarments. That was just the way Ami had always been but it was normally a shock to other males.

She really needs to take care not to give herself a black eye. Be nice, Jon.

“Hey, Ami,” he said. “What’d you need?”

She proceeded to tick off a list of grievances about this and that. Mostly that Brienne wasn’t letting her play pop music on the speakers throughout Field Day as she wanted.

“Well…other classes are still going on,” he said in defense of Brienne’s decision. “She said you could play some at the start and at the end though.”

“But I had an entire playlist worked out! What am I supposed to cut?”

“Um…Miss Stark might be able to help you with that,” he said, not really knowing what songs the kids currently preferred. He hoped Sansa wouldn’t be cross at him for volunteering her aid.

Once Ami flounced off with a huff at him…and a sultry wink at one of the dads…he spied Sansa again. Megga was still at her side and now Sansa was frowning.

Sansa and Randa had hit it off from her first day and it appeared that she got along well with Shae. But, he’d not seen her and Megga together much outside of the office. Megga was quite gossipy but she was friendly over all. He hoped they were getting along alright but the look on Sansa’s face at present suggested otherwise.

He wasn’t sure what to make of that but had to return to his preparations. And he was already sweating with two shirts on.
The price I pay for my devotion.

“So, what can I do to help next?” Sansa asked later as he was finishing up running down the itinerary for the P.E. coaches and the parent volunteers.

He looked around and wished he could pull her into his arms for a kiss. “Ami Frey was needing a bit of help with the music, I think.” Sansa frowned again and he decided to offer something else. “Um… I need to finish setting up cones for the racing lanes. Want to help with that?”

“Sure,” she said breezily. There was a false note under it though.

Great. What did Megga say to her?

He racked his brain trying to think of what tidbits of gossip or nosy questions the young woman might have had to set Sansa on edge.

They walked along side by side as they set up the cones. There was a palatable tension coming off Sansa that he didn’t like. She was chewing at her bottom lip and not in that adorably flustered way she sometimes did. More like she did when she was worried over something.

“What’s wrong, love?” he asked when they reached the far side of the field and he was at least convinced no one else would hear them.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said half-heartedly. He stopped walking and waited for her to turn and face him. “Okay…yes. Something is wrong.”

“What is…did Megga say something to you or…”

She twisted her hands together and looked around. There it was again, that miserable, worried look.

“It’s just that…she mentioned something. It’s probably just gossip and even if it’s true it wouldn’t really be…but it didn’t sit well with me.”

“What did she say?” he asked, moving a bit closer.

“She, uh…told me about you and…Ami Frey…last year,” Sansa whispered, looking down at the ground.

“Me and Ami Frey? Last year? I’m afraid you’re going to have to be more specific, love.”

Sansa glanced up, clearly aggravated now. She rolled her eyes and said, “She told me you two had had a thing. It’s not a big deal. We didn’t even know each other then. I just wish you’d told me about it rather than letting me hearing it from…”

“I never went out with her!” he protested hotly.

“She didn’t say you did,” she said with a pained look. “She just said you’d…hooked up a couple of times.”

“Megga said I slept with her?” he asked loudly now. He felt his eyebrows creeping into his hair line as his blood started to boil. “She told you I slept with Ami?!”

“Jon! Keep your voice down, please. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything here.”
“Sansa,” he said earnestly, pulling her into his arms. He didn’t give a shit what anyone thought right now except Sansa. “I have never slept with Ami or any of the women here. Well…except for you, love.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again. And now the tears came. “I’m sorry, Jon. I’m so stupid! I was stupid to listen to gossip. I should’ve just come out and said what I was troubled by and I…”

“No, you’re not stupid and please don’t cry, love,” he said.

He shushed her with a quick kiss on the lips while he held her and stroked her back.

He glanced around with sudden paranoia for kissing her in front of the other staff members and the parent volunteers but when he saw Megga’s staring at them with wide eyes and her mouth hanging open, he was tempted to flip her off. That’d be far worse than kissing Sansa.

“No, love,” he said again. “You’re not stupid at all. You’re still new here and we both know our relationship has apparently set some tongues wagging. I hope Ami’s not saying those things about us. I have a hard time believing that she would. She doesn’t strike me as the type to say she’s slept with a man unless she has. Some of the women though…Brienne told me some of them call her Gatehouse Ami behind her back because she’s, um…sort of free with her…”

“Affections?” Sansa said with a small grin.

“She’s quite personable, I suppose,” he responded with a laugh.

“With boobs like Dolly Parton.”

“Well, yeah…there’s that,” he snickered. “Anyway, there’s a ton of gossiping ninnies around here which I usually just ignore. It’s not like most of them share their gossip with me anyway.”

“You’re the subject of a good deal of their gossip from what I gather,” Sansa said irritably.

“I don’t care. I don’t care what they say about me. I care what you think though. Does this stuff make you upset? Do you want me to talk with Megga? Would you like me to talk to Brienne about this?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m going to let this be a lesson to me not to take any of the gossip I hear to heart. And I’ll definitely put on my skeptical spectacles every time Megga opens her mouth from now on.”

“Good plan.”

“I’m sorry, Jon. Next time, I’ll just talk to you.”

“Always a good plan,” he said as he dared another quick kiss…but on the cheek this time.

Sansa stepped out of his embrace and dried her eyes and they finished their task just as all the 2nd graders were being led to the field by their teachers.

“Would you do me a favor, love?” he asked as he saw the pack of red shirts and picked out his daughter amongst them. “Would you keep an eye on Lyarra for me? Maybe cheer for her a bit? She doesn’t want her dad to embarrass her and I can’t exactly cheer for her against her fellow 2nd graders. I kind of hate that I can’t ever just sit on the sidelines and cheer for her here like the other parents do.”
“I’d be happy to,” she replied.

When there were no more errands or tasks left to do, Sansa flopped down beside Lyarra again on the beach towel she’d brought to sit on.

Randa and Shae were manning the office and told her to have a good time watching the kids since it was her first Field Day with them here.

She’d never got to attend one of Mina’s working for Mr. Baelish but Brienne had told her to take tomorrow afternoon off so she could go to her daughter’s school to watch her. Mina had been thrilled when she’d told her Friday.

Sansa liked the think that Lyarra was pleased to have her sitting with her today. A majority of the second graders had a parent or grandparent sitting with them after all. Mrs. Glover was a kind, motherly woman who was doted on by her students and she doted on them in return…especially the ones that had no one special there to watch them.

Megga had slunk back inside after Brienne had had a sharp word or two with her. Sansa hadn’t said a thing to her and neither had Jon but Brienne was bright and had been watching Megga with Sansa and then Sansa with Jon. She knew her staff well and was quick to stamp out the gossip when it got to be too much. Of course, gossip is rather like a brush fire. You put it out in one place, only to have it flare back up again elsewhere.

Ami Frey had come over at one point before things got rolling and asked Sansa to help her select some songs for the opening of Field Day.

“Brienne won’t let me play them all and I’m having a hard time choosing which ones to use. Jon said to ask you,” she’d said.

Sansa had found that the woman was perfectly nice one on one and regretted listening to a tale bearer once more. Sure, Ami flirted a bit with the single, male teachers and some of the dad volunteers. Sansa couldn’t really fault her for that. And perhaps she was no nun but she was genuine at least. Sansa determined that she would befriend her…and maybe take her bra shopping.

“How’re you doing, sweetie?” Sansa asked as Lyarra sat there looking better but still a bit down in the mouth.

Lyarra had slipped on the grass and fell during the relay race and cost her team of four girls the victory. Sansa had seen the angry tears of frustration and disappointment in her eyes but dared not call attention to them. Instead, she’d sat her down with some water for Lyarra and then proceeded to French braid her hair. She talked about England and that they’d have to help Mina feel better about the flight. She’d never flown and she was nervous. She also talked about dogs and Jon burning the smores last weekend over the grill and then what she was planning to make for dinner that night. She soon had Lyarra giggling and not paying attention to the disappointing result of the relay race anymore. It made Sansa feel sort of like Wonder Woman or something.

_I’d do anything to make you smile, baby._

“T’m okay,” Lyarra said with a shrug. “It’s just that I’ve got the three-legged race to do next. I stink at that.”
“Oh…I’m sure you’ll be…”

“I stink at that, Sansa,” Lyarra said a bit more forcefully.

“Well…I was always terrible at it, too,” Sansa laughed. “Who’s your partner?”

“I don’t know. Mrs. Glover said she’d pair us off in a bit.”

As it turned out, one of the students that had been signed up for that event was absent today so Mrs. Glover was left in a quandary of what to do and who to leave out of the event. Sansa looked over at Jon who was busy applauding the slowest sack racers as they reached the finish line. She whispered in Lyarra’s ear and received a nod before she said something to the teacher.

Thus, Sansa found herself doing something she’d not done since she was ten at least. She was tied to Lyarra for the three-legged race and she couldn’t help laughing at the way Jon’s eyes widened in shock at the sight of them. With her long legs, Sansa would have to remember to keep her strides short for Lyarra’s sake.

It didn’t matter in the end though. She was just as abysmal at the three-legged race as she’d ever been and it was obviously not Lyarra’s best event either. They wound up in a heap laughing hysterically on the course while the other participants staggered around them.

Lucky for them, Chelsea Elementary’s handsome assistant principal came to their rescue. He pulled his girls to their feet again, laughing along with them. They may have come in last but they managed to finish. And while Lyarra ordinarily hated to lose anything, she didn’t seem to mind in this case one bit.

During the last event of the day, Jon came over to sit beside Sansa as Lyarra’s class prepared to battle Ms. Mallister’s in tug of war.

“Having a good time?” he asked.

She took his hand in her own and said, “Having a great time.”

“I’m glad. Thanks for doing that with…”

“Jon…I love her, okay? I love her like she’s mine. You don’t ever have to thank me or ask me to look out for her. I’ll always be looking out for her.” His eyes softened and she just knew he was going to try and lean in for a kiss now. Earlier, when she’d been weepy and none of the kids were outside yet maybe that’d been okay but it wouldn’t do just now. “Little eyes are all around, Mr. Snow,” she said softly. She grinned at his disappointed look that he swiftly hid. “I’ve got a surprise for you by the way.”

“A surprise? What kind of surprise?” he asked, his eyes wide with interest.

“One you’re going to enjoy.”

“It’s cruel to tease me like this, Miss Stark.”

“Perhaps it’s a tad cruel…but I promise to make it up to you this weekend.”

“What’s this weekend? Did you still want to go to the garden shop to…”

“Oh, look! They’re ready for you, Mr. Snow,” she said lightly while ignoring his question.

He grimaced to see all the students lined up on each side of the sand pit and the teachers staring at
him. He tacked on his best coach’s smile as he got back up to start the epic battle to determine which of the six 2nd grade classes would be the ultimate Tug of War Champion.

Chapter End Notes

These two are overdue for some sexy times so rest assured that the next chapter will include them enjoying Sansa’s surprise weekend getaway.
Weekend Getaway-Part 1

Chapter Summary

The start of a weekend getaway for our couple brings some smut, a surprise and some sweetness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I love this surprise!” Jon gasped as their mouths parted.

He hurriedly yanked off his t-shirt and threw it across the room before helping Sansa out of her shorts. His eyes widened when he saw the black thong she’d worn as an extra surprise.

“Better and better,” he mumbled as his hands caressed her ass.

“Do you prefer this to shopping for geraniums with me?” she asked coyly as she unclasped her bra.

She peeled it off and threw it at him. She loved the way he nodded dazedly and licked his lips as he stared at her. No one had ever made her feel half as sexy as Jon did.

He shimmied out of his shorts and boxers and Sansa couldn’t help but do a bit of staring, too.

“I can’t believe you planned all this behind my back,” he said next as he guided her towards the cabin’s large and comfortably shabby sofa.

“Am I in trouble for being sneaky?” she asked.

“You are,” he replied as he gave her a firm smack across the ass. “The best kind of trouble though.”

“Oh!” she shouted and then giggled at him when he massaged the place. He started sucking on her neck and the back of her knees met the sofa. “Aren’t we going to the…”

“No,” he said, easing her down onto the sofa and climbing on top of her. “We’ll get there soon but right now…I just can’t wait any longer.” He nudged the thong to the side and centered himself before he pushed his way inside of her. “Sansa…” he groaned as he filled her, “this is the best…fucking…surprise of my life!”

“Am I forgiven then for my deceit?” she asked. He bit his lip and nodded as he started thrusting. “Ohhh…Jon. I’ve wanted this for so…ahhh…long. All alone…all weekend. Don’t stop, honey,” she purred as she wrapped her legs around his waist. She moaned as he sank deeper into her.

“No way, love. I’m going to relish every…oh, fuck…second of this…all weekend…long.”

They hadn’t even made it to the bedroom yet of her Uncle Benjen’s cabin nestled amidst the mountains beside a serene mountain lake. A perfect lovers’ paradise, secluded and rustic but with enough modern amenities to make it habitable year-round.

It was a shame that Uncle Benjen was still a bachelor but Sansa knew her uncle had a girlfriend that
enjoyed it with him. He lived about an hour in the opposite direction from home so Sansa usually
only saw him at Christmas or Thanksgiving. But she’d called him a few weeks ago to see if he’d
mind letting her and Jon use his cabin for a weekend.

The Starks kids had always loved coming to Uncle Benjen’s little hideaway. There were only two
bedrooms so the adults got those and the kids all brought sleeping bags and camped out in the
spacious family room by the fire or on the screened in back porch when the weather was nice.

Of course, as everyone got older and as Uncle Benjen was busier with his work these days, they
didn’t come so often now. But, Sansa had brought Mina once a couple of years ago and hoped that
maybe her and Jon could bring both the girls someday.

However, Sansa was enjoying the family room in a whole new way this evening.

She should’ve figured they wouldn’t make it any farther than this. Jon had been getting more and
more aroused ever since they’d pulled out of his driveway this afternoon and said their good-byes to
the girls, Arya and Rhae. The eighty-minute drive had only made him more desperate. He’d even
tried to have her in the driveway when they arrived.

“We’ve not christened the Pilot, love,” he’d argued while tugging at her tank top.

“And we’re not going to either when there’s a lovely cabin with four solid walls right there,” she’d
laughed.

“Oh, I plan on christening every room in your uncle’s lake house this weekend.”

“There’s not that many rooms,” she’d said.

“Multiple times then. And you just made a better argument for car sex. It’s not like there’s anyone
around to see us.”

“There’s animals, Jon,” Sansa had said with finality. Not that I’d object to car sex all together with
him. He’d laughed then and asked if she was afraid of frightening Bambi. “Shut up and take me
inside before a bear finds us,” she’d replied.

Once inside the cabin, Jon had immediately dropped their bags to the floor and swept her up into his
arms, kissing her passionately and making her head spin.

And now, he was fucking her into the sofa of the cabin’s open family room. She couldn’t say she
minded that one bit. He kissed and nipped at her ear and she raked her nails along his back and ass.
Not hard enough to really hurt, just enough to tease. She’d found it drove him wild.

“God…don’t stop, Sansa,” he cried. He pounded into her harder as she continued her pattern, lightly
scraping his flesh.

“Jon…” she prompted, glancing towards her chest. He grinned and started suckling her tits. His
hands tightened their grip on her hips and she was getting close. “Yes, honey…” she babbled now,
nearly incoherent with need.

She carded her fingers through his riot of curls and moaned as he teased her nipples, licking and then
blowing on them before suckling at them some more. His hips never ceased their steady rhythm.

Stars were forming in her eyes as Jon rocked her into the worn cushions and whispered filthy things
in her ear. His dark eyes were filled with love and lust as the stared at her, making her feel like the
most beautiful woman in the world.
And no children here. No bosses, no family, no gossiping co-workers or exes or anyone but them. Just the two of them making love with sweet abandon.

He slipped a hand between them and rubbed her clit, pushing her over the edge unexpectedly.

“Ahhh…Jon…uhhh…OH, FUCK!” she shouted as she came.

“OH, FUCK!” a gruff-sounding male voice said from the front door.

Sansa’s eyes widened in horror and disbelief. The setting sun was shining behind whoever was there, perfectly illuminating a figure but without giving them any clear view. Her terror-stricken mind registered a few details though. She could make out the shape of a tall man with a full beard wearing a ball cap. He had a rifle thrown over one shoulder.

“Oh, my God! Please tell me I’ve fallen asleep and I’m having one of those nightmares about ‘Deliverance.’ Where’s the banjo music?

“Eeeek!!” she shrieked as those thoughts formed, hoping the scream would wake her from this nightmare.

Jon leapt off her in an instant to face the intruder. Of course, he was naked with his hard, wet dick on full display. He automatically grasped a throw pillow off the sofa to cover himself. Unfortunately, it was one of the small, heart-shaped ones her mother had made for Benjen years ago and about the size of a cantaloupe…not much cover.

Sansa grabbed the afghan blanket off the back of the sofa she’d made as a Christmas gift for her uncle last year to cover her own nakedness. At least, she was fully covered.

She peeked out from under the covers as her eyes adjusted to the sunlight pouring in. She noticed the pizza box tucked under the man’s other arm and six pack of what appeared to be Natural Light.

Who do you know that drinks Natty Light? Dad and…

“Who in the hell are you?!?!” Jon roared just as Sansa came to her senses.

“The owner of this fucking cabin, dipshit!” he responded with deadly malice as pulled the rifle off his shoulder. “Who in the hell are you?!”

“Don’t shoot, Uncle Benjen!” Sansa squealed. Apparently, he’d not looked closely at her earlier. “It’s me…Sansa. I’m sorry…”

Benjen’s jaw dropped and he lowered the rifle at once. “Holy shit! Sansa?! I’m sorry! I thought you said next weekend! I’m…oh, holy shit! I’ll let you get decent! Jesus Fucking Christ!” her uncle shouted as he started laughing before he dashed back outside.

Jon stood stock still, his face still the picture of shock except now his cheeks were starting to flame.

“So…that was your, um…”

“That’s Uncle Benjen,” she answered…before she dissolved into giggles.
Benjen Stark was a perfectly cordial host and, much like Jon, eager to pretend their meeting earlier hadn’t happened. He’d grown a fuller beard since Sansa had seen him last and with the sun in her eyes she hadn’t recognized him immediately. And he’d not looked too closely at the nearly naked woman on the couch as he’d had his eyes on the man. And, he was probably grateful now not to get an eyeful of his niece. He’d seen far more than he wanted to see as it was, Jon knew.

He’d planned on doing some fishing at his cabin over the weekend but graciously told them he’d return to his apartment a couple of hours away when the mix up on dates was sorted out. He did share his pizza and beer with them though which was kind considering Jon hadn’t wanted to stop for supplies on their way up.

Jon had convinced Sansa they could do it a bit later since he’d been wanting to make love to her from the moment this whole surprise weekend-getaway had been sprung on him when they left work that afternoon.

Once Jon had got over his initial shock and embarrassment, he’d liked Benjen and they’d talked a good deal about Mina and Lyarra and him and Sansa.

Sansa had picked at her pizza and nervously scurried about unpacking while she avoided looking her uncle in the eye.

“So…” Benjen said with a smile at his niece when he got ready to leave, “I think I’ll neglect to mention seeing you next time I talk to your dad.”

“Yeah…that would be appreciated,” she grinned self-consciously. “Or maybe we could just leave out the part of how much of me you saw?”

“Agreed,” he said with a relieved laugh as he pulled her into a hug. He wished them both a nice rest of the weekend.

They waited until they were sure he was gone before Sansa turned to him with a smile and asked, “So, where were we?”

“Heading to the bedroom and locking the door…after I lock this door…and close all the curtains.”

“Good plan,” she laughed.

She laughed even harder when he did indeed close all the curtains and triple checked to see that the doors were all locked.

“This is better,” she said later when they were bare once more and under the covers at last.

They laced their hands together, her fingers so delicate and long in his hand. He kissed each one before her reached up to gently tuck a strand of her auburn hair back out of her face.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. “I can’t believe I get to be here with you.”

They just lay there for several minutes facing each other, happy to take their time now. He’d not come earlier thanks to her uncle’s unwelcome interruption but they had all weekend. Hopefully, no other rifle-toting family members…or wild animals…would decide to burst in on them now.
“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” he replied, stroking her soft cheek before kissing her sweet and slow.

Just the sensation of their lips touching was enough to stir his blood. He kissed her more passionately and saw her blue eyes darken. Sansa scooted closer and put her arm over his hip. His cock was hard again and pressed into her belly. He dipped his head down to lick and tease a nipple and heard her mewl before she shoved her chest forward, eager for more attention there.

His hand dipped down to finger her as he continued suckling. He stroked her clit with his thumb. Her legs were pressed together tightly but he managed to slip a finger inside her. She started moaning for him to get inside her, that she was going to come and that she wanted his cock.

“Then, come, my beautiful girl. You’ll get my cock soon enough, I promise. Come for me now,” he whispered in her ear before he put his mouth back on her breasts and his hand worked her to her peak.

“Mmm…Jon,” she sobbed in ecstasy. “It’s…good…so good, honey.”

Her hips were snapping in time as she rode his hand and her chest, neck and face were flushed the loveliest pink. He pulled back from her breasts when he felt her cunt fluttering around his fingers so he could watch her, so he could see his beautiful woman’s mouth parted with her cry, to watch all the ways her face reflected the pleasure he’d just brought her.

He lazily licked his fingers and kissed her once on the mouth as she drifted back down. Her blue eyes opened, staring at him in wonder…as though he’d done something extraordinary. She made him feel like more than just a man when she gazed at him that way.

“What?” he asked feeling bashful now.

“I love you. I love the way that you love me,” she said with sweet sincerity.

“I love the way you love me, too.”

“You always want me to feel good. You’re always so giving in bed. You’re never selfish.”

“Neither are you,” he stated. Her eyes were glassy and he suspected what she was thinking about. “Is that something new for you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said softly. “With Ha-, uh…no one has ever been that concerned about my pleasure before you, Jon.”

“No one was an idiot then,” he said.

“I want you inside me now. That was wonderful but…it leaves me wanting more. I…” She blushed and started again. “I like how full I feel when you’re inside me.”

“Well, that would be my pleasure,” he smirked.

He rolled her to her back and spread her legs. He kissed his way up her body. He rubbed the head of his cock along her slick folds, moistening it before he glided inside of her. He sighed contentedly to feel her tightly wrapped around him.

“Nothing feels so perfect as being buried inside of you, Sansa. Holding you, loving you, being loved by you in return…it’s more than I ever could’ve imagined.”
She kissed him deep and lovingly and urged him to start moving. Every fresh gasp or moan he drew forth from her was like a prize to be treasured in his heart. He was devouring the sweetness of her mouth when she cried out with her release, her nails raking lightly along his back, pushing him to his own. He roared her name when he came; grateful for this time alone when they didn’t have to hurry and didn’t have to worry about the children for just a little while…and so grateful for this woman in his arms.

He rolled to his back soon after and pulled her to his chest. She rested her head on his shoulder. He kissed and caressed her soft skin, any place he could reach; her shoulder, her upper arm, her hand and her face.

“I love you,” he whispered. “Thank you for this weekend.”

“I love you, too,” she said sleepily. “And you are very welcome.”

He listened to her breathing even out and grow deeper before he fell asleep, too.

Chapter End Notes

Two things-

I had a couple of other WIPs I intended to update first but Amymel and I were talking about the upcoming Jonsa Smut Week on Tumblr and I decided I wanted to write some Jonsa smut and add one of my fave tropes to it ;) So, blame Amymel if you were wanting a different fic updated...lol. Love you, Amy!

Second-I decided to break the weekend getaway into two parts so this is shorter than a normal chapter for me. The second part will be longer.

Thanks for reading!
Weekend Getaway-Part 2

Chapter Summary

Jon and Sansa enjoy some more of their weekend getaway (yup, more smut) and Jon suggests a way for them to learn more about each other. #couplegoals

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before she truly woke for the second time on Saturday, Sansa was already aware of the raucous calls of various birds from the great outdoors that surrounded them. Her first wake up had been around daybreak when she had roused enough to realize Jon’s mouth was between her thighs. 

*The best sort of wake up,* she thought.

After they were both sated and had thoroughly exhausted each other, they’d fallen back asleep.

Sansa breathed deeply and opened her eyes to find Jon asleep beside her. He had rolled to his side facing her and she took her time watching him sleep until the call of nature was too strong to ignore. She rose and stretched and padded to the guest bathroom.

When she glanced at the clock, she cringed. It was nearly ten o’clock and she couldn’t believe they’d slept so late. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept that late at all.

*And is that so bad? Why must you feel guilty about sleeping in?*

She knew she shouldn’t really but Mom Habits die hard. She checked her phone to see if Arya or Mina had called. Nothing. She was relieved…and slightly disappointed.

*Is anything ever simple again once you’re a parent?* she wondered, not for the first time.

Her stomach growled loudly and she knew they’d need to make a run to the little market twenty minutes down the road if they hoped to eat anything besides the remaining slice or two of Uncle Benjen’s pizza. And she certainly couldn’t imagine drinking Natty Light this early in the day.

She’d just got the water adjusted in the shower when she heard the bathroom door open.

“May I join you?” Jon asked from the other side of the curtain.

Sansa’s lips curled into a wide smile. “You did say we’d christen every room,” she called as she peeked out at him.

Jon was adorably afflicted with a bad case of bed head and he was squinting at her, no doubt trying to stare at her breasts without his glasses on or contacts in. He grinned happily at her response and climbed in.

He took the soap from her hands and started washing her back, his hands slipping lower and lower until it was mostly her ass getting washed. More like caressed. She didn’t mind that one bit.
He started nuzzling at her neck and she felt one of his soapy hands come around to her belly, pulling her back into him. His cock was hard.

“You know…my shower at home was the first place we had sex,” she said.

“You say that as if I’ve forgotten, love,” he said huskily in her ear. “I’m not ever going to forget that night.”

He rinsed his hands and guided her under the spray to rinse off. Then, he walked her to the shower wall. She turned her head back towards his and he kissed her deeply.

“Lift your foot up and put it on the ledge there,” he said. Sansa did as he said with one foot on the edge, about twelve inches off the floor. Balancing on one foot felt a bit precarious. As though he’d read her mind, Jon put one hand firmly on a hip. “I’ve got you,” he breathed. “I won’t let you fall.” She nodded and felt the fingers of his other hand testing and teasing her folds. “May I do this, love? May I fuck you from behind in here?”

She nodded feebly, already wet and eager for his cock to be inside. His voice, his hands on her, his body so close…it was intoxicating. He started pumping a finger in and out as his thumb stroked her clit.

“Yeah, honey. Fuck me,” she sighed.

“Bend forward just a bit, darling.”

She did as he said once more and felt the head of his cock nudge her pussy. He entered slowly with a feral sounding grunt and Sansa braced her hands against the wall.

“Unnn...yes, Jon,” she murmured.

“Louder, love. No one’s here but us.”

_God, that voice._ She moaned loud and long as his hand continued to rub and tweak her clit.

“You have the most perfect ass, Sansa. I love seeing every bit of you,” he rasped against her neck as he fucked her slowly. “I can’t think of a better way to get clean than to make you dirty, my angel.”

“Jon…uhhh…” she cried.

“Do you like it when I talk like this?” he asked as he started thrusting a bit harder, sinking deeper inside whilst still stroking her with his thumb. She bit her lip and nodded. “What’s that?” he prompted.

“I like it.”

“You like what?” he teased.

“I like…I like the way you talk to me when…I like your dirty talk, Jon…annnn…”

“Are you ready to come, love?” he asked.

“I…ahhh…almost…”

“Not yet,” he said as he pulled out suddenly. She whimpered in protest until he spun her around. Now, her back was against the shower wall. “I want to see your face, Sansa. I love watching you come on my cock. I want to watch those beautiful, wet tits bounce while I fuck you hard in this
shower. Is that alright, love?”

“Yes…yes, please…” she begged. “I want you back inside of me.”

“As you wish, my darling,” he responded as he lifted her leg around his hip and he rammed into her with unexpected force.

“Oh!” she shouted, delighted at this sudden change of pace. “Oh…yes…”

“That’s right, love,” he urged as he lifted her to her tiptoes and started bucking his hips harder into her. “I want you to scream for me, Sansa. I want to fuck you hard and fast now. May I do that?” he rasped.

Even when he talked dirty, Jon always seemed to ask. She loved that. She loved everything about this.

"Urrrg…yes. God, yes…Jon! Please, don’t stop! I’m…fuck, I’m going to come!”

“Scream, love. No one is here but us,” he growled. “Scream the house down for me!”

His hands were grasping her ass so tight now. There’d be marks for certain. She loved it. She wanted them. She wanted to look at the marks and know she was his.

“YES! JON! YES! AHHHHH!” she screamed as she climaxed. The orgasm and steamy shower made her feel as though she were floating in a fog.

He pounded into her hard three or four more times and shouted out her name as he came.

Afterward, he was panting as he held her to him. “I love you,” he murmured, kissing her again. “I hope I didn’t hurt you,” he said worriedly next.

“You didn’t hurt me at all,” she assured him. “I love you. I loved that.”

Her stomach complained noisily again about the lack of food though and they both laughed.

“Let’s get cleaned up and go fetch some supplies, alright?”

Once they were out and dry, they returned to the bedroom to put on fresh clothes. Jon commented on how late it was and suggested they might as well grab some lunch to go from the little deli next door to the market.

“I know we were tired and stayed up late…” Jon began.

“And woke up early this morning,” she reminded him.

“Well, yeah. You were there in bed with me and naked. I couldn’t resist. But I guess I’m surprised at how late we slept. It’s as though we’d not slept that well in…”

“Eight years?” she asked.

“Exactly,” he laughed in response.

“Sleep is a precious thing for parents.”
“It is. I really like the cabin,” he commented next, running his fingers along the bedding while putting on his shoes.

The guest bedroom was decorated in woodsy hues with an old-fashioned quilt across the queen-sized bed that was covered with wolves and black bears.

“My Grandma Stark made that years and years ago,” Sansa said.

“She did?” he asked.

“Yes. I never knew her. She died not long after Mom and Dad married. Her name was Lyarra, too.”

“I never knew that.”

“We’ve much to learn about each other, I guess.”

“Well, maybe we can learn some more this weekend,” Jon said, rising off the bed. “We could write a letter to each other and then read them tonight.”

“That sounds very…teacher-y.”

“Well, it is,” he chuckled. “I had my students write letters about themselves when I taught.”

“I like it,” she said as they headed out to the SUV.

“Great. We could list three things about ourselves in it that the other person doesn’t know. Then maybe we could ask about somethings we’d like to know about the other person. And then maybe share some of our plans or dreams of the future.”

“Okay,” she said…and then leaned over for a kiss. He obliged naturally but then looked perplexed when she stopped him from fastening the seat belt. “But first…you mentioned christening the Pilot yesterday.”

His eyes widened comically. “Now?! You, uh…you want to, um…”

“Actually, I was thinking I’d like to suck your cock for now. I did say I was hungry.” His jaw dropped and she nearly laughed at how pink his cheeks had become. “May I do that?” she asked in a sultry tone. “May I suck your cock, Mr. Snow?”

“Wuh-well…sure, if you…”

“What, honey?” she said teasingly.

“You’re not afraid of animals watching us now?”

“After being burst in on by my uncle, I’ll take animals,” she said she started tugging at his shorts.

“But…are you…”

“Inaugural blow job for the Pilot, Jon. Yes or no?”

“Yes…fuck, yes,” he nearly shouted.
They wound up eating at the deli and then wandered around the sleepy little mountain-side hamlet for most of the afternoon before they grabbed some things at the market and headed back to the cabin. Sansa picked out a bottle of wine and Jon grabbed a six pack of Heineken. If they were going to unwind and sleep in to their hearts’ content tomorrow, there may as well be booze.

There was a lovely iced lemon pound cake in the display case at the deli where they’d had lunch and Jon made a point of leading Sansa back in there before they left town. He asked the lady behind the counter box it up for them before she could raise an argument.

“I’ll work those calories off you tonight and tomorrow,” he said in her ear, sending a delicious thrill down her spine.

When they returned to the cabin, Sansa made a simple salad and Jon grilled steaks. She brought him a beer on the back porch and they sat side by side in the Adirondack chairs while their meal sizzled. She sipped her wine and watched the lake reflect the setting sun. As real life goes, she thought it was the closest thing to a romantic movie she’d ever experienced firsthand.

They decided to dine on the porch and listened the cicadas and crickets fill the evening with their song as the moon rose over the trees. Jon was eyeing Benjen’s hot tub with interest but when Sansa heard a snuffling sort of growl not far off, she immediately suggested returning inside. Jon laughed and said he’d be in as soon as he cleaned the grill.

Sansa washed the dishes and put the rest of their supplies away.

She wished they had a week together here. And then she immediately turned around and called Arya begging to speak with Mina. Jon came in just as she finished talking to her daughter.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. They’re good. They spent most of the afternoon and evening with Lyarra and Rhae.”

“I know,” he said.

“You do?”

“Yeah, I called when you were making the salad earlier and I was waiting on the grill to heat up. I interrupted their mini-golf tournament apparently. I was told by Lyarra in an extremely patronizing tone, mind you, to relax and have fun looking at antiques and shopping. Were we going antique shopping?”

“No,” Sansa said and laughed when he breathed a sigh of relief. “Mina just told me something similar though. I think Rhae has them convinced that they are having a far better time with their aunts than we are.”

“That’s probably for the best.”

Even with summer on the way, it was cooler in the mountains as evening came on. Jon started a fire as Sansa worked on her letter, or her assignment as she jokingly called it, at the kitchen table. He sat down to write his own letter as Sansa sipped another glass of wine. Jon would glance up at her from time to time as he wrote and smile shyly at her. He was taking much longer than her and Sansa couldn’t help but wonder what sort of things he’d decided to share.
She tried to peek over his shoulder at one point and received a scowl for her efforts. She giggled as he swatted at her thigh and fetched herself a slice of the pound cake.

Once he had finished, they moved to the sofa and Sansa curled up against him. He asked her to go first and she pulled out her letter to read.

“Will I be receiving a grade for this, Mr. Snow?” she asked sarcastically.

“Perhaps, Miss Stark,” he replied before he nipped at her ear. “Now, read.”

She cleared her throat and smiled at the ridiculousness of reading a letter aloud to the very person she’d written it for.

"Dear Jon, I am writing this letter to share somethings about myself with you and to learn some more things about you in return. First off, I should tell you that I was a wretched big sister to Arya when we were younger. She was perfectly annoying at times but I was the elder sister so I should’ve been kinder and have no excuse for my atrocious behavior."

“Sisters fight,” Jon said, trying to make her feel better no doubt.

Sansa read on.

“I always called her Arya Horseface in front of my friends because she had buck teeth before she got braces. It made her cry.”

“Oh, my God!” he exclaimed. “Now I need to call your sister and tell her I’m so sorry that you were such a rotten, awful meanie!”

“I know! She’s forgiven me, thankfully,” Sansa said. “May I continue?”

“Please,” he said.

“Secondly, I walked in on my parents having sex by accident when I was eleven. I knew I should’ve knocked but I was upset about a boy that said I would never be as beautiful as Britney Spears…”

Jon’s initial shock over her discovery was replaced by a scoff at that part but she held up her hand before he could speak.

“I wasn’t thinking and apparently someone forgot to lock the door. I was quite certain at the time that I was scarred for life and I'm afraid they were as well. And then, poor Robb was scarred for life when I told him all about it after when he found me crying in our tree fort.”

Jon started chuckling at her and she threw a pillow at him…the same pillow he’d used to shield himself yesterday.

“Considering what happened to us yesterday, I suppose karma truly is a bitch and I should just thank God that it was Benjen and not our girls that walked in on us. So, the moral here is…always lock the door!”

“Duly noted,” Jon said with a little nod.

“Third of all, I want you to know that no man in my life who wasn’t a blood relative has ever made me feel as safe or loved or confident as you do. In fact, you quite outshine Bran and Rickon in
that department but they’re my baby brothers so they get a pass. And the way you jumped off the sofa buck-ass naked prepared to defend me from an armed man with no more than your dick and a throw pillow as weapons…”

“To be honest…” Jon snickered, “he looked like something out of ‘Deliverance.’ I wasn’t sure which one of us he might go for first.”

“Oh, my God…he did, didn’t he?” she cackled. “Uncle Benjen, the Mountain Man!”

Once she dried her tears of laughter, she continued.

“But that’s just you, I’ve learned. You’re always thinking of me and the girls, always putting us first. I love you so much for that, Jon Snow. Thank you for being in my life. I’m so glad Mina wanted to play soccer this spring.”

“Me, too. God, yes...me, too,” he agreed.

“Now, I’d like to know everything about you in time but I’ll start with some simple things. Do you prefer Reese cups or Snickers or neither?” She ignored his snort of laughter. “Can you tell me anything about your grandparents? And would you…” Sansa bit her lip but forced herself to ask it. “Would you ever want more children?”

He smiled softly then and pulled her closer. “Yes. Yes, I’d love to have more children someday… with you…only you,” he said softly.

They stared at each other for a full minute. She teared up naturally because that’s just how she was made. She was a crier. She’d accepted that fact a long time ago.

“Now, as to your more serious question,” he continued, “I’m a Reese’s man.”

He got smacked with the heart-shaped pillow some more for that even though she was laughing.

“I can’t tell you much about my grandparents. Mum’s parents were dead before I was born.”

“Oh, Jon. That’s sad.”

“It’s alright. I had Mum. I’m sure she missed them though, especially being on her own with me.”

“I don’t think I could’ve managed without my parents. And at least Harry has tried to be around unlike…”

“Yeah,” he said. His father was a sore spot he preferred not to think too much on, she knew. “Rhae has said the Targaryens are...well, batshit crazy was the term she used. She’s closer to her mum’s family. They’re quite nice actually.”

She nodded and returned to her letter.

“Finally, I’ll tell you some things I’d like to see come about in the future. First, I’d like to see Trump out of the White House…”

“Yes, please,” Jon murmured in agreement.

“I’d like to see myself with my degree at last.”

“Definitely,” he said, kissing her cheek.
“I’d like to see our girls grow even closer...like true sisters...but not ones that call each other Horseface.” He laughed and nodded. “I’d like to see us together, the four of us.”

“Um...that’s it,” Sansa trailed off a bit lamely.

She had been afraid to sound too pushy, to write down too much.

Jon wasn’t Harry but they’d only been dating for three months. He was still a guy. Despite all the ways he’d tried to show her he was in this with long term goals in mind, she still harbored doubts that made her hesitant to hope for too much.

Jon cupped her cheek and said, “I like all those plans,” before he kissed her.

The kisses were tender and sweet. They remained chaste for a change though and she curled up into his arms. She let him hold her for several minutes as the fire crackled and popped. She felt languid and relaxed with her wine and his arms around her.

“Our turn,” she sighed at last.

“Dear Sansa,” he began, feeling extremely nervous.

He’d suggested this little activity and then he’d written what he wanted to say. But now, he had to read it out loud to her. It reminded him of being in class again...being a student in class again that is.

But as he began to read, his anxiety decreased. Sharing things from his childhood with Sansa wasn’t hard even if some of those things were somewhat sad.

There was no need to conceal from Sansa that it hadn’t been easy growing up as a boy with no father in his life. He recalled the first time he’d heard the word bastard applied to himself and how his mother had cried when he came home and tearfully asked what it meant. He was seven. He didn’t know. He just instinctively knew it wasn’t something nice.

He talked about his mother a good deal. She’d struggled to provide everything she could for him, often going without things for herself in return. His father had sent his child support payments, that was true...but not a penny more.

He shared a bit about his mother’s obsession with football and how it had formed his own. He told her of his fond memories of staying up far too late as a teen to catch replays of matches on ESPN and his mother joining him rather than making him go back to bed.

In turn, he admitted it was an aspect of raising Lyarra he enjoyed a great deal; watching matches on lazy weekend mornings in his bed with her and discussing players, tactics and skills as she learned more about the game...and coaching her of course.

Then, he shared how difficult those first two years raising Lyarra on his own had been. Even with his mother and Rhæ’s help, he’d struggled. He was ashamed at how many times he’d wanted to hand her off to his mother and run away. He never had though. And Sansa understood...just as he knew she would.
When it came time to ask her questions, his were along the same lines as hers.

“*What’s your favorite flavor of ice cream? What is one of your favorite childhood memories? What is one of your worst memories of childhood or adulthood?*”

“My favorite ice cream is mint chocolate chip,” she said.

“Not lemon?” he teased.

“No…not for ice cream,” she said vehemently. “Lemon sorbet or sherbet is fine. Let’s see…a favorite childhood memory. Well, we used to come up here a good deal when I was a child, all of us. We’d stay with Uncle Benjen. Sometimes Mom and Dad would be here, sometimes not. My favorite was when we’d come up for the 4th of July. Dad and Uncle Benjen would grill burgers. We’d play in the lake. Well, everyone else would play in the lake. I usually stayed on the dock.”

“You can swim, can’t you?” he asked.

“Of course, I can. It’s just the lake is…a lake. There’s fish and other animals that…defecate in it,” she said with a shudder. He snickered and she glared at him. “You can’t see the bottom and it’s…dirty,” she said primly as he laughed. “Anyway…we’d shoot off firecrackers at night and then us kids would camp out on the porch in sleeping bags and keep each other up talking.”

“That sounds like a wonderful memory.”

“My worst memory…it’s a tie, I suppose. Losing my grandmother, my mother’s mother. Her name was Minisa by the way. I don’t suppose I’ve ever told you that either.”

“No,” he said quietly.

“I loved her very much. I stayed with her and Grandpa Hoster a couple of times a year. Just me. With four siblings, it was special to just have that time alone with my grandparents…to feel special. She did that with each of us though. She died when I was thirteen.”

“How?”

“Cancer.”

“I’m sorry,” he said sympathetically.

“And then my Grandpa Hoster died when I was twenty-two of heart failure. Mina was three. She kept asking where he’d gone. And a month later, it was as though he’d never existed in her mind. It was…it made me really feel my own mortality, you know? What if something happened to me? What would Mina do? Would she just keep asking where her mother had gone until she forgot about me? I’m sorry,” she said suddenly, thinking of Val and Lyarra without a doubt. “I…Lyarra has suffered that already. And she was just a baby. I shouldn’t have…”

“No, Sansa. Don’t be sorry. You don’t have to apologize for anything. It’s very sad that Lyarra has no memory of her mother. She was far too young to form any memory of her. But you don’t have to be sorry for having those worries. I imagine most parents do.”

She nodded and he moved on to the final part of his letter…things he hoped for in the future.

“*There are many things I could write here, many things I could say but I will tell you three now. First, I’d like to get a dog. The girls both want one and I do, too. I’ve never had a dog but I’ve always liked them. I’ve got a large backyard and my job doesn’t take me away that often. I thought*
once we got back from England, if you don’t object, we could take the girls and find one that suited us…”

“Jon, it’s your house and…Mina and I really wouldn’t have a say about…”

He held up a finger and read on, “I’m asking you because I want you and Mina to move in with us.”

He glanced up to gage her reaction. Nothing. She was still as a statue and staring at him. He told himself not to panic just yet and keep reading.

“I know this is sudden in many ways and there’s no pressure to move in this instant. Whenever you’re ready though, I’d love for you and Mina to live with me and Lyarra…to be part of our home, to be our family. I love you. I love Mina. I want all my girls under one roof with me. But again, I won’t pressure you. Just know that whenever you feel we’re ready, I’ll be so happy to have you home with me always. And obviously, I wouldn’t want to get a dog if you disapproved of such a step since it would be your home, too.”

He looked back up again. His heart nearly exploded with happiness to see the smile on her face now. Perhaps he’d shocked her at first but she was smiling now. He took that as a good sign and finished.

“Lastly, I want to marry you, Sansa Stark. Again…whenever you’re ready, I’d like to make you my wife.”

He laid the letter aside and stood from the sofa before he got down on his knee in front of where she still sat.

“I’ll try not to cock this up. I don’t have a ring so I know it’s not a proper proposal. I’ve never proposed before so I’m a little out of my depth here,” he said nervously.

She didn’t speak. She didn’t smile. She didn’t laugh. She was back to staring at him.

Oh, fuck…now I’m really nervous.

“Um, anyway…Sansa, I love you with all of my heart. I know we’re not conventional perhaps in some ways but I…I made up my mind a while back that you’re the one for me. I believe wholeheartedly that you are the love of my life and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. So…when you think we’re ready for that step…would you do me the great honor of marrying me?”

The fire behind him still popped and crackled. He could hear the clock on the roughhewn wooden mantle ticking away. Outside, the owls were competing with the crickets and other insects.

Tears slid down Sansa’s cheeks and Jon thought perhaps his heart would indeed explode…but from heartache now.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered…and he was certain he would die of a broken heart. “I don’t mean to cry. No one’s ever asked me to marry them before and you’ve caught me quite off guard.”

“Oh?” he asked hopefully. Maybe she…

“Jon,” she said with a warm and loving smile, “nothing would make me happier than to marry you one of these days.”

“Oh, good,” he gasped, never realizing he’d been holding his breath all this time. “You…”

Whatever he wanted to say flew out of his mind though as Sansa launched herself into his arms
causing them both to topple backwards onto the hardwood floor.

“Ow,” he said dryly.

“Sorry,” she winced.

“Never mind, love. It's only my head.”

He pulled her down for a kiss, a long and loving kiss.

She was his world, her and the girls. He had meant every word he’d written down. She was the one and he wanted to call her his wife one day. Her earlier question about children had given him hope that this would be the response he’d receive but he’d still felt nervous.

But now...

Their kisses turned more passionate and this time when the cabin’s comfortably shabby sofa got put to use, no gun-toting relatives interrupted.

Chapter End Notes

I already had half of this written when I posted the first part so I decided to finish this up before diving back into some other WIPs.

Thanks so much for reading!
Eight-year-old Minisa Hardyng adjusted her backpack and stared at the departure sign searching for their flight. Today, she would be flying for the first time in her life…on three separate airplanes.

The roughly 4000-mile journey would take over fourteen hours including their two layovers. Mina was already tired just thinking about it. And, she’d slept terribly and been awake since 5AM because Mommy had said they’d have to be at the airport extra early to go through security.

Also, her stomach really hurt.

Her mother had taken Lyarra to the bathroom…again. Lyarra had said her stomach hurt too but Mina thought that might’ve been due to the large pack of Sour Punch Straws she’d scarfed down while Mommy and Jon had been distracted this morning trying to get the Pilot loaded up.

Theon had bought them both candy at the movies yesterday afternoon. Mina had consumed every last one of her Lemonheads before the previews even finished but Lyarra had promptly forgotten the candies when Theon got his jumbo-sized hot, buttered popcorn. She’d immediately dove into it with him and then said she was thirsty. She’d talked Theon into buying them each a thirty-two-ounce soda.

Theon had wound up spending more time standing outside the ladies’ room than watching the movie.

“Are you sure you’re really empty this time?” he’d asked incredulously after the fourth trip for Mina and third for Lyarra.

“This is why Mommy doesn’t let me have soda very often…and never that much,” Mina had said primly. How often she needed to pee really wasn’t a proper topic of conversation, she’d thought.

Theon had received a big lecture from Jon about junk food and soft drinks when they returned to his house where her mother and him had spent the afternoon going over last minute packing lists and wrapping up things that needed to be done before leaving home for two weeks.

Mina liked Theon and felt bad that he’d been fussed at for buying them treats. What if Jon said Theon couldn’t take them to the movies again? Both girls had argued in his defense that he took them to McDonald’s afterwards, so they’d had a good dinner at least. Somehow, this didn’t seem to impress Jon one bit.

All around her this morning, the bustling airport was a hive of activity. But when she mentioned it to Jon, he’d laughed and told her to wait till they reached the larger airports.

People were moving to and fro but Jon had let her walk over to the sign while he was talking to the
ticket lady about something. He said it was fine as long as he could see her. She wasn’t a baby.

“I don’t see New Jersey up there,” she said to Jon when he joined her at the board a minute or so later.

“Look for Newark,” he said. “E.W.R. will be its abbreviation.”

“Why? Shouldn’t it be N.E.W.?”

“I don’t honestly know,” he chuckled.

She spotted the flight and was pleased to see that it was listed as on schedule. Jon had fretted that one flight being delayed could mess up their other flights even allowing for the layovers.

Mommy and Lyarra were being really slow in the restroom. To pass the time, her and Jon figured up how many minutes each flight listed on the board would take according to the departure and arrival estimates. Lyarra complained that her dad did nerdy stuff like that all the time because he missed being a teacher. Mina didn’t mind though. She enjoyed it. She really didn’t think Lyarra minded either since she was always asking if they could do math games at restaurants and stores.

“In less than an hour, I’m going to fly,” she commented after they’d finished their game.

She thought she said it in a rather grown up way. But Jon wasn’t fooled. He put his arm around her shoulders.

“Are you scared?” he whispered in her ear.

“A little,” she admitted.

“Okay. It’s alright to be scared. Do you want to call your dad before we board?”

“No…well, maybe.”

“Here,” he said, pulling out his phone. She started to tell Jon his number but he was already pulling him up in his contacts.

“Do you talk to my Daddy?” she asked. It never occurred to her that Jon might have a reason to talk to Daddy.

“Yeah…a bit lately. Here you go.”

It was nice to talk to Daddy. He’d flown many times. Mommy had only flown three times and never so far away. But Daddy had flown to Germany once which was even further than Manchester. He told her that everything would be fine.

After she hung up, Mommy came back from the restroom with a rather sad looking Lyarra.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Jon asked when he saw his daughter.

“She’ll be alright,” Mommy said kindly while rubbing Lyarra’s back. “She just vomited up about a pound of candy but we’ve had some water and she says her tummy feels better now.”

Jon and Mommy exchanged a look while Lyarra cried and ran to hug her dad. Then, Mommy fished a packet of saltines out of her bag and handed them to Lyarra along with the bottle of water.

“These might help settle your tummy, sweetie,” Mommy said to Lyarra while brushing the curls back
out of her face.

Lyarra took the crackers and, when Mommy sat down, she curled up in Mommy’s lap. Jon and Mommy shared another look and smiled at each other. They were being kind of sappy over something like throwing up, Mina thought.

As she watched Lyarra sitting in her mother’s lap, there was a very small part of Mina that wanted to remind everyone that Sansa Stark was her mommy. But, Lyarra had just got sick. That was never any fun.

And Mina was afraid to fly…but Jon wasn’t. So, when he sat down, Mina sat down next to him on the hard-plastic chair and waited for the announcement that it was time to board their plane.

Mommy kept stroking Lyarra’s curls and holding her. Lyarra was snuggling with Mommy while clutching her stuffed dog Ghost. Mina wished she hadn’t packed Lady in her suitcase now. There wasn’t anyway to get her out. Then, Lyarra started playing with Mommy’s hair. She had her little stuffed friend and Mommy’s silky hair to play with.

She watched Mommy’s hand drift through Lyarra’s hair next and thought of how nice that felt when Mommy did that to her. And very softly, she could hear her mother humming under her breath in Lyarra’s ear.

I’m not jealous. Babies get jealous, Mina thought to herself.

She also noticed how Mommy’s new ring sparkled under the florescent lights. Jon had given it to her a few nights ago after dinner. Mommy had cried but they were happy tears, she said.

Lyarra had asked if Jon would buy her a diamond, too. He’d laughed and said maybe someday. But diamonds were the birthstone for April which was when Mina’s birthday was. Lyarra would be better off with an emerald for May. Mina couldn’t remember which birthstone went with Mommy’s birth month.

Mommy was still holding Lyarra as she nibbled on the saltines so Mina decided to distract herself from those ugly little pangs of envy. She pulled out the map she’d drawn. She’d plotted out their course on it and Jon said it reminded him of Indiana Jones…whoever that was.

“From home to Newark, then to Dublin, and then to Manchester,” Mina said aloud as she traced their route with her finger.

“Yes, sweetheart,” Jon said, putting an arm around her.

He’d taken to calling her that lately. Mina didn’t mind. She kind of liked it…as long as he wouldn’t call her that at soccer next season. That’d be embarrassing.

Mommy calls me baby. Daddy calls me princess. Jon can call me sweetheart. That’s okay.

Mina leaned against his shoulder as they continued to look at her map. He was warm and he smelled nice. Mommy had said she liked Jon’s cologne once. Mina could see why. It reminded her of Grandma’s cedar hope chest and a little of Uncle Robb’s aftershave.

She scooched up closer and found he was more comfortable to lean against than the hard plastic of the chair.

“The longest stretch will be from Newark to Dublin across the Atlantic Ocean,” she said.
“Yes.”

“Jon…what happens if a plane has a problem over the ocean?” she asked him quietly.

She knew. She’d had nightmares about it last night. Miles of blue water and nothing around…but sharks. Daddy had said not to think of such things but it was hard not to. She was curious what Jon would say.

“Then, they, uh…try to fix the problem while the plane still flies along,” Jon said uncomfortably.

“But what if they can’t? Then what?”

“Then, we pray, Mina. We do whatever the crew tells us to do, we hope for the best…and we pray,” he said simply before asking her a question. “Did you know that in 1620 the Mayflower left Plymouth, England and it took sixty-six days for them to sail to Cape Cod?”

“Really? That’s an awfully long time to cross. It’ll only take us about seven hours to fly from New Jersey to Ireland. How did you know that?”

“I’ve taught 4th grade,” he said with a smile. “We learn a good deal of early American history that year.”

“Oh…” Mina said, wondering how she could compete with what 4th graders might know. “What other things might I learn in 4th grade?”

He grinned and kissed the top of her head. He was doing that more often, too. She liked that. She loved Jon. He was…well, he wasn’t Daddy. He was Jon. But, he was part of her life, an important part, and she was glad of it.

“Well, let’s see…” he said as Mommy smiled at them both.

Sansa frowned and wriggled her fingers. Her hands were puffy from the flight. She slipped off the ring and tucked it securely into her change purse. She saw Jon watching her but he didn’t comment.

She glanced back down at her ring finger. They’d been to her condo’s community pool with the girls a few days ago and Sansa had worn her ring then. They’d spent hours there and she had a noticeable tan line from it. She smiled to herself. Even when I’m not wearing it, it’s like I still am.

“Oh, it’s quite chilly,” Sansa said as they headed outside. She buttoned her jacket up and told the girls to do the same.

“I told you it wouldn’t be warm here like at home,” Jon said.

“Mommy! Mommy!” Mina shouted. “They’ve got a McDonalds!”

“Mina, calm down,” Sansa said. “They’ve got lots of…”

“And a Starbucks! Here! In Ireland! At the airport! Can you believe it?”
“Mina,” she sighed. “Baby, you can find McDonalds all over the world…and Starbucks, too.”

Both girls had done well with the flights. Mina had been entranced looking out the window on the way to New Jersey. She was fascinated seeing the fields and trees and cities from high above. But once they’d headed off across the ocean, she’d preferred to watch movies on the iPad Harry had bought her for the trip…or play rock, paper, scissors and other games with Jon.

Lyarra had napped for a bit, listened to music with her ear buds and looked out at the ocean some. Thankfully, her stomach had settled after her candy cramming this morning. And now she was begging Jon for Chicken McNuggets.

“How long is our layover again?” she asked him with a grin.

“Long enough to feed hungry girls, I guess.”

“McDonalds two days in the row!” Lyarra shouted before whooping like she’d just won the lottery.

“Christ,” Jon muttered under his breath.

“Oh, come on, Jon,” Sansa laughed, taking his hand. “Gotta give the people what they want. Be sweet and buy me a McFlurry.”

“Can I lick it off you?” he whispered in her ear.

She smirked at him as the four of them strolled into the restaurant.

Lyarra and Mina liked pointing out all the Aer Lingus planes with the shamrocks on the tail as they devoured their fries. Jon called his mother to let her know they were running on schedule. He was told his step-father would be picking them up at the airport since his mother didn’t like driving when it was still dark out. It’d be around 5AM local time when they landed or around midnight at home.

*These poor girls are going to be exhausted…and crabby.*

Sure enough, once their bellies were full, the two of them grew sleepy and did not want to walk all the way to the next gate.

“How far is it?” Lyarra moaned.

“My legs are too tired to keep walking,” Mina groused.

“Alright, alright,” Jon said after three straight minutes of whining. “Lyarra, you’re on my back.” Lyarra happily scrambled up on his back. “Come here, Mina,” he said and then took her in his arms. “Sansa…can you manage their bags?”

“Sure,” she said, watching in wonder as he carried roughly 100 extra pounds of weight through the airport. “It’s a good thing you work out,” she said once they reached the waiting area near their gate.

He sat Mina down on one chair and Lyarra in the next.

“I figured they’d get tired. Lyarra and I have flown out to California twice and down to Florida once and she always wears out walking through the airport eventually.” He glanced around and quietly asked, “Is there something wrong with the ring?”

“It was just a little tight after flying. My feet are swollen, too.”

“Alright. We can have it adjusted if needed.”
“No, it’s perfect, Jon,” she said. “I’ll put it back on once the swelling goes down.” And, after I meet your mother, she added to herself.

They boarded their flight for the final leg of their journey forty minutes later and, approximately an hour after that, they touched down in Manchester. Both girls were cross and having trouble keeping their eyes open as they trudged through the airport.

“You’ve got to walk for a bit at least,” Sansa chided Mina as she kept falling behind on the way to collect their baggage. “Jon can’t carry the both of you all through the airport and I can’t handle all four carry-ons without his help.”

“I’m tired, Mommy. I want to go home,” Mina whined.

“We’ll be at Lyarra’s grandmother’s house in about an hour.”

“Another hour?! I don’t want to go there. I want to go to our house.”

“Our house is four thousand miles away, Mina. We won’t see it for two weeks. Come on and keep up, baby,” she snapped.

Sansa was fighting her own irritation and exhaustion and trying to not to completely lose her cool with Mina. Lyarra was grumpy but Jon seemed to be handling it well. He seemed quite at ease honestly. Perhaps having flown with his daughter before he knew what to expect. Perhaps having flown over here before to visit relatives he was not so overwhelmed by it all. Sansa only knew she felt strangely out of place.

It wasn’t that the British were so terribly different. They spoke the same language even if Sansa had to listen closely to their accents at times. No doubt some of them might find her accent hard to understand. And just like anywhere in the world, no matter the differences, great or small, they were all just people in the end. Everyone they’d interacted with thus far was polite, too.

Like in Dublin, she saw many of the same familiar name brands around the airport that she would see in the States. It was just little things that made her aware that she was somewhere new, somewhere else, somewhere foreign.

She’d never traveled overseas. She’d been to Mexico and Canada one time apiece as a kid with her family. But once she’d become a mother at the age of nineteen, there’d been precious little opportunity for travel or money to do so. Her parents had talked about sending her and Mina on a cruise last year but it had fallen through because Sansa couldn’t get the time off from Mr. Baelish… and she didn’t really relish going on a cruise ship with just her daughter. She would admit she was old-fashioned enough to prefer traveling with a man far from home even if that man would’ve been Harry. Not that he’d ever taken them both anywhere. At least her and Mina had already had their passports made thanks to the cruise that never happened though.

Unfortunately, like Mina, Sansa was prone to homesickness. She was always eager to be off on a new adventure and longed to see new places. But once the initial excitement faded, she usually entered a roughly twelve-hour period of pining for home. And right now, her sofa and quilt in her condo sounded heavenly.

She sent a quick email to let her mother know they’d arrived safely. She refreshed her inbox a few times, hoping to receive a reply.

Stop being a baby, Sansa. You’re a grown woman. You don’t need your mommy.

But she sort of wanted her anyway. Catelyn Stark always knew how to calm her daughter’s fears.
She glumly closed the email at last, knowing her mother was probably sound asleep at home.

Her stomach was in knots. Jon was chatting with another man that was picking up his bags and checking his phone. The girls had slouched down into one of the chairs and were bickering under their breath about something. She knew she should probably go see what was wrong and try and resolve it. But she was too focused on her own anxiety at present.

She was nervous about meeting Jon’s mother. The two times they’d spoken over the phone Lyanna had seemed very nice…and like a very involved mother. Sansa would not call Jon a Mama’s Boy. Or Mummy’s Boy…whatever they’d call it here. But he was her only child and she’d raised him on her own.

She’d also been a huge part of Lyarra’s early years and helped her son wade through his first few years of fatherhood. It was natural that his mother would be curious about this woman he was bringing across the sea to meet her four months after they’d first met.

She wondered about his step-father as well. Jon’s father had been a non-factor in his life as a kid, a child support check and nothing more. Rhae had grown up with him but Jon barely knew him. And David Smith had met and married Jon’s mother after Jon was a grown man with a child of his own.

Sansa fervently hoped they would like her and Mina. She hoped she could win them both over during this trip, show them that she was good for Jon and Lyarra. She hoped they’d come to care about Mina. She hoped for many things. In short…she was a nervous wreck.

Jon had asked her to marry him at Uncle Benjen’s cabin and for a few days it’d been their little secret. But he’d surprised her the other night with the ring. It was stunning and she’d jokingly asked him if he had a second job she wasn’t aware of to pay for it. She’d been speechless and on Cloud Nine though when he’d deftly slipped it on her finger whilst the girls chattered and asked questions excitedly.

The way his eyes had sparkled as he admired it on her hand had left her breathless.

“You’re mine,” he’d murmured under his breath. “As long as you’ll have me, I’m yours and you’re mine.”

Then, being that he was a rather smart cookie, Sansa learned Jon had already asked Rhae to come over to watch a movie with the girls that night. He’d taken her out dancing to celebrate. And then they’d found a secluded place for a heated round of making out in the Pilot before they’d headed back to his house and the girls.

Sansa still felt a thrill every time she looked down at her hand and saw the diamond winking up at her. The girls kind of understood the significance of the ring but kind of didn’t. There was time to help them understand it all.

But Sansa had been afraid Theon’s eyes were about to roll out of his head when he spied it on her finger yesterday. She could only imagine what Jon’s mother would think. She’d rather Jon speak with her about it first before Sansa waltzed into her house flashing the ring in her face.

So, she had her concerns. Sansa was sure about Jon. She wanted to marry him. She just wanted reassurance that his mother wouldn’t take one look at her, shake her head and say something like, “She’s not the girl for you, dear.”

“Penny for your thoughts, love,” Jon whispered in her ear. She jumped slightly, having been caught chewing on her lip as she fretted.
“I don’t think you’ve got enough pennies for them all.”

He put an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. “Start with the simplest then and we’ll work our way up.”

“Our girls are tired and in a rotten mood.”

Apparently, there was a small tug-of-war going on over Ghost, the stuffed dog and Sansa cursed under her breath for packing Lady in Mina’s suitcase.

“Yes, they are,” he agreed glancing over at them with her. “An unfortunate side effect of travel… especially traveling this far and for so many hours. Mum’s got a room ready of them. They can sleep in the car or we’ll just tuck them in as soon as we reach the house.”

“A room for them?” Sansa asked just as Lyarra handed over Ghost and declared that Mina could hold him for twenty minutes. At least they worked that out. “I figured Mina and I would share a room and…”

“Well, I thought they might like to bunk together and we can share the other.”

“Jon…” she said uneasily as she returned her full attention to him.

“Mum is well aware I’m an adult,” he chuckled.

“But we’ve never shared a bed while the girls are in the same house with us.”

“You’re right,” he sighed. “I’m sorry for getting ahead of myself and not discussing this with you ahead of time. I can sleep on the foldout in David’s office if you prefer,” he said matter-of-factly. He’d do it she knew. “I just thought the trip might be a chance for them to maybe get used to the idea of us sharing a room.”

What are you so afraid of, Sansa Stark? You’ve accepted his proposal. You’ve been wearing the ring he gave you. You’re going to be sharing a bed when you move in together, aren’t you?

Hell, yes, we’re sharing a bed!

She decided that he had a point and this would be a good opportunity to test the waters with the girls. And honestly, the thought of lying in his arms every night while they were here was very appealing.

“You know what? I think you’re right. We can share a room at your mother’s house.” He grinned mischievously so she added, “But, I think we both should sleep in our pajamas and keep in mind that both of our girls sometimes have nightmares and need us during the night.”

“Of course,” he nodded. “However…I’ll warn you that I am still going to try and get in your pants every single night.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said as she grinned right back at him.

David Smith was seven years older than Jon’s mother but quite fit for his age. He was an average
looking man with none of the attention-grabbing looks or unusual hair and eye color of his biological father. But Jon infinitely preferred his company to Rhaegar’s. He had sometimes wondered what it would’ve been like to grow up with David in his life but then he felt guilty about that. He loved his mum very much and she’d been a great single mother. He was very happy that she’d found David though. He’d taken to the role of Lyarra’s grandfather immediately and Jon suspected he’d take to Mina just as quickly.

He was friendly and good company but had a reserved way about him that some might’ve thought would clash with his wife’s more out-going ways. Jon, however, had learned that they were well suited. His step-father’s quiet moods balanced out his mother’s vivaciousness. And her temper when roused was often calmed by David’s more easy-going nature.

“Come along, young ladies,” David said to the girls after politely greeting them all when he met them at the airport. “We’ve got a bit of a drive but then we’ll see you both settled down for a rest before Grams is trying to drag you both out for shopping and sweets.”

The little scowls and petulant grumblings from a few minutes earlier had completely disappeared with the appearance of David. Jon carried Mina on his back as David carried Lyarra on his own till they reached his step-father’s car.

“Well, Jon,” he said as Sansa climbed into the back with the girls and they stashed the luggage in the trunk. “Where’d you find a beauty like her?”

“Football,” Jon replied with a grin.

“Huh…s’pose I should’ve taken more of an interest in it,” David said thoughtfully with a wink.

Jon rode next to his step-father but looked back at Sansa. Both girls were lying against her, already falling asleep.

He knew she was nervous. He’d tried to tell her not to be, that his mother would love her. For years, all his mother had wanted was for him to ‘find a nice girl and settle down.’ Well, he’d found her. Sansa was a nice girl…but she was far more than that, far more special than anything he could’ve imagined.

All through the long day, Sansa had been wonderful with the girls even as she personally started to wear down with fatigue. But nothing had warmed his heart quite like how she’d taken care of Lyarra when she’d been sick this morning. A puking kid was no fun and Lyarra tended to run toward hysterics when she vomited. But Sansa had managed her with competent calmness. He’d noticed that before, how unfazed Sansa was by those little childhood crises.

He hadn’t been actively looking for love before he met Sansa but he had come to realize how fortunate he was to have found a partner like her, someone who understood his concerns and struggles as a single parent. He loved her. He loved her completely, the whole person that she was. Even if she hadn’t been a mother, he would’ve loved her, he thought. But the way she was with Lyarra, the way he felt about Mina…it would make blending their families so much easier.

In other words, Sansa was perfectly suited to him and he thought he was well suited to her…just like Ned and Catelyn...just like his mum and David.

So, he’d found someone. Someone that was more than just a nice girl looking to settle down. Someone that was his ideal match.

Jon had never been to his mother’s house. He’d not been over here since before Lyarra was born. As
the sun started to appear in the East, he looked out the car window to take in his surroundings.

When they arrived at their comfortable, little home in Rochdale, Jon saw his mother standing in the doorway in her robe. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet in happiness to see them. He gave her a quick hug before he helped David carry the sleeping girls up the stairs to their room.

Sansa had nodded off in the backseat and Jon woke her with a kiss.

“Come on, love. Let’s get you in and let you lie down in an actual bed.”

“Oh, I can’t do that.” Sansa said anxiously whilst trying to rub the sleep out of her eyes. “What would you mother think if I immediately came in and went to bed?”

“She’d think you’re tired from traveling for hours. Come on,” he said in a tone that indicated he wouldn’t listen to any further arguments.

Sansa and his mother greeted one another cordially. His mum hugged Sansa tightly and told her how happy she was that her and Mina had come to visit them. Then, she’d urged Sansa to go and take a rest and a shower if she liked and promised she’d make them all breakfast later.

He could tell Sansa was pleased by her warm welcome and he also encouraged her to rest, promising that he’d come join her shortly. He made sure she was settled before he headed back downstairs to find his mother again. She was in the kitchen. David had headed up the stairs to give them some time alone together.

“So, you’re here at last,” she said with a fond smile. “Well, take a seat and tell me all about the flight. I’m frying you an egg.”

“Yes, we’re here…and you don’t have to make me anything, Mum.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’re not hungry after that god-awful flight, Jonathan?”

“God, don’t call me that.”

“I’m your mother. I can call you by your name. Now, are you going to sit there and lie through your teeth to your mum and claim you’re not starved?”

“No, I won’t lie to you. I’m famished,” he said, grinning at her pursed lips and scowl. “I just don’t want you to feel you’ve got to cook something for me the instant I walk in the door.”

“I’ve only got you for two weeks. Why do you want to rob me of one of my greatest pleasures?” she asked sharply though he knew she wasn’t truly aggravated. “I’ll cook for you as much as I please. I can’t believe how much Lyarra’s grown.”

“Me, either,” he said as he sat at the table and waited for his mother to dish up his toast and egg.

“Coffee?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“You still take it black, I suppose?”

“I do.”

“David ate up the last of the blackberry jam, I’m afraid. Do you want the strawberry or some orange marmalade?”
“The strawberry, please.”

At last, she sat down with him and smiled across the table. He smiled right back at her and took a bite of his egg.

“So…when are you marrying her?” she asked without preamble.

Jon coughed and choked on his bite of egg. “Wah-att?” he sputtered as he tried to draw a breath.

She stood and walked over to start whacking him on the back as he coughed.

“When are you marrying Sansa? And for the love of God, please use a napkin rather than spray me with more bits of egg.”

Jon automatically did his mother’s bidding and grabbed a napkin to wipe his face whilst trying to contain his astonishment. “I, uh…how do you know I’m…”

“I know you, son. You’ve brought this young woman and her daughter thousands of miles and across the Atlantic Ocean to meet me. You’d been dating Val for over a year before you brought her ’round the house when I only lived an hour from campus.” Her eyes softened and she said, “I could tell by the way you’ve talked about her. I could tell by the way you carried her little girl into my house. You love them. You are deeply in love with Sansa and you love her daughter.” Then, she smirked and added, “Plus, I saw the tan line on her ring finger.”
A couple of days after their arrival, Sansa awoke feeling truly energized for the first time having fully recovered from her jet lag at last. Lyanna had taken it easy on them so far, allowing them to sleep at odd times and not suggesting much in the way of outings. But today they had plans.

She glanced at the clock. It was a quarter till 7. She still had time to lie in bed. She rolled to her side and enjoyed the novelty of Jon lying next to her, snoring softly. The morning sunshine was filtering through the window of the bedroom they were sharing at his mother and step-father’s home. His handsome face was relaxed in his slumber, his lips were parted slightly and yet sweetly puckered and his curls were an adorable mess. For a time, she stared at the man she loved, memorizing his features as she delicately traced the muscles of his chest under his soft t-shirt with her fingertips.

However, she could hear the girls’ voices from downstairs and decided to join them and allow Jon to sleep a little longer.

She found Mina, Lyarra and Lyanna in the kitchen. Lyanna was fixing breakfast. It was obvious she was taking a great deal of pleasure in having them here…and feeding them all. It brought her own mother to mind and how nothing was too extravagant for Catelyn Stark when her children were all home for a meal and she got to feed them.

Today, Lyanna was frying up eggs and sausages while the girls poured themselves some milk and set the table. David was finishing up his breakfast as he would be heading in to work today. He still looked half asleep but he was the first to spy her in the doorway and he smiled warmly at her, giving her courage.

“Good morning,” Sansa said somewhat shyly.

This was the first time she’d been in Lyanna’s presence without Jon. She drew some comfort from the girls being there at least.

He had told her about his mother’s quick eye and assessment regarding the ring and their engagement but Lyanna had not broached the topic with her yet. Sansa nervously twirled her ring on her finger. She’d worn it to bed last night and was wearing it still. There wasn’t any need to hide it anyway.

“Good morning,” they all echoed back and Lyarra got up to hug her.

She’d been very affectionate since leaving home…since she’d got sick before the flight and Sansa had taken care of her. And as if on cue, Mina came over to hug her, too. Sansa smiled down at them.

There’s plenty of me to go around, girls.
“Sit beside me, Mommy,” Mina urged.

“I’ll get your juice,” Lyarra said.

Sansa took the indicated seat and thanked Lyarra once she had been served. She didn’t want them fighting for her attention. She didn’t want them to fight at all. She asked both girls a few innocuous questions as Lyanna finished cooking, giving them both an opportunity to speak.

“A proper breakfast to sustain you for our adventures today,” Lyanna said cheerily once the food was ready. She dished up eggs and sausage onto a plate for her and asked, “Is Jon still abed?”

“He is,” Sansa replied.

“Lazy bones. Just like this one,” she said with a huff towards David.

He grinned and said, “His clock’s all out of sorts from the time change. We played darts and talked for a bit after you went to bed.”

“A bit? You didn’t come to bed till after one.”

“Ah…well,” he shrugged. “I’m off to work, ladies. Have a good day.”

Lyanna kissed her husband good-bye as they bid him farewell and then sat down at the table where he’d just been seated.

“Well, the husband is gone and my son is still asleep. We can have a nice chat this morning at last… just us girls.”

Sansa gulped down some juice and told herself there was no need to panic as the girls grinned at them both. Mina dug into her own plate of eggs and sausage. Lyarra had apparently conned her grandmother into buying some sugary cereal but she had an egg as well.

“Sure. That’d be…thank you for breakfast, Lyanna.”

Lyanna waved away her thanks and asked, “So, what would you like to see while you’re in Manchester, Sansa? It’s not as exciting as London, I suppose, but you’ll see that next week. What can I show you here though?”

“Um…well, I know we’re touring Old Trafford and the socc—...I mean, the National Football Museum today, aren’t we?”

Lyanna rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know that’s where my son is eager to take the girls. But I asked what you want to see?”

“Oh…” Sansa said with a flush of pleasure as she considered her answer. She hadn’t wished to let on that she was not as crazy about soccer as the rest of them but it was nice that Lyanna was asking this. “Well… I’d like to see Heaton Park and the botanical garden nearby…and perhaps Manchester Cathedral.”

“There now… that sounds a bit more like it,” Lyanna said with a smile as she tucked in to enjoy her own breakfast.

“Sounds like what?”

“Just more like something I’d think you would enjoy, dear girl. We could view them tomorrow if you like. You might enjoy the art gallery as well.”
“Yes, I would like that.”

“Good. I want you to enjoy yourself while you’re here with us.”

“Thank you, Lyanna. That’s very kind of you.”

“Mmm…not kind at all. I’m being selfish. I intend to make you very happy you came here, Sansa,” Lyanna said as Sansa looked at her in bewilderment. “How else am I supposed to get you to bring them all back again some day?”

Sansa chuckled when she saw Lyanna’s wry wink and decided she wasn’t so nervous around Lyanna after all.

She observed Jon’s mother as she enjoyed her breakfast. She was quite a lovely woman with dark, curly hair and lively eyes. She had a good sense of humor and liked to laugh but she was very kind as well.

Sansa wasn’t sure what she had expected. She should have known based on what Jon had said and the conversations they’d had so far that she had little to fear from her future mother-in-law. She supposed though her experiences being what they were had made her leery.

Anya Hardyng had come around over the years. She loved Minisa and was quite cordial with Sansa now. However, Sansa could recall very well the judgment in the older woman’s eyes when Harry dragged her along to introduce her to his mother…and break the news of her pregnancy.

*Coward.* She’d shared the news to her own parents alone.

Still a teenager and frightened to death, she’d been left in one room while Harry chased down his sobbing mother. Nothing was ever Harry’s fault in Anya’s eyes…at least it hadn’t been back then. She knew differently now though she still coddled him.

Sansa’s pride had been cut to the quick and tears of shame had coursed down her cheeks to hear herself accused of trapping Anya’s darling boy and ruining his future by getting knocked up.

“Are you even sure it’s yours?” she’d asked her son hysterically.

That had hurt the most. She’d been a virgin when she met Harry and he was already far from one. She’d never been with anyone else. At least Harry had had the grace to assure his mother that he didn’t doubt the baby was his.

It was one of the reasons Sansa had never broached the topic of marriage with Harry later on when he’d been living with her and Mina and trying to make a go of things. She had not asked for this. She had not sought out a boyfriend with the intention of getting pregnant her first semester of college. And she certainly hadn’t been in the market for a husband at eighteen. And anyone who thought otherwise could go fuck themselves.

Lyanna didn’t seem anything like that. Sansa wondered what her reaction had been like when Jon had told her Val was pregnant. She highly doubted Val had ever been accused of purposely tying Jon down unfairly. She’d been the one trying to leave him for one thing and they’d been involved a lot longer when she became pregnant unexpectedly.

Sansa pondered that thought. If Val had been meaning to leave him, to go on her European tour and leave him behind, it seemed strange that she wouldn’t have been taking precautions. And, Sansa knew how much it had bothered Jon as a boy being a born out of wedlock and having no father figure in his childhood. She couldn’t imagine he would’ve been careless about birth control and left it
all on Val to deal with. Perhaps it was a question for Jon some other time.

However, when the girls had finished and returned to their room to change, Sansa couldn’t believe her own ears when a bold question tumbled out from her mouth.

“Lyanna…what was your reaction when Jon told you Val was pregnant?”

“My reaction?” she asked before considering her answer. “Well, I was surprised. They’d already split up, you know.”

Sansa nodded. She knew all about that. “Yes, Jon told me she’d not wanted any strings when she left. It seems…well, she wound up pregnant so I guess those strings were there whether she wanted them or not.”

“Mmm…that,” Lyanna said as she sipped the last of her tea. “Well, she’d been sick with some bronchial infection for several weeks before she broke my son’s heart. Not that I’m holding a grudge now. Not after…everything,” she sighed. “Anyway…she was on some strong antibiotics…”

“And they weren’t using any back up?”

“No…it’s easy to get sidetracked and take it for granted. She said it obviously messed with her birth control. That’s what she told Jon. He never doubted her so why should I? It didn’t matter to me what happened. I was going to be a grandmother and my son was going to be a father. Sooner than either of us had expected but…well, that’s life. Given my own history, I could hardly say anything, could I?”

Sansa nodded again and wanted to smack her forehead. Of course. Lyanna was a teenager when she got pregnant, too.

“My parents were disappointed but very supportive,” Sansa said, opening the door if Lyanna was willing to talk about it. “Harry’s mother was not…not till after Mina came.”

“I’m sorry,” Lyanna said. “My own experience was not good. I had gone over to the States for an exchange program and lived with a family that had been friends with my parents’ before they died. I met Rhaegar through them. He was handsome and charming…and, as I later learned, bored with married life. I was young and foolish. He had his little fling and ran back to his wife once I found out I was pregnant. My parents were gone and there wasn’t much here for me then so I decided to stay over there and make a new life for myself with my child.”

“It can’t have been easy,” Sansa said, remembering her struggles with Mina and money and how impossible it would’ve seemed without her family’s support.

“It wasn’t,” she said in a bitter tone as she turned her eyes towards the kitchen window and was silent for a time. But her face cleared and she continued, “Despite everything…I’ve never regretted having Jon. I’ve never thought of him as a mistake and I never will.”

“I feel the same about Minisa.”

They smiled at each other and Sansa reached for her hand. They sat like that for a time quietly. Sansa decided she would like calling this woman her mother-in-law. They talked a while longer until Jon stumbled into the kitchen still half asleep.

“Ah ha!” Lyanna said. “He rises from the dead at last!” She sprang to her feet to fill him a plate of food.
“Morning, Mum,” he said before sliding in next to Sansa and kissing her good morning. “Sorry, I’ve missed everyone else for breakfast.”

“Well, you should’ve taken a sleep aid and gone to bed instead of keeping my old husband awake.”

“Sorry, Mum. I didn’t mean to keep him up. I should’ve done something earlier to help me fall asleep,” he said as he shot Sansa a devilish smirk.

She blushed while hoping Lyanna wouldn’t notice. He had stayed up late playing darts and talking with his step-father…but then he’d stayed up much later than that.

He’d climbed into bed and started caressing her ass, testing to see if she was in the mood. She had been. They’d fooled around for a time just kissing and touching each other. When she was sopping wet with want, she’d rolled him to his back and rode him relentlessly, chasing down one orgasm after another. They were both sweating and breathing heavily by the time she’d had her fill. She’d sucked him off after that as he babbled all manner of naughty, sweet words and carded his hands through her hair sending shivers down her spine until she tasted his salty release and swallowed him down.

He’d passed out shortly afterwards with a goofy smile on his face. Sansa had curled up in his arms before falling back asleep with a smile of her own.

Sansa bit her lip to keep from grinning back at him. She nudged his foot under the table to get him to stop making eyes at her when his mother turned back around.

Lyanna ran her hand through his hair with one hand as she put the plate down in front of him. “When’s the last time you had your hair cut?”

“It’s been a while,” he answered…still smirking.

“Hmmm…it’s not terribly professional looking.”

“Brienne hasn’t complained. Neither does Sansa. She likes it a bit long,” he added with a mischievous wink.

“Yes, I suppose she does or you would’ve already cut it. For Sansa, I mean.” He took a sip of his coffee just as his mother said, “Sansa…would you mind having him get it trimmed for the wedding at least?”

“Christ, Mum. We’ve not even set a date or…”

“Oh, I think I could do that for you, Lyanna,” Sansa replied.

Men love sports. Well, not all men but many of them do. Sansa knew this very well.

Her father loved baseball and American football with a passion. Robb did, too. Bran’s interest in sports waxed and waned but Rickon was nearly as incorrigible as their father and eldest brother. And by now, she was well aware of Jon’s passion for soccer. She was completely okay with that even if she didn’t share their fervor.
Naturally, plenty of women love sports, too. Arya loved any sport one could name so long as there was a fair bit of potential bloodshed involved. Lyanna had introduced Jon to soccer and helped spark Lyarra’s interest, too. Minisa was becoming quite a fan as well thanks to them.

However, Sansa had not anticipated how seriously Jon took all things related to Manchester United until they took the tram from Rochdale to Old Trafford for a tour with the girls and Lyanna.

The look on his face from the moment they strolled through the entrance was quite precious, like a child’s on Christmas morning. She recognized the expression. She’d seen that look before on a grown man’s face…her father’s.

When Sansa was eleven, her mother had wanted to take a family trip to Niagara Falls in August before school started back. It was hotter than Hades and would be a fourteen-hour drive from their home but the Stark clan had loaded up in the family passenger van at Catelyn Stark’s chipper urging and assurances that this would be a fun adventure.

Less than two hours after leaving home, Bran had become car sick. Sansa could still recall the exact odor of vomit, sweaty bodies, her father’s aftershave, cheesy puffs and Dr. Pepper mixed together to this day. At least, he’d felt better afterwards.

Rickon was only three then and had been a complete terror in the backseat from around the 45 minute-mark. Once Bran puked, it was a scream-fest.

Sansa and Arya had been in a difficult phase as sisters. They had liked the exact opposite of nearly everything and fought constantly that summer. The close confines of the van had only exacerbated it.

Robb had been in a broody teenage mood and pointedly ignored them all while listening to music and grumbling a lot.

Her father’s knuckles had grown whiter and whiter as he gripped the steering wheel. One of the veins on his forehead had started to stand out in a troubling way.

And her mother had tried her best to cajole them all and make the best out of the situation for another three and half hours.

Sansa could still remember when her mother finally broke down an hour past Columbus, Ohio. She’d wept in her husband’s arms standing on the side of the road as five young faces were pressed against the windows watching.

“Way to go, you little shits,” Robb had growled. “You made mom cry.”

“I didn’t do anything! It was Sansa!” Arya had argued.

“Robb said shit!” Rickon had shouted.

“I can’t help that I got sick!” Bran had cried.

“Would you all *please* shut up?” Sansa had hissed.

It was a memorable road trip to say the least.

However, her father had suggested they take a little break and stop for the night before continuing. It had helped immensely. The Stark kids were happy to find a hotel with a pool. Her parents had sprung for three rooms. Robb and the boys shared one while Sansa and Arya shared the other and her parents had their own.
The next day, their parents had let them sleep in and even enjoy the pool again. Everyone was refreshed and in better spirits. The spring had returned to her mother’s step and the thirst for adventure was back. So, she’d recommended a side trip.

They went to visit the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Sansa could not have cared less about football. But her father and Robb had been in heaven, reverently staring at memorabilia from football’s earliest days like two pilgrims in the Holy Lands. Arya and Bran were interested enough to enjoy the tour.

For Sansa, the smile on her mother’s face as she observed her husband and children having fun made it worthwhile…even if Rickon had still been a terror and nearly got them kicked out of the Hallowed Halls of American Football History.

They’d made it to Niagara Falls the next day and, overall, it had been a good trip. Like most family vacations, there were parts that weren’t so great; frayed nerves, short tempers and disappointments are just part of family life at times after all. Her mother was happy though. She’d even suggested they trek the additional four and half hours over to Cooperstown, New York to see the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Her father, much to Robb’s disappointment, had declined and suggested they spend the extra day doing something she would enjoy. So, her mother had gotten a day at a local spa while her kids had enjoyed more pool time. Then, her father had taken her mom out for a candlelit dinner while the rest of them watched TV in their hotel room under Robb’s supervision. The five of them had even managed not to kill each other.

It was one of the best examples Sansa could put into words regarding the give and take of a loving partnership, a marriage.

So, it was not unexpected that Jon would be enraptured visiting the august playing field of his favorite sports team. She was prepared for that. She was looking forward to relishing his and the girls’ enjoyment even if it wasn’t her kind of thing.

However, Sansa thought perhaps he was a bit too enraptured once their tour began.

The tour had just started and she leaned into him. “You look like a kid in a…”

“Shush, love,” Jon whispered.

It was true the tour guide was speaking but she’d been speaking in his ear. She felt her cheeks burn. No one else would have been disturbed. However, she bit her tongue and followed the group.

Ten minutes later though, it happened again. The girls both needed to use the restroom. Jon had a gleeful, somewhat idiotic smile on his face but other people were talking. She figured she should be safe.

“Jon…I need to take…”

“Shhh!” he said urgently as their tour guide started waxing on about Sir Alex Ferguson’s statue.

Sansa literally took a step back and pursed her lips.

“Jon,” she admonished, reaching for his arm…and he batted her hand away.

Oh, fuck this, she thought sourly, moving away and wishing David had joined them today. At least he was a rational human being when it came to sports.
Jon wasn’t sure what he’d done…but he’d definitely done something. Sansa was decidedly frosty towards him from the moment she returned from the ladies’ room with the girls. She was putting on a good act for his mother and the girls but she was clearly pissed at him.

Once the tour guide had turned them loose for the self-guided part of the tour, Lyarra and Mina had several questions for him. He answered them as best he could but he kept looking at Sansa. He tried drawing her into the conversation but his mother would start asking her questions about other things. Every attempt he made at talking to her was ignored or rebuffed.

“Um…Sansa?” he said at one point when they were viewing the pitch.

“Oh, look…it’s grass with artificial fibers,” Sansa said with faked enthusiasm…not that the girls noticed.

His mother was snickering to herself and seemed to be enjoying this. “It’s decidedly…green,” Lyanna added. “Perhaps we should kneel in it’s presence,” she whispered to Sansa, making her laugh.

“Yeah,” Jon chuckled nervously. “Uh…Sansa…” he began again, taking her hand and pleading with his eyes for his mother to go on ahead with the girls. His mum had mercy on him and did just that as he pulled Sansa into an alcove.

“Oh, am I permitted to speak to you now?” she asked, her eyes wide and her expression sarcastic.

“What?”

“I wouldn’t want to disrupt your worship at the altar of your football gods.”

“Sansa…I don’t know what I did but…”

“You don’t know?” she asked incredulously. He shook his head remorsefully. “You shushed me…twice,” she said irritably.

“I did?”

“And then you smacked my hand away.”

“I did not do that! Did I do that?!?”

“You did!” she argued. “I reached for your arm and you swatted it away…like I was a tremendous bother.”

Jon’s jaw dropped but his memory didn’t fail him completely. As he stood there gaping at her, her eyes welled up with tears and her chin started to tremble. *Oh, holy fucking shit! Fix this, idiot.*

He recalled his earlier behavior and was embarrassed. He knew this wasn’t something she was that interested in but she’d been very good-natured about seeing all of it.

And what had he done? He’d acted like a child and now he needed to make amends to the woman
he loved for being thoughtless and rude.

“Christ…I’m so sorry,” he said sheepishly. “I guess I got caught up in the…” She folded her arms across her chest. “It’s no excuse. I’m sorry. I’ll, uh…make it up to you.”

She lifted a brow and a small smile formed despite her efforts to banish it. “You’ll make it up to me? How exactly would you do that?”

“I’ll, uh…take you shopping this afternoon.” She rolled her eyes. 

Fuck, think fast! “I’ll take you to that fancy shopping center Mum mentioned. I’ll follow three paces behind you in the store, carry all your bags and tell everyone how beautiful you are and that I don’t deserve you.”

She had to suppress a laugh then at least.

“It’s alright, Jon. I wouldn’t want to disappoint the girls and make them miss the football museum. I know you were just excited and…”

“I’ll make you dinner tonight!”

“Your mother is making us dinner,” she said sardonically.

“Shit,” he muttered. “I can, um…I’ll give you a foot massage tonight!”

He flexed his hands and her eyes lit up. Sansa enjoyed a good foot massage and he enjoyed giving them to her. Plus, it usually led to other things if they were alone.

She raised a finger to her lips as if she was considering. “Well, my feet are a little sore from walking all over this huge stadium.”

I’m not imagining the way she emphasized the word ‘huge,’ am I? Shut up and focus!

“I would, uh…I’d be very happy to work all that soreness out for you,” he said, moving closer. “I’d set you down on the bed and get on my knees. I’d worship your poor, tired feet, nice and slow, giving them just the right amount of pressure.” He gave her a wicked grin and leaned in, speaking in a low rumble, “I’ll bet I could have you moaning with pleasure as I squeezed and rubbed and gave them all of my attention.” Sansa’s eyes darted to his lips and he heard her inhale sharply. “I wouldn’t have to limit myself to just a foot massage either, if you like. If there was some other area that needed attention…your back, your shoulders…anywhere. I’d do anything you like…anything at all…to earn your forgiveness for my brutish behavior earlier.”

“Your offer has…appeal,” she said with a smile to match his own. “But for now, we should catch up with your mother and the girls.”

Dad had screwed up somehow. Lyarra was certain of it. So was Mina.

He’d had a panicky sort of look for the second half of the tour after Sansa took them to the restroom. Mina had told her before that her father had done stuff in the past that made her mommy upset or angry but this was the first time Lyarra knew of her own dad doing something to make Sansa unhappy.
“Boys are just dumb sometimes. That’s what Aunt Arya says and I guess it’s true of men, too,” Mina had told her when Grams was distracted for a second. Mina didn’t seem worried though. “I only worry if Mommy cries,” Mina said when Lyarra asked if she wasn’t concerned.

Sansa didn’t look like she was going to cry exactly. She’d just looked mad. But Lyarra was worried all the same.

Dad wasn’t stupid but what had he done? She couldn’t figure it out but she wanted him to fix it because she loved Sansa. What if he did something that made Sansa want to leave him? To leave her?

She sucked in a deep breath and blinked a few times. She couldn’t cry here. She was here where her favorite team played, at a stadium she’d only ever seen on television before but she couldn’t think about that. All she could think about was Dad and Sansa and now, they’d disappeared.

*What if they’re having a huge fight now? What if Sansa hates him now? What did he do?*

“Grams,” she said in a small voice, tugging on her grandmother’s hand. “Is Daddy in trouble with Sansa?”

Her grandmother looked like she might laugh for a second but then her eyes turned soft. She knelt in front of her.

“Are you worried about that, darling?” She nodded and hated the tears that wanted to come out. She didn’t want Mina to see. But, there was a pain in her chest, squeezing her heart and hurting. “Oh, Lyarra…it’s just a lover’s spat. Nothing serious at all.”

“I don’t know what that means, Grams,” she mumbled while making sure Mina was still reading an inscription on the wall.

Her grandmother smiled and said, “Sorry. A lover’s spat is just a minor argument between two grown-ups who are in love. Some careless action or unkind word upsets one or the other and they get in a tiff. Sort of like when a player fouls another and they get angry for a moment or so but then they’re shaking hands by the end of the match. Your father loves Sansa very much and she loves him. They’ll work it out quickly. They’re probably doing that right now. You’ll see.”

Lyrarra nodded and hoped Grams was right. “Do you ever have those with David?”

“All the time,” she laughed. “I’m a bit temperamental at times and sometimes he’s just…well, frustrating. It never lasts long. We love each other. You don’t need to worry at all, Lyarra. And even if they were having a true argument…which they’re not…I promise they both love you.” Her grandmother stood back up whispered, “Look.”

She turned and saw her dad and Sansa, holding hands and jogging towards them to catch up. They were smiling at each other and then smiled at her when they saw her. Thankfully, he’d managed to make amends, it seemed.

“Sorry, we fell behind,” her father said.

“It’s okay,” Lyarra said as she reached up to grasp a hand from them both.

She loved her father with all her heart. He had been the center of her world for as long as she could remember.

But now she had Sansa, too. Sansa who was becoming something like a mother to her. She had no
memory of her own mother. But Sansa was now the person she thought of when she heard that word.

It was wonderful and scary. Wonderful because she had someone new to love and scary because there was someone else that she could lose.

Almost as if she could read her mind, Sansa put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. The ache in her chest faded in a heartbeat and she decided to enjoy the rest of their time at the stadium. She even asked her dad about shopping for souvenirs.

“Oh fuck, honey…” Sansa cried softly as he felt her pulsing, shuddering release around his fingers yet again.

They’d started at the foot of the bed. Now, she was shoved all the way up to the head of it, propped up on their pillows as he’d stalked her across the bed with his tongue. He was laying across the lower half of it, naked and nearly overcome with need at this point. He’d resisted his desire to rut against the covers and just come that way while she came under his mouth and fingers. He wanted to wait for her cunt, for the hot, wet heat of Sansa to encase him. He groaned into her folds at the thought of it, pulling another moan from her.

“I can’t…you’ve got to stop…” she panted breathily as she lifted her arms and begged him to come to her, to enter her at last.

“I’m still making it up to you,” he said with wide-eyed innocence as he lifted his head from between her thighs, her juices running down his chin in clear contradiction to that innocent expression. She whimpered and he returned to lapping at the remains of her arousal.

“I can’t…unnn…take anymore of you making it up to me. Jon…oh, god,” she whined. “Heaven help me if you ever majorly fuck up. I might die of pleasure from your penance.”

The foot massage had been the beginning…then, the back and shoulder rub. By the time he had her naked, she was squirming. He’d started with her breasts; fondling, squeezing and then licking. She’d ran her fingers through his hair, sending a jolt to his cock as she tugged slightly. She’d whispered he wasn’t to get his hair cut anytime soon, making him laugh before he started to suckle her nipples. When his hand reached down and stroked her clit, she came almost at once.

He’d stripped then and she thought he would have her then, he knew. Instead, he’d went down on her. And, he’d continued to do so, exploring all the ways he could make Sansa come apart with his mouth and hands alone.

He thought he may have earned her forgiveness for his rudeness earlier in the day…just maybe. He wasn’t prepared to take any chances though.

“Do you forgive me?” he asked teasingly. He gave her slit another swipe with his tongue. “Because I’ll keep going if necessary until I…”

“I swear to God. If you don’t get that sweet ass up here and fuck me, Jon Snow, I’ll…” she growled
between clenched teeth.

He nearly laughed, knowing she was putting on an act. She was nearly limp beneath him and thoroughly sated. He still intended to make her come once more before he finally did.

He smiled smugly before crawling up the bed, covering her body with his own. He wiped his beard and lips before diving in to kiss her hungrily. His cock was aching for release…in fact, it was weeping for it but he'd held fast to his intent and made the past hour since the girls had gone to bed all about Sansa’s pleasure.

Before that though, his mother had told him about earlier and he’d had a talk with Lyarra, eager to ease her worries and assure her that everything was just fine between him and Sansa. His daughter was coming to see Sansa as a mother and he didn’t want anything to mess that up. He wanted the girls to feel secure about their relationship. He knew Sansa was the love of his life and that he would do everything in his power to keep her happy. He believed Sansa felt the same. But this was still new for their daughters and they needed reassurance that they were both loved no matter what.

He hoped when they returned home Sansa and Mina might be alright with moving in. He couldn’t wait to have them all under one roof and Sansa in his arms every night. He hoped the break over the summer might be a good time for getting used to living together. But he wouldn’t push. He’d told her he’d wait for when she felt ready and she hadn’t given him a time frame yet.

He could wait. Just like he had waited for his pleasure tonight. But now, his waiting was mercifully almost at an end.

Her arms wound round his neck and she pulled him closer as their kisses continued. His cock, hard and hot, was pressing against her soft skin. She spread her legs and he centered himself. He started to push inside her at last and swallowed a groan…and then Sansa froze and gave his shoulders a slight shove.

“What?” he asked.

Her eyes were wide and then he heard it. The doorknob was rattling. Thankfully, he’d locked the door. The cabin and Uncle Benjen had convinced him to never again fuck Sansa without the door being locked.

“Goddammit,” he muttered, hanging his head in frustration.

“Swear jar, Dad,” Sansa snickered at him as he stood and jerked on his pajama pants.

Sansa grabbed his t-shirt off the bed and her panties before throwing on her own pajama bottoms and crawling under the covers.

Of the two of them, he knew which girl was more likely to be coming to their room this late.

Another nightmare. They were growing fewer and farther apart but Lyarra still struggled with them.

There was a tentative knock now as he crossed the bedroom floor, furiously adjusting himself to make his hard-on go away…or at least not so obvious. Good luck with that.

He cracked open the door and, as expected, there stood Lyarra clutching Ghost, her greyish-blue eyes wide and fearful.

“Daddy,” she whimpered.
His plans to pat her on the head, remind her it was just a dream and usher her back to bed died right then. His heart melted and he hoped Sansa understood.

But before he could speak, Sansa did.

“Come on, sweetie. Come lay down with us for a bit.”

Lyarra bolted past him and jumped into the bed next to Sansa. He smiled to himself and went to the bathroom to wash. By the time he’d returned, the two of them were whispering to each other and cuddled up snuggly.

Jon laid down on his side of the bed, reaching out to stroke Lyarra’s soft curls and then Sansa’s cheek.

“I love you,” he murmured to them both.

“We love you, too,” they both answered.
Jon huffed and tapped his toe. He shifted his carryon from one shoulder to the other. They needed to leave soon but he couldn’t seem to get them moving.

_of course not. They're enjoying this too much._

Sansa smirked at him. Otherwise…nothing. He may as well be invisible to the other occupants of the kitchen.

The girls were listening with glee as his mother once again indulged in her favorite brand of child torment…Jon’s Most Embarrassing Childhood Memories.

“We really need to be going,” he said at last.

“David’s gone to fuel up the car so you’re stuck here till he returns but he’ll run you to the station with plenty of time to spare,” his mother said.

_I should’ve gone with him_, Jon thought as he rolled his eyes.

“And don’t roll your eyes at me, Jonathan,” his mother chastised. “It’s terribly rude. The girls asked politely. They simply want to hear about your childhood.”

“Mum…”

“Did he really cry over that first loss?” Mina asked bringing his mother back on track.

_Traitor._

“For days, darling,” his mother laughed…like it was funny.

_Like you weren’t upset, too!_

“Did Dad really get into a fight at school because of the second, Grams?” Lyarra followed up.
“He did. I got called by the principal...while I was at work, mind you...and had to go and fetch him. He gave poor Grenn a black eye and was completely unrepentant until I threatened to cancel the cable service if he was going to get this emotional over a couple of losses. He burst into tears at that...right in the middle of the principal’s office.”

“I did not!” he protested hotly. “It was in the parking lot after...” he grumbled while the four of them snickered at him. “And I apologized to Grenn the next day. We never fought again.”

“Well...it was the most miserable week for any United fan,” his mother conceded.

October 1996. Just days apart, Manchester United was handed two of its most humiliating losses in history. Newcastle had thrashed them 5-0 and then Southampton had beaten them 6-3.

Grenn had been the only boy at his elementary school who followed football with anything approaching the same enthusiasm as Jon. They were friends and often spent recess kicking an old playground ball around and discussing their favorite players. Grenn didn’t follow a particular team though. He just loved the sport. He knew Jon was devoted to Manchester United but, like any child, he wasn’t above some teasing.

“What's the difference between Peter Schmeichel and a taxi driver?” Grenn had taunted after the second loss. It has been a good-natured attempt to get a rise out of his friend. Grenn had known Jon worshiped Man U’s keeper but he likely hadn’t expected such a volatile response when he’d finished the punch line, “A taxi driver only lets five in at a time.”

Jon had had a bit temper as a kid. He’d called Grenn a dumbass over the joke so Grenn had called him a bastard...not really understanding the implication of the word. He’d snapped and lunged for his friend. They’d wound up wrestling in the dirt until two teachers pulled them apart.

“I was eight years old for fu-”

“JON!” his mum scolded.

Sansa’s eyes widened as he nearly let the word fly anyway. Mina looked curious. Lyarra looked hopeful. The dollar signs were already flashing in her eyes. Theon had used that word once in her presence. And Jon had foolishly said it would cost him five times more than most other swear words.

Okay, I still have a bit of a temper.

“I was eight,” he said more quietly, “and there’s David pulling in. They’ll be back on Friday,” he added as he hugged his mother good-bye.

“Oh? Won’t you be coming back with them?” she asked with a grin.

“Not if you insist on telling them these stories every day.” He kissed her cheek though and she knew he didn’t mean it.

Two hours later, the four of them were seated on the train carrying them to London for a three-day sightseeing adventure. He’d asked Sansa to make a list of the places she most wanted to see during their planning stage since he’d been there more than once. He knew the girls would only ask about places to eat and shops to buy treats or other such things they were interested in.

Sansa’s initial list would’ve taken two weeks to see and he’d admitted as much to her. So, without a word of complaint, she began paring down her list little by little until it resembled something
achievable in the time allowed that wouldn’t leave all four of them completely exhausted.

But, he’d seen the regret in her eye each time she struck something else off her list and he’d privately made his own list. One day, he would take her to see everything she was missing out on this trip.

As the initial excitement of traveling by train began to wane for the girls, Sansa pulled out her itinerary for the four of them to discuss.

“Today…lunch and bus tour, followed by checking in at hotel where we can see St. Paul’s…”

The girls whooped at this. Not St. Paul’s Cathedral but the hotel. Jon and Sansa had been parents long enough to know that, for eight-year-olds, staying at the hotel would probably be one of the highlights of the entire vacation for them.

_A close second to McDonalds at Dublin’s airport_, Jon thought with a private smile.

“Then, tonight we’ll ride the London Eye.” More cheers. “Tomorrow, we’ll do the Thames River Cruise and visit Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey.”

“Will we really ride on a double-decker bus today, Mommy?” Mina asked.

“Yes, baby.”

“Are we going to see London Bridge?” Lyarra chimed in.

“The day after tomorrow…after we visit the London Zoo.”

More delight from the children. Sansa had made sure to include things each day that the girls might enjoy.

“And we’ll finish the last day at Covent Garden and do some shopping. We’ll catch the early train back to Manchester the next day,” Jon finished, having memorized their plans. “So, we’ll be busy but take breaks as needed. And the number one rule while we’re in London is you girls must stay close and not wander off, yes?”

Lyarra was known to get excitable and wander at times.

“Yes,” they agreed in unison.

“Excellent.”

As a believer in Murphy’s Law, Jon really should’ve known better.

The hotel was awesome just as expected. Actually, it was better. Far fancier than anything she’d ever stayed at previously. Mina’s mouth hung open as she gazed at the lobby filled with vibrant colors. She could smell something delicious coming from one of the restaurants. Lots of nicely dressed grownups were coming in and out of the revolving doors…which were pretty cool all by themselves.

Mina was thrilled to be staying at a fancy hotel in the middle of a huge city…so much bigger than
her home town. Jon had said it was a nice chain and Mommy agreed but neither acted like it was anything special. What was wrong with them? At least Lyarra was impressed.

“The only bad part is there’s no pool,” Lyarra said from beside her as Jon was busy at check in and Mommy was talking to the doorman about something.

“That’s okay. We swim all the time at home…and I’m going to the beach with Daddy when we get back.”

“That’s good for you,” Lyarra huffed. “I’m not going to the beach…and we don’t have a pool in our neighborhood.”

“I’m sure Mommy could invite you over.”

“You think she would?”

Lyarra looked so happy at the thought. Mina couldn’t see why exactly. She liked Jon’s house and big back yard better than the townhouse even if there wasn’t a community pool. If she were Mommy, she’d want to hang out at Jon’s.

And maybe live there.

Two nights ago, Mina and Lyarra had overheard Grams asking about a wedding…between Mommy and Jon when the three of them were cleaning up after dinner. Mina smiled at the thought of Grams. She liked Lyarra’s grandmother and she’d told Mina she could call her Grams, too.

She knew Jon had given Mommy the pretty diamond ring and they’d mentioned getting married some day but…well, Grams was excited for them and she heard a lot more about it that night while her and Lyarra were supposedly watching TV in the next room. David was supposed to be watching with them but he’d started snoring.

When Grams left the kitchen, she urged David to go to bed and followed him upstairs. Jon and Mommy were still in the kitchen and being quiet. Mina told Lyarra she needed to use the bathroom but instead she crept towards the kitchen to hear more about the wedding. From the doorway, she had seen Jon holding Mommy close and kissing her. Then, he’d asked her if she’d move in with him when they got back home after her trip with Daddy to the beach. Mommy had said yes.

She felt a little unsure about moving into Jon’s house; part of her liked the idea but part of her had worries.

So, she’d mentioned it to Mommy when she was brushing her teeth. She’d tried to act like it wasn’t a big deal but Mommy had hugged her and then they’d had a good snuggle in bed and talked about it…just the two of them.

She loved lying next to Mommy. She’d played with Mommy’s silky hair and asked dozens of questions about Jon’s house and what living there would mean. She knew Jon made Mommy happy. They loved each other. Mina loved him and she loved Lyarra, too. They would be a family, Mommy had said. She would like that.

And Jon had mentioned getting a dog that night he’d given Mommy the ring back home. She’d not forgotten that. Neither had Lyarra. That would be a dream come true.

But, then she’d thought about her bedroom at home. It had pink walls. Grandpa and Uncle Robb had painted it pink for her when they’d moved in, back when she was three and loved all things pink. She’d gotten tired of pink but…that was her room. And then she’d thought of her school and
transferring to Lyarra’s school. Then, she’d started crying.

Mommy had stroked her hair and promised it would all be okay and said they could paint her bedroom at Jon’s house a new color.

“It’ll be our house, too,” Mommy had said when Mina had asked if Jon would let them.

They’d talked about colors…Mina thought purple would look nice…until she’d fallen asleep.

When she had woke up early the next morning, Mommy was still there sleeping next to her and Lyarra was snuggled up against Mommy on the other side. She had wondered why Lyarra hadn’t just gone to sleep with her dad and if Jon had felt sad to be alone that night.

“Great. Thank you,” Jon said to the lady behind the desk drawing Mina back to the present. “Let’s go see the room, girls,” he said taking the room keys.

Lyarra squealed and ran towards the elevator. Jon told her to slow down and jogged to catch up to her. Mommy thanked the doorman for all his advice, picked up her bag and held out her hand to Mina.

“I beg your pardon…Mrs. Snow?” the clerk behind the desk said. “I forgot to give your husband the complimentary biscuits.”

“Oh,” her mother said as her face grew pink, “of course…thank you.”

“Stark,” Mina said loudly to the clerk. “Her last name is Stark.”

“Mina,” Mommy hissed. Her face got redder. She was looking angry now.

“Well, it is. You’re not Mrs. Snow,” she answered back. She knew Mommy didn’t like talking back but she was angry, too. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Baby, let’s go see the room.”

Mommy put her hand on her shoulder and started guiding her away from the desk. Mina dug in her heels. She wanted something else explained…now.

“Go ahead, Jon,” she heard her mother call. He was holding the elevator for them and looking confused. “We’ll catch up shortly.”

She allowed her mother to lead her to a sitting area away from the entrance and other people. It was fancy. There was a tea service set up for guests. Mina looked at the paper bag in Mommy’s hand the lady had handed her.

“Why would they give us biscuits?”

“They’re just cookies. They call them biscuits here, remember?” Mina nodded and stared at her feet. “Mina…is there something you want to talk about?”

“Yes.”

It was all she could seem to get out as her chest got all achy and tight.

*Stupid. This is stupid. Who cares if the stupid lady got Mommy’s stupid name wrong?*

But, she did care.
Mina’s chin trembled. She didn’t want to cry here. She wished she’d thought of this two days ago when Mommy was snuggled up with her in the bed at Grams and David’s house. She wasn’t sure why she’d not thought of it then.

Moving was scary enough but a wedding...a wedding between her mother and Jon.

She’d been so excited by the idea at first. Mommy would wear a beautiful dress and look like a princess. Jon would wear a suit like one of those actors at an awards show. And Grams had said she’d come to America to see it and buy the girls fancy dresses to wear. Lyarra might not get very excited about that but Mina was. She pictured wearing a beautiful pale blue dress, all floaty and gauzy and sparkly with silver shoes. Maybe Mommy would French braid her hair and let her wear lip gloss.

But then, the more she thought about it, about what a marriage really meant, the more questions she had. And one thing especially was bothering her.

“You’ll never have the same last name as me,” she whispered.

Mommy gasped and looked around. “I…Mina…you mean because I’m not Sansa Hardyng?”

“Yes.” She bit her lip and said, “Why do I have Daddy’s last name? You don’t.”

Mommy looked frustrated and clenched her fists for a second and closed her eyes. “Because it was important to him and I… I agreed to it.” She took a deep breath and her eyes got glassy. “I used to think that someday your dad would marry me…but he never did.”

Mina felt rotten. Mommy was about to cry and it was all her fault.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Mommy!”

“It’s alright, baby,” she said, swiftly wiping at her eyes and giving her a bright smile, just like Mommy always did when she was sad and Mina thought she might cry.

She wasn’t fooled by that anymore. She knew she’d hurt her and it would take her time to get over it. She hated making Mommy sad even when she was angry.

“Mina…your father and I are never getting married. Even if I’d never met Jon, that’s not going to happen. I’m sorry if that makes you sad, baby.”

“I know…I kinda knew it,” she admitted as the first fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

She’d hoped…but she knew. Daddy had never bought Mommy a ring. Daddy didn’t make Mommy laugh and smile like Jon did, either. She loved Daddy…but he and Mommy weren’t ever going to get married.

Mommy pulled her into her lap and kissed the top of her head. “Can I ask you something? I’ll never be Sansa Hardyng. But, does it bother you that you won’t be Minisa Snow?”

“I…I’m not…” She didn’t know. She wasn’t sure what she felt about it. “Maybe a little bit…but Daddy...” she croaked.

Now, she was thinking of Daddy and how much it would hurt him if he ever found out about that part of her that was sad she couldn’t be a Snow, too. How did the day turn terrible so quickly?

“Your father loves you very much, baby. He’s very proud that you’re his daughter. I know he is.
Minisa Hardyng is your name and you should be proud of it, too. Jon will be your step-father when we get married, just like David is his. Jon loves David and they’re close…but he didn’t change his last name to Smith, did he?”

“Jon’s a grownup.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“But, he’s a Snow like Grams was. He’s not a Tar…um…”

“Targaryen.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, every family situation is different.” Mommy sighed and opened the paper bag. “You’re a smart little girl so I’ll tell you a secret. Sometimes there’s no easy answer and grownups don’t know everything. But we’ll make this work, baby…all four of us together. You’re Mina Hardyng and I’m Sansa Stark…and I suppose I’ll be Sansa Snow when I marry Jon. I don’t have to be, you know. I could just keep using my same last name.”

“You could?”

“Yes, I could. But I think I’d like to be Sansa Snow. But someday…if you get married…you can decide if you’d like to stay Minisa Hardyng or not.”

Mina nodded and watched as Mommy pulled out a little chocolate chip cookie from the bag. Those were her favorites. It smelled good and fresh. And the questions about Jon marrying Mommy didn’t seem so bothersome now.

“Mommy…can I have a biscuit?” she asked with a grin.

“Of course,” Mommy smiled.

Since Mina was no more than a toddler, Sansa had been hiding her tears in her daughter’s presence. Tears of sadness anyway. She never wanted to stress her precious girl or cause her needless worry. After all, her own mother had been much the same…break downs on the side of the road during road trips from Hell didn’t count.

As they rode up the elevator together, she fought the same battle.

Mina barreled through the door into the room when she realized what Lyarra was doing. She was jumping back and forth between the two beds with Ghost in her arms.

“Lyarra! For the last time…stop!” Jon fumed with his hand over the phone. He’d said he was going to check in with Rhae about the house.

Mina started to join Lyarra in her jumping until Sansa said for them to sit down and share the cookies. Both girls sat on the edge of the bed at once in silence, divvying up the remaining goodies.
Sansa waved at them all half-heartedly and went into the bathroom, indicating that she was going to put the toiletries away. Instead, she closed the door and turned on the vent, letting the tears fall at last.

It was natural for Mina to have worries and concerns about all the changes looming ahead. Sansa had a few of her own. But she’d been blindsided by the scene in the lobby all the same.

She’d felt such a rush of pleasure when the clerk called her Mrs. Snow. She’d never been married but she knew she wanted to be Jon’s wife with all her heart.

She’d been embarrassed and frustrated by Mina’s response.

And then, her daughter’s heartache over the last name…sometimes, Sansa thought she’d rather have every bone in her body broken than to see her child suffer emotional pain.

So, she hid in the bathroom to process the emotions of the past fifteen minutes while attempting to swallow her tears in isolation yet again.

*What is wrong with you, big crybaby? Stop crying. It never does any good.*

It never stopped the tears completely though. A knock at the door had her wiping her eyes again.

“Yes?”

“Hey,” she heard Jon say. “May I come in?”

She looked in the mirror, plastered on a smile and cracked open the door. “Sure. I’m just getting us fixed up in here.”

She started busying herself with arranging Jon’s deodorant and her make-up, steadfastly looking down at the counter and willing her breathing to return to normal, wishing her face wasn’t so splotchy.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind, kissing the back of her neck and whispering, “She’s been crying. I can tell. And you can’t fool me. You’ve been crying, too.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. They’re scarfing down cookies and looking at a pamphlet about the Eye.” A delighted shriek from the next room and thumping was heard. “Or they’re both jumping on the beds now that I’ve left the room,” he chuckled. “Sansa…talk to me, love.”

Sansa spun around and buried her face in his neck, so grateful to have him to cry on.

“Just hold me for a bit,” she said.

She was tired of crying alone and hiding her tears. But as Jon held her, she thought maybe that had changed for good now.

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The rest of their first day had been filled with activity as they’d expected but Sansa could not have
been happier. It helped traveling in a foreign city with someone who was already familiar with it. And Jon had been right. They couldn’t have managed half her original list in the three days they had allotted. She would find it more enjoyable with the girls if they weren’t constantly on the run anyway. She was still excited about what they would see.

That night at the hotel, Mina asked to sleep with her. Sansa could tell Lyarra wanted to join them like she had that night at Lyanna’s but instead she laid beside her father.

Sansa wasn’t certain what to do about this exactly. She loved Lyarra and wanted to mother her. Sansa ached for the little girl that had lost her own mother at such a young age. She wanted nothing so much as to pull Lyarra close and promise she’d be there for her and never leave her.

But she had to handle this delicately. It would be so easy to inadvertently breed hostility and resentment between the girls. That was the last thing either she or Jon wanted.

And while Lyarra might want Sansa to be her mother, she knew she was having trouble with the idea of sharing Jon. Sansa couldn’t blame her. He was the only parent she’d known. She’d had her grandmother and her Aunt Rhae but Jon was truly her rock, the center of her young life. As much as Lyarra tried to show how big she was, she was very much her daddy’s little girl and needed him, needed to be reassured that he was hers and he would never love her any less.

Mina and Jon were forming a close bond though. They loved each other but she wasn’t likely to run to Jon with her problems just yet as Lyarra was starting to do with Sansa.

Lyarra knew Mina had Harry, her actual father who was not only still alive but part of her life. So, when Mina had asked Jon to sit next to her on the double-decker bus, Lyarra had very pointedly sat between them. Jon had managed to finagle his way around it by getting up with an excuse and then sitting between them when he returned. But Sansa had seen the displeased look in Lyarra’s eye. It hadn’t lasted long but her lovely grey-blue eyes were looking decidedly green for a few minutes.

Little by little…we’ll make this work, Sansa swore to herself. They’ll just need time and loads of patience and understanding.

Mina fell asleep quickly that first night but she could hear Jon and Lyarra whispering together, discussing their view from the Eye and other things they’d seen. She could hear her sweet giggles when Jon would pretend he’d fallen asleep and snore like a bear.

Around midnight, he’d moved Lyarra allowing Sansa to climb into bed beside him at last. The little girls in the next bed were slumbering soundly when Jon’s hand slithered down her pajama pants and started teasing her clit.

“You are wicked,” she whispered.

“Uh-huh…and all yours,” he said, nipping at her earlobe.

Despite her shock at his boldness, she really couldn’t resist temptation. His cock was hard against her ass as she bucked into his hand, biting her pillow until he made her come while sucking on her neck and whispering naughty things.

She panted and stilled, making sure the girls were still asleep. She reached back, attempting to grasp his cock through his boxers and return the favor but he shook his head.

“Just you right now,” he murmured, nuzzling into her hair and telling her he loved her.

She yawned and let him hold her, happier than she’d ever been in her life.
We’re a family. We’re going to make this work.

Neither girl made mention of the change in bed partners the next morning.

Their second day was exciting with more activities and walking. The girls both loved the river cruise and seeing the palace, fascinated by the thoughts of a queen residing within just like in a fairy tale.

They were less enraptured by Westminster Abbey after the initial awe at its size had passed. But Jon kept them entertained while Sansa enjoyed it all.

The second night, both girls shared one bed while Jon slept next to Sansa. However, he wasn’t behaving wickedly. He wasn’t feigning his snores, either. Thankfully, it only took a few shoves before he rolled over and quieted down enough for Sansa to sleep.

Their final day of touring arrived and they started off at the zoo. It was lovely but all the walking compounded with the past few days left the girls with their energy waning quickly. By the time they reached London Bridge, they were both grouchy and tired.

Sansa thought maybe they should skip Covent Garden…but she really didn’t want to. Jon suggested a mid-afternoon treat. After indulging in gelato, everyone’s spirits seemed refreshed.

An hour later, they were wandering through the stalls and storefronts. Jon was holding her hand and the girls were chattering about different things they saw.

“Mommy, look!” Mina said excitedly.

There was an artist’s stall filled with little ceramic dogs and other animals. She pointed out one that resembled her stuffed friend Lady. She begged and gave her best puppy eyes.

“It’s so cute! Mommy, can I have it? Please, please, please!”

Sansa knew Harry would’ve bought it in an instant but she was not as easily swayed. And, she wasn’t keen to pay £45 for something breakable. Mina was careful with her things but still…she was eight.

Sansa suggested they walk along to the toy store and see what was there.

“I’ll buy it for her if you don’t mind,” Jon whispered in her ear. She looked back at her daughter who was dragging behind them and sulking.

“Jon…it’s like $60…for a piece of pottery, something that’ll collect dust.”

“I know but…she’s…”

“Acting spoiled.”

“She is not. She really wanted it and I had planned on indulging the girls in something special over here.”

“You already bought them jerseys and souvenirs in Manchester.”

“Well, I know but…”

“Let’s see what the toy shop holds.”

“It’ll be pricey there, too,” he grumbled and she laughed at him for sulking, too.
Ten minutes later, they stopped to watch a street performer. Lyarra was laughing heartily at his antics but Mina was uninterested. Sansa pulled out her phone to check her messages. Jon went to buy a couple of bottles of water for the girls. She could hear Lyarra chuckling as she read a message from Margaery.

MARGAERY: I know you’re on vacation and I’m terrible to bug you but I’m dying to let you know. I’m pregnant! Sorry, I couldn’t wait till you were back to say it. I miss you and I love you! Your brother is being ridiculous already and bought a tiny catcher’s mitt. It’s precious. I asked what if it’s a girl? He said she’d play softball. Help! Okay…enough. As you were!

She was thrilled for her sister-in-law and brother. They’d been talking about it for a while and had only started trying in March.

She quickly typed out a congratulatory text…and then they’d proceeded to start texting back and forth.

She could hear Lyarra laughing next to her at the mime. Jon reappeared holding three waters a few minutes later.

“Where’s Mina?” he asked.

Sansa looked around. Lyarra stood right where she’d been. But Mina was no longer there.Sansa dropped her phone and couldn’t breathe.

This is stupid, Mina thought.

She knew she’d messed up big time. She should never have wandered away. She’d only wanted to see the little dog figurine again. The stall wasn’t that far away. Mommy was busy on her phone and she didn’t care about the silly mime. She thought she’d have time to slip away and come back. But Covent Garden was huge and she got mixed up.

I need to go back to them…now.

Her heart started pounding. She felt sick with worry and ashamed. Nothing looked familiar. There were all sorts of people around, some were British but some were from elsewhere and speaking different languages. She didn’t know anyone here; only Mommy, Jon and Lyarra.

Where am I?

She could hear a crowd laughing and thought maybe that was the mime…but this crowd was watching an actress and an actor. They were doing some sort of comedy routine but it didn’t seem funny to Mina.

She tried to remember the things Mommy had said about getting lost. And a police officer had come to school one day towards the end of the year and told their class a bunch of stuff about what to do in different emergencies.

Find a police officer…or a security guard…or a mom with kids.
But there weren’t any police officers around from what she could tell. And the only mom she saw was yelling at her son and angrily walking the other way.

*Stay in one place.*

Someone had said that…Mommy or the police officer.

But she was in the way. People were passing by her and some were bumping into her. They’d say excuse me but keep walking.

She started to cry. She was lost and didn’t know if or when she’d ever be found again.

“Are you alright, love?” an older woman asked. She looked closer to Grandma or Grams’ age.

She shook her head.

“Are you lost? Can’t find your mum?”

“No. I mean…yes, I’m lost.”

“Oh, dear. I’ll bet your mum is worried. What’s your name?”

“It’s…”

“MINA!”

Her head whipped around as she heard Jon’s voice. He was shouting. It was Jon. It had to be Jon. She could see him racing along the street towards her but he hadn’t seen her yet. He was frantically searching for her.

“Jon!” she shouted back and ran towards him. “Jon, I’m here!” She was already crying.

Never in her life had she felt such joy and relief as when he reached her and lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist and nearly strangled him winding her arms tightly around his neck. All she could think was she was safe.

“Thank God,” he breathed over and over. “Oh, thank God...thank God.”

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I’m sorry. I wanted to see the dog figure again. I’m sorry I wandered away!”

“It’s doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter…” he said rapidly, pulling back to touch her face. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “You found me.”

“I found you, sweetheart,” he said. “I never would’ve stopped looking.”

Jon looked like he might cry. It made her cry harder. She held him tighter.

“I’m sorry, Jon.”

He kissed her forehead and said, “It’s okay. You’re okay. We’re...let’s take you to your mother.”
Sansa was angry and rightfully so when he returned with Mina but her relief outweighed the anger a thousand times over.

He’d sent her and Lyarra to the security office to alert them that Mina was missing. He knew he could move faster without them trailing him.

He watched Sansa clutching her daughter to her chest as Lyarra held his hand and cried. She’d been frightened by Mina going missing and frightened by the panic and high-pitched emotions she’d seen them both display in that first minute before Jon regained his senses enough to make a plan.

They were all overwrought by the time they reached the hotel and he looked forward to returning to his mother’s house where it was quieter, far quieter than London with far less opportunities for girls to wander off.

Being children, the girls bounced back from their fears once they were dressed in their pajamas and settled in front of a cartoon before bed.

But, the parents did not forget so quickly. Again, Sansa wept in his arms in the bathroom, out of sight of the girls.

Over and over, he assured her that Mina was safe and assuaged the guilt that was assaulting her for texting Margaery and not paying the strictest attention.

“IT could happen to anyone,” he said. “None of us are perfect. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar. Please, love…she’s safe.”

When she’d cried herself dry, he made her drink some water and then drew her a hot bath. He told her to try and relax while he tucked the girls in.

He went back out and found Lyarra already asleep. He adjusted the blankets around them and sat on the edge of the bed. Mina looked up at him with her big blue eyes that reminded him so much of her mother. She sat up and reached for him. He pulled her tightly to his chest for a hug.

“I love you, Mina,” he said.

“I love you, too.” She laid back down and he handed her Lady. Before he could get up, she asked, “Jon…will you lay with us?”

“I…”

The bed was only a double. They’d be squished. He had no idea how Sansa had stood it the other night at his mom’s when she’d slept with them both.

“Please.”

“Of course,” he said. “For a little while.”

She scooted over towards the center so he could climb out easily later. She settled down and touched his hand. He lightly caressed her auburn hair and wished her sweet dreams.

“Jon?”
“Yes?”

“I’m glad you’re going to marry my mom someday.”

“I’m glad you’re glad,” he said, his heart full and aching simultaneously.

“I’m glad you’ll be my step-dad someday.”

“Me too, sweetheart,” he said watching her lids flutter closed at last. *Oh, me too.*

Chapter End Notes

There's an artist named Lesley Martin that sells ceramic figures similar to what I described in Covent Garden.

I'm sure some of you recall getting lost as a child in a public place and the terror that invoked. I still remember that feeling from two separate occasions of my childhood and it was awful. Once I stepped onto an elevator as the doors were closing when I was too far ahead of my parents and once I got lost at the mall briefly. Having experienced it on the other end once as a parent, I can only say that is even more terrifying.
Jon, Sansa and the girls are back from England and Mina is on vacation with Harry. Jon runs into two different dads on a Saturday afternoon.

As the chapter title suggests, this one has some dad povs and relates more to fatherhood.

Quick reminder—there is no Aegon in this story. Rhae is Elia's only child.

“Mina!” she gasped. The whole bed was shaking with her thrashing. “No…Mina! JON!”

“Hmm-muh? Sansa?”

He startled and instinctively fumbled for his glasses. He felt her hand grasping at his shoulder. He had no idea what time it was or even what country he was in. The past 72 hours had seemed like a blur.

He sat up and shoved his glasses on as the wheels started to turn. He flicked on the light. She was kneeling on top of the covers, trembling as her hands covered her face.

“I’m sorry…I’m sorry,” she said as she came back to herself.

“A nightmare?” he asked. She whimpered and he pulled her to him. It was not the first since their experience at Covent Garden. “S’alright, love,” he said holding her tight. “They’re just dreams.”

“I dreamed she drowned,” she whispered in a strangled tone. “She was running towards the ocean and Harry was laughing and telling me she was fine but she wouldn’t stop. She didn’t listen,” she cried. “The waves were enormous, like something from a movie. One second she was there on the edge and the next…she was gone.” Her voice broke into a sob.

“Sansa…” he sighed, kissing the top of her head as he held her. “It’s just a dream. Harry and Anya will keep her safe.”

“I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Shhh…come on, love. Lie down next to me again.”

They’d returned from England three days ago and yesterday morning Mina had left with Harry and his mother for the Gulf Coast.

Before their trip, Sansa had struggled with letting Mina go for a week with Harry. Now, she was
really struggling.

“What if he gets drunk? What if he’s too preoccupied ogling girls in bikinis when they’re at the beach or pool? What if they go to the boardwalk or somewhere and she wanders away like she did with us?”

Her worries were not completely without basis but she’d agreed to let them take Mina and fretting endlessly over it wasn’t doing her any good.

She nestled into his arms and he was glad she’d agreed to spend the night tonight. They still worried over what the girls might think each time they took another step towards living together. But, having spent the last two weeks sharing a bed overseas, he supposed it wouldn’t hurt to test it out at home. Lyarra was the only one here anyway. They’d still been up watching TV together when Jon had tucked her in. He hoped Sansa’s presence in the morning wouldn’t cause her any concern.

Sansa hadn’t wanted to make love though which was fine. He’d understood she wasn’t in the right frame of mind or mood for that tonight. And they were all still a bit jet-lagged.

He hoped Mina was doing okay. He wouldn’t say it to Sansa but he still had his own reservations about Harry keeping her for a week. No…taking her away for a week. It's worse than if she were just staying with him here in town. His eyes had been bloodshot when he’d come to get her early yesterday morning. They could be bloodshot because it was early and he’d had a late night. Jon hoped it was just that.

They nodded off slowly as Sansa’s heartbeat returned to normal. He stroked her hair and murmured sweet nothings in her ear until her breathing became deep and steady.

Sooner than he would’ve believed, he was waking up to the sound of birds chirping bright and early on the summer morning and a phone ringing.

He bolted upright with Mina’s name on his lips. But it wasn’t her calling.

“Mum,” he said in a gravelly morning voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Why is that always the first thing you ask when I call? Nothing’s wrong. Wait…shit. It’s earlier than I thought there.”

“Swear jar, Grams,” he said automatically. “It’s always earlier than you think when you call. Five hours earlier.”

“Sorry,” she sighed. “I just miss all of you.”

“We miss you, too.”

His mother had had a difficult time with them leaving. Their last four days in Manchester had been spent primarily at home with her and David. It was nice after all the sightseeing to just enjoy simple things like board games, family meals and walks to the nearby park. She’d grown quite weepy when it was time for them to go.

“Mina get off alright for her holiday with her father?”

“She did. They left early yesterday.”

He glanced at Sansa and saw she was awake. Not surprising considering the rustling and racket he’d made to answer the phone.
“How is Sansa?” his mother asked.

“Um…she could be better,” he answered as he reached to caress her cheek. She smiled up at him and wrapped her hand in his.

“Is she…well, this is indelicate, I suppose, but is she there with you?”

“She is,” he chuckled.

“May I speak with her…if she’s awake?”

“Of course.”

He handed the phone over and kissed Sansa’s hand before sliding out of the bed to check on Lyarra. She was blissfully still asleep. He figured she was finally getting readjusted to the time zone. In summer, it was hard to get her out of bed before 8 most of the time but she’d been up at 5 yesterday…and been a complete grouch. Lyarra liked to sleep in and was grumpy most mornings unless there was football to watch. Unfortunately, there wasn’t any to watch this early at this time of year.

He started a pot of coffee in the kitchen, not really planning to go back to sleep now that he was up. Sansa joined him a few minutes later. She was still sleepy and her hair was adorably tousled as she padded into the kitchen. She yawned and stretched in her soft blue tee and pajama bottoms and a wave of affection overcame him. Waking up with Sansa in his bed and coming to share coffee with him was something he would have no trouble getting used to.

He kissed the nape of her neck as she got two mugs down from the cabinet.

“Everything alright? Mum worried I’m taking advantage of you?”

She pivoted to face him as he braced his arms on the counter on either side of her. He lost his train of thought as he stared into her eyes.

“She’s good. She called because she knew what I must be feeling and was worried about me.” She cupped his face and grinned. “She knew I was missing my baby ‘cause she’s missing hers.”

“Oh, God,” he laughed and shook his head.

“It was sweet. I’m so glad we went with you, Jon. I’m really glad I met her and David both. I can’t wait to see them again when we…you know.” She trailed off and her cheeks grew pink. She wanted to get married but she had a funny reluctance to say it out loud sometimes, almost like she was superstitious.

“Get married?” he prompted. She nodded. He wanted more than that. “Are you going to marry me, Sansa Stark?”

“Yes,” she grinned wider as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Yes what?” She rolled her eyes but said it. “I’m going to marry you, Jon Snow.”

“Oh, good. I fear there’s no other woman I’d want to make an honest man of me.”

She laughed and then hummed into his mouth when he kissed her. He deepened the kiss, hooking a couple of fingers into the waistband of her pants as he stroked her sides with his thumbs. She leaned into him, curving her soft, warm body so perfectly against his own. He started to get hard at the
thoughts of having her. She moaned as he nibbled his way along her jaw.

*Coffee can wait.*

He was just about to suggest as much when Lyarra shuffled in with her usual grumpy morning face and Ghost in her arms.

“What’s for breakfast?” she grumbled. She didn’t seem to take Sansa’s presence as unusual which was a good sign at least.

Jon silently counted to ten to get his breathing under control as he willed his semi away. He kept Sansa in front of him while doing so and Lyarra stalked over to the fridge.

“Good morning to you, too,” he said at last, ruffling her curls and earning a deathly glare. Sansa opened the cupboard and did a quick assessment. “How about crêpes?” she asked.

“Crêpes?! Really?!” Lyarra asked excitedly, suddenly wide awake. “With strawberries?”

“Crêpes…really?” he groaned. “Between Mum’s heavy breakfasts and you, I’m going to gain twenty pounds this summer. And I can’t make crêpes worth a…anything.”

“Yes, to strawberries,” Sansa said to Lyarra. “Who says I’m letting you gain twenty pounds? And who says you’re making them?” Sansa asked him with a smirk. “Wanna help me?” she asked Lyarra who nodded enthusiastically. “Great. It’s Saturday. A good day to have a big lazy breakfast…in bed maybe.”

Lyarra liked that idea even better. “In Dad’s bed?”

“Only if it’s okay with your dad,” Sansa added.

“There’ll be powdered sugar and crumbs in my sheets,” he grumbled. “And, lazy breakfasts happen closer to 9 or 10. Not at 6:20,” he pointed out.

“Oh, come on, Jon,” Sansa teased, wrapping her arms around his waist and subtly nipping his ear. “Crêpes, family time and breakfast in bed on a lazy Saturday morning. These are all good things, right? No need to be so grouchy.”

“Yeah. Come on, Dad,” Lyarra grinned. “Geez…don’t be such a grump.”

“Daddy, watch me!” Mina shouted from the edge of the pool.

“I’m watching, princess,” Harry answered.

9AM Saturday morning and he was already watching Mina perform her hundredth spinning jump into the water. Not his usual weekend routine by a long shot. But, as she popped back up to the surface with a huge grin on her face, he smiled and waved once more before glancing back down at his phone with a scowl. He was on vacation but his regional manager didn’t seem to think that was a good enough reason not to pepper him with texts regarding his sales team and customers.
“Jesus Fucking Christ,” he muttered as he answered the same questioned he’d answered yesterday. He shut off his phone after sending his response and contemplated tossing it into the pool.

*No, Sansa would freak if she couldn’t reach you.*

He knew she had her worries about this trip. He knew he was to blame for her having an inordinate amount of worries when it came to him caring for their daughter. But he was trying. He wanted to earn her trust if he could. More than that, he wanted to be there for Mina.

The regional manager and one of the bigwigs from corporate had come down to talk to him after he’d taken a short leave of absence in April to start therapy and AA.

“We’re just worried about you, Harry. Wanna make sure our top sales guy doesn’t have too much on his plate.”

*If you’re so worried about me, why the hell can’t I take a vacation with my kid without getting texted about my team’s sales last quarter or the Royce account?*

His job was stressful. Sales could be cutthroat especially when the job was 80% commission based. It was partly what had led to him drinking but he couldn’t blame it for everything. He’d enjoyed drinking in college too when he was still a carefree kid…or still pretending to be one while Sansa sat at home with their baby. He wasn’t sure when the lines between a drink or two after work and a habit…an addiction had become blurred.

He’d hid it fairly well for a long time. His mother had figured him out but went on making excuses for him as long as she could. He loved her…and resented her for it. She’d never pushed him to face what a shit he’d turned into.

*But you can’t blame her for being a shit. That’s on you, pal.*

He thought of Ned Stark, a man he respected and knew he’d never live up to as being worthy of his daughter. He wished he’d had a father like that in this life.

*That’s another excuse, Harry,* he could practically hear his therapist saying. *Plenty of men grow up without father figures in their lives and don’t become alcoholics or skirt-chasers that shirk their family responsibilities.*

*Yeah…*men like Coach Jon/Mr. Perfect Snow.*

For the sake of his admittedly fragile ego, Harry hoped neither Sansa nor Jon would ever learn how much time Harry had spent talking about *him* in therapy.

Last month before they’d left for England, the three of them had had dinner together one night to talk as grown-ups about the upcoming changes without Mina or Jon’s daughter there. It had gone well but also had been one of the most difficult discussions of his life.

Afterwards, Harry had slipped and drank when he got home. He’d called his sponsor the next morning though and been on the wagon since then. And Jon, of all people, had called him that day and said he hoped he was okay and he was sorry if he was hurting over what they’d discussed. They’d talked more since then. Sometimes, Harry really wanted to hate him. Sometimes, he liked him and wanted his friendship. But, having got to know Jon better, he could see why Sansa loved him.

Sansa and Mina were going to move in with him. He was going to marry Sansa. He’d get to call the most beautiful woman Harry had ever known his wife and call his little girl his step-daughter. He’d
be the paterfamilias, the male head of household. That would be Jon for them...never Harry.

The more rational part of him was happy for Sansa. She deserved a good guy that would treat her right. He was happy that Mina seemed good with it. But that did not mean it had been easy to accept.

He’d thought of them often over the past two weeks while they were all in England together. When he’d called to arrange picking up Mina yesterday morning, Sansa had said they were going to start moving into Jon’s house soon. Next week, Harry would be back at work kissing ass to make bank and Sansa and Mina would start moving on towards their new life with Jon and Lyarra.

He envied Jon having two months off every year and a regular salary. Educators didn’t make a ton but at least his pay wasn’t linked to the whims of fickle customers.

Honestly, he envied Jon quite a bit, period. But, his therapist had said that while it was healthy to acknowledge the envy, it wasn’t healthy to allow it to fester or dwell on it endlessly.

You’re a work in progress, Hardyng, he mused as he sipped his bottled water and called Mina over for more sunscreen. She was fair skinned like her mother with red hair and a tendency to burn and freckle. The Sunshine State would not be kind to her as Sansa had repeatedly reminded him.

“When’s Grandma coming out?” Mina asked as he rubbed the lotion on her shoulders and dotted her nose. She scowled adorably when he got her face.

When she rolls out of bed and has enough coffee in her. Not everyone’s an early bird like you, baby. His mother had always been a night owl.

“Um…she’s probably making us snacks for later.”

He forced her to drink some water. “Keep her hydrated,” Sansa had said along with three dozen other things. He made her sit in the shade for five minutes for the sunscreen to be absorbed and listened to her grouse the whole time with a smile.

As soon as she was free from her imposed pool break, Mina hurried back over for another jump and shouted at him to watch. Harry watched and then applauded.

He thought of his trip to Vegas last year with some of the single guys from the office. That had been a completely different scenario than this. No one to take care of but himself. He’d come home from a week of too much drinking and five grand poorer with nothing for memories but hangovers and an extremely messy fling with a married pediatrician who was there for a conference. He’d been depressed as hell for a month afterwards but continuing to drink and picking up girls at bars had chased the blues away for a time.

So, chasing Mina down with sunscreen, listening to his mom wax on about which 5x7 print of seagulls she thought would look best in her guest bath and drinking iced tea every night with dinner wasn’t anything like his previous notions of vacation. He thought he could adapt to this though. In fact, he thought he might even be coming to like it.

“What a cute little girl you have,” a voice said from two chairs over. He turned and found himself looking into a pair of lovely dark brown eyes.

“Thanks,” he said.

He’d already spotted the two of them. He wasn’t blind after all. Probably all of twenty-two, both girls were pretty enough. The brunette was dozing, probably still sleeping off a hangover as she worked on her tan. But the blonde had spoken. His eyes made another brief scan of red lips, a
voluptuous figure in a green bikini and an inviting smile before he turned back to watch Mina.

“You and your wife must be very proud,” Green Bikini prompted.

“Uh…yeah. It’s just me. My mom’s here with us but I’m not married.”

“Oh!” She moved over to the lounger next to him, offering her hand. “I’m Saffron.”

“Saffron? Like the spice?” he chuckled. “Sorry…it’s a nice name. I’m Harry,” he supplied, shaking her hand.

“Well, I am on the spicy side, I’ve been told,” she smirked. She tossed back her hair and gave a throaty laugh. “You here all week?” He nodded. “It’s hot already today, huh?” He grunted an affirmation as she rolled over on her stomach. She had a nice, firm, bounce-a-quarter-off-me ass. She unhooked the back of her bikini top. “Hey…would you mind getting my back?” She held up a bottle of sunscreen. “It’s hard for me to do myself and my friend’s napping.”

Okay then…sure. I could get your back.

“Daddy! Watch!” Mina shouted, preparing for her next jump. You’ve got to watch her, Harry. She’s a good swimmer but she’s only eight, he could hear Sansa saying.

“I’m sorry…” he said with only the slightest reluctance, “…but I really need to keep an eye on my daughter right now.”

Saturday afternoon at Home Depot was all kinds of crazy. It was packed with weekend home improvement warriors. Lyarra was bored and coming down off her crêpe high. He thought they might head to the sandwich shop up the sidewalk to take care of that but first he was on a mission.

Jon wanted to fix up the bathroom the girls would be sharing with some more shelves. They were just kids and for now the shelves wouldn’t be that vital but he figured as they got older they’d appreciate the extra space for their assorted stuff…whatever stuff it was that teenage girls might want.

Look at you planning ahead for the teen years and not even having a heart attack over it…Jesus Christ.

Sansa had gone to look at paint colors with Lyarra as Jon inspected the options.

“Who knew there were this many different kinds of shelves available? But I don’t like any of them,” he muttered to himself. “I could build shelves…but what the hell do I know about building shelves?”

“Jon?”

He turned to find Ned Stark standing behind him with a cart filled with assorted things.

“Hey, Ned,” he said, shaking his hand. “Catelyn with you?”

“No. She sent me to get her some potting soil.” Jon spied a bag at the bottom of the cart. Ned grinned
sheepishly. “Well, she really should know better than to send me here alone after all these years,” he shrugged.

“Right,” Jon laughed. “Sansa and Lyarra are over at the paint section. I was thinking about redoing the bathroom…for the girls. Thought I could do it before they start moving in next week.”

“Is that right?” Ned asked. He smiled and Jon hoped he’d not just screwed up. Sansa hadn’t said if she’d discussed when they’d be moving in with her parents yet. “Well, if you needed any help, I’m retired, you know. I know a thing or two about remodeling as well.”

Sansa had mentioned her father’s love of keeping busy. Perhaps this would be a good opportunity to build a closer relationship with him. Not that Jon felt the Starks were withholding their approval of him or anything but it certainly wouldn’t hurt to get to know his future father-in-law better.

“That’d be really appreciated…if you don’t mind. I’m not a carpenter or anything close to it. I was wondering if I should buy one of these kits or try and build something myself.”

So, they stood there discussing shelving for several minutes and Ned talked him through what might work best for the space allowed before they wandered over to the paint aisle together to find Sansa and Lyarra.

“Find anything you like?” he asked after Sansa had hugged her father and Ned had got a high five from Lyarra.

Lyarra was getting more comfortable with the Starks little by little. She was already quite at ease with Margaery and Robb having known them the longest. She seemed to like them all. It made Jon happy to think of his daughter having more family in her life. Rhae was a wonderful aunt and Theon made a decent ‘uncle’ but more family here would be nice.

Cat was really great with her. Jon liked to think of her having a grandmotherly figure in her life on this side of the Atlantic. And Ned was a terrific grandfather. Val’s father had been sickly and died not a year after his daughter. His own father…he’d been no more of a grandfather to Lyarra than he had been a father to Jon. He was grateful for David but David was thousands of miles away.

“Yes,” Sansa said with a grin as she held out the paint sample she’d been holding. “I like this shade of yellow.”

“Pastel Lemon Drop,” he read. He knew she liked yellow. He’d said they could repaint the kitchen along with the guest bedroom that would be Mina’s. “It’s…nice.”

She bit her lip, misreading his hesitation. “You don’t like it.”

“Sansa, I think it’s great. It’s warm and looks happy…like a kitchen should feel. I trust your eye for decorating much more than my own. Think we can find some new curtains to compliment it? The grey ones I’ve got are pretty drab.”

“Yes, they are,” Sansa shuddered and he laughed. “Actually, I think I’ll try and find some fabric I like and make some.”

“You can make curtains?” Lyarra asked.

“She can make anything,” her father proudly noted. “You should see the sweater she made me one Christmas. Comfiest thing I’ve ever owned.”

“What about Mina’s room?” Jon asked.
“Well, there’s lots of lovely shades of purple but I think she’d rather be here to pick.”

“Okay, love.”

“Can I paint my room too, Dad?” Lyarra asked.

“Um…sure,” he said cautiously, knowing his daughter’s love of vibrant colors.

“Great. I like this yellowish gold color,” she said, holding out her own sample.

“Golden Rod? It’s, uh…very…” Mustard-looking.

“It’ll go well with my United posters, don’t you think?”

“Oh…yeah. That would work great, baby,” he conceded as Sansa laughed. Yeah, yeah…she swayed me with United.

After checking out and putting their stuff in the Pilot and bidding Ned adieu, they headed up to the sandwich shop for a late lunch. Jon held Sansa’s hand as they walked along the sidewalk letting Lyarra lead the way. She was about twenty feet ahead as she opened the door to the shop and froze. A woman with greying black hair was coming out and started speaking to her. Jon dropped Sansa’s hand and jogged to catch up to his daughter. The stranger seemed very eager to talk to her. Lyarra looked back at him uncertainly. Whoever it was, Lyarra didn’t know them and she was uncomfortable.

“You look so much like your father, darling…except your eyes. You have your mother’s eyes.”

Jon recognized her at once when he got closer. He’d not seen her in five years at least but he saw a younger version of her often enough. Rhae hadn’t mentioned her being in town though.

“Elia,” he said, the same embarrassed discomfort washing over him like it always did in her presence. He’d been fourteen when they’d finally met and he always expected to see censure in her eyes when she looked at him. He’d never seen it once.

The older woman turned and smiled warmly. “Hello, Jon. How are you? I can’t get over how much she’s grown. Rhae’s been showing us pictures or I never would’ve recognized her.” She noticed Sansa by his side and smiled at her.

He started to open his mouth to make the introduction when he saw a man coming towards them from within the sandwich shop, a man he didn’t particularly want to see…his father.

“I’m sorry, Jon. I meant to call you,” Rhae said over the noise at the restaurant where she’d met him, Sansa, Lyarra and Theon for wings that night.

They were alone at the table as Theon had wanted to show off his skeeball skills to Sansa. Lyarra was already well aware of them and would be hitting Uncle Theon up for coins so she could play, too.

“You don’t have to be sorry. I just never expected to run into them like that,” her little brother said.
moodily. He sipped at his Heineken and started peeling the label off the bottle.

“I didn’t imagine you’d run into them. Look…Dad’s been asking about you and Lyarra a good deal lately. I think it was part of why they decided to come visit.”

“Why?” Jon asked genuinely perplexed. “He never cared about me as a kid.”

Rhae hung her head. Jon was only speaking the truth but it still hurt her. He’d been a father to her but always so distant to Jon and Lyanna. She knew part of it was his desire to prove to his wife that he was committed to her and his guilt over cheating. But that hadn’t been Jon’s fault at all. He was just a kid and Rhae knew her mother was the last woman to hold a grudge against her husband’s child for his infidelity.

“I don’t know. He’s getting older and I guess he’s just thinking about things he’s missed out on. You’re the only son he’ll ever have.” Jon scoffed and she knew she’d twisted the knife unintentionally again. “I’m sorry. And I’m not exactly in a rush to get married so I think he’s worrying about never having any grandkids.”

“He has a grandchild,” Jon said with a clenched jaw. “He’s had one for eight years. He never gave a shit about me or her before. And you’ve got plenty of time to get married and have kids if you want, Rhae.”

“Thanks,” she smiled, sipping her own bottle. “I think he’s worried about his name dying out possibly.”

“Well, isn’t that just too bad?” Jon said without a drop of pity. “I’m not a Targaryen and I never will be. He made his choice years ago. I’m a Snow and I’ll be Jon Snow till I die.”

“I know, Jon. I understand why you’re bitter and…”

“Why the fuck does he want to have dinner with us anyway?” he asked angrily now, taking a swig of his beer before setting it back down with a thunk. That could’ve been more Mom than Dad, she thought sadly. Elia would want to try and build a bridge even if a wildfire was raging beneath it.

“He’s…”

“Sansa said yes of course before I could do anything,” he said next. His expression was a mixture of vexation and amusement. Anything Sansa did never seemed to truly upset him.

“It’ll be alright, Jon. It’s just dinner. I’m coming, too. I’ll help deflect when it gets too awkward, okay?”

“You’ll be busy then because the entire goddamn meal’s gonna be awkward,” he grunted with that adorable scowl on his face. She patted his face affectionately. She knew it pissed him off when she did it but he was her little brother even if she’d not found him till she was eighteen. She loved him.

Rhae pointed with her bottle next to where Theon was jumping up and down like an idiot as Lyarra hit the high score on her game. Theon acted like she’d won the lottery and Sansa was laughing and clapping for her. Jon smiled then and was staring at his daughter and the woman he loved.

And, Theon looked at Rhae…and winked at her. Rhae smirked and returned her attention to her bottle. She’d have to watch that. He was a bit younger and a bit of a rake…and Jon’s friend. She was more than a little annoyed that his stupid wink could make her grin so widely. She took another drink
“I want Sansa to tuck me in,” Lyarra had said and it warmed her heart to no end.

Sansa sat on the edge of the bed as Lyarra snuggled down with Ghost and fought the yawns that were winning this battle. Jon lingered in the doorway watching them both.

“Good night, sweetie,” Sansa said before kissing her on the forehead.

“Will you be here in the morning?” Lyarra asked sleepily.

“Yes…is that alright?”

Lyarra nodded with a smile before her eyes drifted shut.

She’d turned to smile at Jon but he was gone. She rose and quietly closed the door. She found him in the bedroom taking off his shoes and belt.

“Hey,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him from behind. “You okay? You were kind of quiet most of the time we were out.”

“Yeah. Sorry,” he said. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek before he went into the bathroom.

“Did you have a good talk with Rhæ?” she asked when he came back out a few minutes later.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Jon…I know this is about your father. Won’t you talk to me?”

He took off his jeans and sat down on the bed, putting his head in his hands. “I don’t particularly like talking about him.”

She knelt before him and took his hand. “I can understand that. And I’m sorry if you’re pissed that I agreed to dinner instead of letting you answer them. It really wasn’t my place under the circumstances.”

“I’m not pissed…not at you anyway. You were just being polite. I had no fucking clue what to say when he blindsided me with the invitation.”

“But you don’t want to go, do you?”

“No. I don’t want to go.”

Sansa had already changed into her pajamas. She climbed into bed. “Come here,” she said with her arms opened wide.

He crawled up next to her, allowing her to hold him. He nestled into her chest and hummed contentedly as she played with his hair. He haphazardly pulled the sheets up over them before he cupped her breast through her top and started teasing her nipple.
“Jon…we can make love but I’d like to talk about this for a few minutes.” He groaned but she knew he’d talk to her. She thought maybe he needed to talk whether he wanted to or not. “I know he wasn’t exactly there for you as a child.”

“There for me as a child? Oh, he was there some,” he said sarcastically. “He brought me a present for my fifth birthday. Just him coming was the present as far as I was concerned. I begged him to stay for cake. I was five but it didn’t take long to figure out that he was eager to leave the entire time he was there. I did everything I could think of to make him want to stay. I cried when he left and then Mum cried. My next four birthdays went unacknowledged by him.”

He sighed heavily, still absently caressing her breast, and Sansa thought her heart might break for him.

“My whole world was football as a kid. He attended a total of two matches, one when I was eight and one when I was in high school. We lost the city championship that game. I hated losing but I hated losing that game most of all because he had come to watch me play and I’d lost.”

“That must’ve been…”

“I was failing English in 8th grade. I never liked Miss Florent and I got lazy in her class. I don’t know how he found out but he called me to tell me how disappointed he was. I was angry…but even more ashamed. I’d let him down but did he even have a right to feel let down or rebuke me for my grades? It’s not like he was there helping me with my homework at night or encouraging me when I worked on my term paper. He didn’t call back to congratulate me when I brought home an A at the end of the year either.”

“Honey…” she gulped, swallowing her tears. It was like a torrent had been unleashed, like all these hurtful memories he’d bottled up had to come out now.

“He bought me a car when I turned sixteen. I’m not sure why he thought he needed to do that but hey, free wheels for me. He never taught me how to drive it though. That was Mum. Everything was Mum. He was just a check and a shadow figure in the background. I was just a mistake he’d made…one he couldn’t undo.”

“Jon…” she cried. “Don’t say that.”

“I never…never…want Lyarra to feel like that,” he said vehemently.

“I know, baby…”

“Oh, he missed my high school graduation but had Rhae hand me an envelope stuffed full of cash. So, see? He was there some…his money was anyway,” he finished with such bitterness.

She wiped her eyes, drew a deep breath and asked, “So why the sudden interest and the invitation to dinner?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. Maybe he was as caught off guard running into us as I was running into him. I think it popped out of his mouth without a thought.” He huffed and returned his attention to her breast for a minute before continuing. “Rhae says he’s been asking about me and Lyarra. She thinks he’s regretting the distance between us now that he’s getting older.”

“What do you think?”

“I think I don’t give a fuck about him or his regrets anymore.”
She wasn’t surprised at the venom in his voice. She couldn’t really blame him based on what he’d told her.

She continued carding her hands through his curls, trying to picture what it must’ve been like having such an indifferent father.

Her father was the total opposite of that. Ned Stark was a loving father, always there for his kids whether he was cheering them on at home work, sports events or dance recitals. He always had an ear available when they needed to talk…or a shoulder available to cry on. Even when he’d been displeased with his children, none of them had ever doubted his love.

Harry was Harry. He was not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. He was too self-centered for a man his age and a complete jerk sometimes. He’d hurt her and Mina with his carelessness in the past. He was blind to how sexist he could be at times and he was struggling with a very real addiction problem. But he did love Mina and he tried to be a good daddy to her. The checks had not always been on time when Mina was smaller. He’d let Sansa down more times than she cared to count when it came to being there for either of them. He could’ve tried harder sooner but he was trying now. And she never doubted that he loved their daughter.

Jon had grown so quiet she almost thought he might’ve fallen asleep until he said, “He’s not going to hurt my little girl.”

Sansa blinked and sat up. He had growled those words but there were tears in his eyes when he glanced up at her. The rest of his face was set in a hard mask like he was struggling not to break down.

“I wanted him in my life. I wanted to have a dad around…even a part time dad. I would’ve been okay with sharing him. But he didn’t ever try. Do you think I enjoyed never having a father figure in my life as a kid? Don’t you think it hurt when all the other guys on the team had their dads there when we’d play in a big tournament and I knew mine couldn’t care less?”

“I know, Jon. I’m sorry,” she said. She stroked his face as his tears finally fell.

“He’s not hurting Lyarra. He’s a non-entity in her life right now and he can stay that way. He doesn’t get to hurt my little girl by acting like grandpa all of a sudden and dropping back out again when he loses interest,” he swore with a frightful rage.

“No, he doesn’t,” she agreed, her maternal instincts stirred. She wouldn’t see Lyarra hurt either. “We’ll protect her. And, it’s just dinner. Mina will be back then and we won’t make a big deal of it to either of them. He had his chance to be a father to you and blew it. How much you want to allow him in your life and your daughter’s at this point is entirely up to you.”

He shuddered in her arms and she held him tighter. “I don’t want to talk about him anymore tonight,” he mumbled.

She tipped his chin up and kissed him. “Okay,” she promised.

Sunday afternoon found the three of them back at Sansa’s townhouse and the community pool there.
She’d invited Robb and Margaery over to swim and for dinner. Jon knew she was missing Mina but they’d spoken to her every day and she appeared to be having a great time. In fact, they were all missing Mina and Lyarra was more than a little jealous of her swimming every day and going paddle-boarding with her father while at the beach. He was pleased when Sansa suggested they come over to swim today. Lyarra had been ecstatic.

Jon climbed out of the pool to dry off. He’d said he’d go start on dinner and let Sansa, Robb and Lyarra enjoy a little more pool time. Margaery was laying on the lounge chair next to him and had been napping on and off. It was still very early in her pregnancy and she complained of being sleepy constantly. She’d not shared the news with anyone but Sansa so far…and Jon by default.

“I feel like a slug,” she said when he started to throw his shirt on. “Did Lyarra’s mom go through this?”

“I don’t know. I guess. She didn’t tell me the news till she was past three months.”

“Oh. Sansa said she didn’t notice the fatigue because she was always napping between classes anyway.”

“That sounds like college,” he laughed. “I’m sure she figured it out soon enough.”

“Yeah…soon enough,” Margaery sighed.

Lylla started shrieking delightedly as Robb started tossing her around the pool. They ganged up on Sansa, splashing her till she was shrieking, too.

“He’s going to be a great dad,” Jon said watching Margaery’s face soften as she stared at her husband.

“Yeah…he is.”

Sansa’s phone started ringing. It was Harry so he answered it at once.

“Hello, Harry.”

“Hey, Jon. Is Sansa around?”

“She’s swimming actually. I’ll get her for you.”

“No, there’s no rush. Mina wanted to talk to both of you so you’ll do.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s good. I think she’s just missing you guys. It’s raining right now and my mom’s kind of big on shopping and it…well, it got kind of dull with that this afternoon going from store to store. But I figured as much time as we spent outside yesterday, she might need a break from the sun. The UV rays down here have been brutal but you can tell Sansa I’ve managed to keep her from becoming a lobster so far.”

“Okay,” he chuckled. “I’m sure you’re doing fine though.”

“Hang on.”

Jon heard voices and the phone shuffling around and then she spoke.

“Hey, Jon,” the familiar little voice said.
In his mind’s eye, he could picture her perfectly, her red hair braided into pigtails and her blue eyes. Maybe another freckle or two from the sun. Like a punch to the gut, he realized how terribly he missed her with just the sound of her voice.

“Hi, Mina,” he said. “How are you? Your mom’s in the pool but I’ll get her if you want.”

“No, it’s okay. I can talk to you…if that’s okay.”

“Sure. You can always talk to me, sweetheart.”
Lyarra looked up at the ceiling and grinned once Dad had climbed down off the step-stool and Sansa had turned off the other lights.

“There…we’re officially camping under the stars,” Dad announced proudly.

Sansa snorted and went to fetch the smores supplies from the kitchen.

Mina clapped and said it was beautiful. “Can I have stars strung up in my new room, Jon?”

“Sure, sweetheart…sometime…on occasion…later on,” Dad said. That was usually Dad’s way of hoping you’d forget about something. She’d have to clue Mina in. “Help me with the air mattresses, girls,” he said next.

The four of them were camping out in Sansa’s nearly empty townhouse for what would be the last time on the living room floor tonight before the big day tomorrow. Little by little, their clothes and personal items had been moving from the condo to the house but tomorrow it would be official.

They’d had hot dogs for dinner which was a-okay in Lyarra’s book. Mina thought Dad’s corny indoor camping idea was the coolest thing ever. It wasn’t the same as the great outdoors but at least there were no mosquitos…or bears…or snakes.

Truly, it wasn’t that bad except when Dad tried to tell spooky stories by their ‘campfire’ (Sansa’s fireplace) and left out the best parts.

“You left out the zombies attacking during the blizzard, Dad!”

“I did?”

“Yeah! And you left out the severed hand that creeps across the cabin floor in the last one!”

“Oh…well, I…”

“Geez! It’s like you almost don’t want these spooky stories to be spooky! When Uncle Theon tells them, they’re much scarier!”
“Yes, I’m aware.”

Dad looked at Sansa who’d been smirking at him and they chuckled together. Lyarra’s eyes narrowed. Maybe he was purposely leaving out the best parts.

Regardless, the four of them were having a good night. Sansa brought out an old guitar to teach the girls some campfire songs she said she’d learned in Girl Scouts. Dad asked if she still had her uniform. Sansa gave him a look and Dad shut up and let her sing and play for them.

One of the best surprises of the night was learning that Mina’s Uncle Bran was going to move into the condo once they moved out. The grownups seemed pleased but the best thing in Lyarra’s opinion was that Bran had said the girls could still come over and swim whenever he was off.

They nestled down on their mattresses to sleep after 10:30 (way late for bedtime) but during the night Lyarra woke up and could hear Mina crying. She reached for her and realized she wasn’t on the mattress next to hers anymore. She stumbled towards the hall bathroom and found Sansa holding Mina in her lap while seated on the edge of the bathtub.

“Are you okay?” she asked Mina.

“She’s fine, sweetie,” Sansa answered as Mina burrowed her face into the crook of her mother’s neck. “It’s just…it’s a lot of changes right now for us all.”

Lyarra understood. Changes weren’t always easy. Dad had always said that change would come sure as the seasons. Sometimes, it made her stomach hurt though.

Mina had returned from Florida almost two weeks ago. She said she’d had a lot of fun but she was glad to be home again. It struck Lyarra now that Mina was home again but also leaving her home.

She knew this was going to be a big change for everyone, Mina and Sansa moving in, but she’d had a long talk with Dad about it after they’d returned from Grams’ house and she’d thought everything would be okay.

However, the night Mina had returned, she’d hugged Dad like she’d not seen him in six years. She’d hugged Sansa first but then she’d squealed and Dad had lifted her up in his arms and they’d hugged and Lyarra was sorry to say it had bothered her. It had bothered her more that she would’ve thought.

Afterwards, Dad had come to her room though and laid down next to her. She hadn’t wanted to sound like a baby and talk about the way Mina hugging him had made her feel…but she didn’t have to as it turned out.

“You’re always going to be my daughter, Lyarra,” he’d said in a quiet voice.

She’d felt his hand reaching for hers. His hands were always warm, it seemed. They weren’t soft like hers…she loved them though. His hands were strong and always there when she needed a hand to hold.

“I know,” she’d said grasping his hand with her smaller one.

“I love you so much, baby.”

“I know. I love you, Daddy.”

He had sighed then. She didn’t call him daddy much anymore but when she did he always sighed. They’d laid there quietly a bit longer until he’d rolled to his side to face her.
“And since you’re stuck with me as your dad, I’m afraid you’re just going to have to deal with this,” he’d added right before he started tickling her till she shrieked with laughter and begged him to stop.

Dad and Sansa were going to get married. Lyarra was happy about that. Her and Dad had always been a great team but she knew he’d been lonely for a lady to love. Sansa was beautiful and nice and made Dad happy. And Lyarra loved her…loved the idea of having a new mom in her life at long last.

However, that made her feel a bit guilty in two ways.

First, it made her feel guilty about her real mom who had died when she was a baby. It was like she was forgetting her in a way the closer she got to Sansa…except she couldn’t really remember her.

She’d taken out the photo album her dad had made when she was little and looked at the pictures the other night. She looked at the pretty blonde woman named Val who was smiling in all the photos. There were a few of her with Dad and in a couple of them she was holding a tiny baby that Dad swore was her. Lyarra couldn’t remember any of it though.

*Do you mind me having a new mom?* she’d wondered as she looked at the pictures. *I hope not. Sansa’s great. She’s just what I would wish for if I ever wished for a new mom…but I still love you.*

It had made her sad enough to cry and Dad had found her crying in her room over the old pictures. He always seemed to know what to say or do to make her feel better.

The other guilt had to do with Mina.

She loved Mina. They were going to be like sisters, except good sisters who loved each other and didn’t fight all the time, she hoped. Sansa had said that sisters fight sometimes and it was okay but Lyarra didn’t want to fight with Mina.

However, she had to admit, she wasn’t as keen on the idea of her dad being Mina’s dad in a sense as she was on the idea of Sansa being her mom. Mina had her own dad. She’d just got to spend an entire week at the beach doing fun things with her dad and now she’d come home and was getting Dad’s attention and they’d be moving in and possibly taking up more of Dad's time and attention.

But now, Mina was crying late at night in the hall bathroom because she was leaving her home to come live with them. Lyarra wasn’t going to let mean, jealous feelings eat her up inside when her friend…her kind of a sister…was sad.

“Are you going to miss your old room?” she asked.

Mina looked at her with big blue eyes that were all teary and nodded.

Lyarra didn’t know what to say to make it better but she hated for Mina to be sad. She patted her back while Sansa stroked Mina’s hair. Mina’s hand reached out for Lyarra’s. It was warm, almost hot, but soft and the same size as hers. She grasped Mina’s hand and Sansa smiled at her.

Lyarra sat down beside them on the edge of the tub and kept holding Mina’s hand. Sansa whispered sweet things and hummed for Mina…and for her too maybe. She supposed that just like Dad, Sansa would know what to say or do to make a girl feel better.

Listening to Sansa humming made her feel sleepy even though the edge of the tub was cold and the light over the sink was too bright. She wanted to go lay back down but she didn’t want to leave yet either.
Soon, Dad was coming down the hall. He stood in the doorway, looking at the three of them with a strange expression on his face. He looked happy but sort of like he might cry or something. Then, him and Sansa seemed to be talking without talking, just with their eyes and nodding. He kissed Sansa on the cheek and then Mina on top of the head before picking Lyarra up to carry her back to the living room.

She was still awake when Sansa and Mina came back. Mina laid with her mom the rest of the night but she didn’t cry anymore. Lyarra was glad for that.

“Hold the door!” Jon called the next morning as he made his way from the moving van with her uncles on his heels.

Mina scooted back out of the way and held the door as Jon and the others swept through all carrying boxes or pictures.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” he said. “I’ll get something to prop it open for now. I think this box might need to go to your room if you want to take it.”

She peered at the label and then grinned widely at him as he ruffled her hair. “Thanks,” she said over her shoulder as she darted off with it.

All morning long there’d been a flurry of activity at the house…and a flurry of Starks everywhere she looked. It was exciting and Lyarra and her were having a grand time with all this moving business but she was happy to have some real unpacking to do at last.

Mina’s tears from the middle of the night were long forgotten as she carefully opened the box and started arranging her stuffed animals in her new room with its newly painted periwinkle walls and lacy white curtains that she’d made with Mommy. Well, Mommy had sat at her sewing machine and done most of the work but she’d let Mina help.

They’d made curtains for the kitchen as well which would be hung once the paint in there was dry. They had painted her room first though with Theon’s help the other night. He was coming over soon to help and she wanted to show him the curtains she’d made…well, her and Mommy had made. He’d said the other night that he didn’t know anyone under the age of 50 that owned a sewing machine. Mommy had scoffed and rolled her eyes at him.

“How’s it going in here, baby?” Mommy asked from the doorway.

“Good,” she said before she turned and giggled. “You’ve got yellow paint on your nose.”

“I do?!?”

“And your forehead.”

Mommy gasped and looked in the dresser mirror. She wondered aloud how long it had been there. She’d been painting the kitchen earlier with Grandma, Aunt Arya and Rhae.

“I can’t believe he didn’t say anything,” she muttered as she wiped at the places.
“We all know how much you like yellow,” she teased which made Mommy laugh and hug her.

“Are you alright today?” Mommy asked next, holding her close. “Okay with all of this?”

“Yes, Mommy. I’m okay today.”

“Good,” she said with a kiss. “If you want to talk though, just say so. Want to come and see our new yellow kitchen?”

“I will soon. I’m kind of…” She gestured towards her furry friends. It’s not like lining up stuffed animals was urgent. She just liked having something to do that made it feel more like home.

“Yes… I see you’re busy right now,” Mommy said without making it sound silly at all. “I’ll be arranging some of my things in my new room soon, too.”

She liked that. They both had new rooms and had things to arrange, things to adapt to. It was going to be okay though. Jon was here and Lyarra was here. It was going to be their home together and she was looking forward to it.

“Is Aunt Margaery okay?” she asked.

“She’s fine, baby,” Mommy said. Mina looked at her earnestly, wanting to be reassured. “I promise, she’s just fine.”

When Uncle Robb and Aunt Margaery had come over this morning, Aunt Margaery had immediately said the paint fumes were too strong for her. She’d gone to the bathroom and it sounded like she was throwing up. Then, she’d gone out back to lay in the hammock Jon had in the backyard. She’d promptly fallen asleep. She was tired a lot lately but Mommy said not to worry.

“I’ll tell you what... when you finish in here, why don’t you check on Aunt Marg for me? Maybe take her some Sprite from the fridge, okay?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

Once she finished with her room, Mina strolled down the hall and saw Grandpa working to finish up the shelves him and Jon had been building together.

“Looks good, Grandpa.”

“Thanks, angel. Think this’ll hold all your make-up and nail polish someday?” he asked with a wink.

“I don’t think I’ll ever have that much make-up or nail polish.”

Grandpa laughed and said, “Good.”

He’d told Lyarra the other day to call him Grandpa Ned if she liked. She had started calling him that at once. Mina supposed that was okay since David lived in England. Actually, he wasn’t really her grandfather but he acted like one. She didn’t mind sharing Grandpa with Lyarra. Sometimes, it was hard to share Mommy but it was getting a little easier.

Lyarra’s mother’s father was dead and Jon’s father was... well, he might as well live in England too from what Mina could tell. Or maybe Antarctica. Jon didn’t talk about him. Lyarra barely ever mentioned him except to say he had silver hair and purple eyes. It sounded like a cartoon character to Mina. But, they were all going to have dinner with him and Rhae’s mother tomorrow night. She was curious to see if his purple eyes matched her new bedroom walls.
There was still a lot of hustle and bustle in the house and Mina thought she’d check on Aunt Marg now. She went to the kitchen to get her the soda. Aunt Arya and Grandma had moved on to another room but Rhae was still there and Theon had arrived. Rhae was trying to unpack some kitchen things but he said he wanted to help. Rhae said he was just getting in the way. Mina could see why. He had Lyarra’s aunt boxed in a corner and was staring and smiling kind of stupidly at her.

“Maybe I like being in your way,” she heard Theon say to Rhae.

Rhae started to laugh but then spotted her over Theon’s shoulder. “Hey, Mina!”

“Hey, Little Red!” Theon said as he spun around quickly. That had become his nickname for her. She kind of liked it. He called Lyarra Squirt but now he had a nickname for her, too. Little Red was better than Squirt, she thought. “Want to help me make a pizza run in a bit?” he asked Mina.

“You just arrived and you’re running off to get food?” Rhae asked in an annoyed tone.

“I’m helping!” he protested. “Hard working people need to eat though, right, Mina?”

“Sure, Theon. But I’m going to take Aunt Marg a drink and check on her. Maybe Rhae could get them with you.”

She grabbed a soda and scurried from the kitchen. It was kind of tense feeling in there. She just hoped they weren’t about to start arguing or something.

Mina headed out back to find Aunt Marg who was still asleep in the hammock. “Aunt Marg,” she said softly.

Her aunt’s pretty brown eyes opened and she smiled. “Hello, darling. What have you got there?”

“A Sprite if you want it.”

“That sounds good. Thanks. Wanna lay with me?”

“Okay.”

Mina carefully climbed into the hammock and stretched out next to her. They shared the Sprite until it was gone and Aunt Margaery said she might need Uncle Robb to put a hammock in their backyard for her. Mina had to admit it was very comfortable.

She enjoyed swinging slowly, laying next to her aunt and listening to the insects buzzing. It was hot and sticky out but kind of sleepy and nice in the shade when the breeze would blow. She looked over at the swing set where her and Lyarra had played the first time she came to visit…the first time she’d seen Jon kiss Mommy. She’d been unsure about it then but now she was used to seeing them kiss.

*It’s just another adjustment…like anything else that changes.*

Jon had said he’d build them a tree fort over in the far corner but he’d need Grandpa’s help. Mina just knew Grandpa would love to do that. He loved building things with his hands. And Jon had also been talking to Mommy about getting a dog again. Both girls hoped that would happen sooner rather than later. The condo had a patio that was smaller than their living room and no real yard at all. Now, this was going to be her yard to play in. She liked that a lot.

“Your alright with all this, darling?” Aunt Marg asked.
“Yeah…I think it’s going to be good.” Her aunt hugged her. “Aunt Marg…are you sick?” she asked.

“What?”

“You’re so tired all the time lately. And I heard you getting sick in the bathroom.”

“I’m not sick,” she laughed. “Well, I was sick earlier but not like you’re thinking.” Aunt Marg brushed her hair back off her face. “Mina…can you keep a secret? It won’t be for long. We’re going to tell you grandparents tomorrow night when we take them to dinner.”

“Sure,” she said excitedly. She liked the idea of having a secret, something only she knew.

“Uncle Robb and I are going to have a baby.”

“Okay…” She wasn’t sure what getting baby had to do with being tired and not liking paint fumes when they’d not got it yet.

“I’m pregnant, I mean. It makes me tired and my stomach’s been a little queasy on and off is all.”

“Oh!” Mina gasped. She put her hand on Aunt Marg’s tummy. It was still as flat as ever and she frowned.

“It’s early, honey, but my little peanut is growing strong already.”

“Peanut?” Mina snickered.

“Yeah…that’s your Uncle Robb’s name for it.”

“Will it be a boy or girl?”

“We don’t know yet. We can find out later…maybe by then you’ll be able to feel the baby’s kicks.”

Mina grinned. She liked that idea. “So, I’ll have a little cousin?”

“Yes.”

“And will it be Lyarra’s cousin, too?”

“Well, your mom is going to marry Jon and Lyarra will be her step-daughter so…yes. Is that okay?”

“Yeah…I like that,” she said. She did. They’d have something new to share, a baby that would be their little cousin.

She stretched again and curled up next to her aunt.

“Are you tired too, darling?”

“Yeah…I didn’t sleep so good last night.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. How about we take a little cat nap?”

“Okay.”
Sansa stretched out across the sofa in the living room and turned on the Food Network to help her unwind along with a glass of Merlot. Jon came to join her after tucking both girls in.

“Care for some?” she asked indicating her drink.

“One glass would put me flat on my ass right now. I’m beat.”

“Me, too,” she agreed and laid her head on his shoulder. “I figured I may as well have a glass since I’ll be passing out shortly anyway.”

“I’ll probably want more than one glass tomorrow night,” he grimaced.

“I know,” she said softly. They’d been very busy the past couple of weeks but she knew tomorrow night’s dinner had been on his mind a good deal. She also knew Jon wasn’t going to get shit-faced in front of the girls just because he dreaded having dinner with his father. “We’ll be there with you.”

He nodded before pulling her close. He inhaled and exhaled slowly and deeply. She could feel his body relaxing beside her.

“This is amazing, you know,” he said a few minutes later.

“What?”

“This was just a wish of mine on a piece of paper a couple of months ago and now you’re both here.”

“It was a sweet wish, honey. I’m glad we’re here, too. Do you think we're...well, have we rushed it too much? Is all this too soon for the girls?”

"I don't think so. I mean, it has moved fast but kids are very resilient."

"Kids love routine."

"They do but they are also resilient. And, we're doing our best to ease all their worries and doubts."

"I hate doubting myself," she sighed.

"Welcome to parenthood."

"Very true," she said and kissed his cheek.

"You're a good mother, Sansa," he said with sweet sincerity.

"Thanks. You're a good father, Jon." Then, she scowled and said, “But, I can’t believe you let me walk around with paint on my nose half the morning!”

“You looked so cute though,” he laughed. She poked him in the ribs. “Ow!”

“And, I can’t believe you strung up all those lights last night at the townhouse and left them for poor Bran to take down.”

“I’ll take them down tomorrow or Monday,” he chuckled. “Poor Bran said he wasn’t moving in until next week.”
She plowed ahead. “And, I can’t believe after all the work you did today, you strung up more lights for Mina tonight in her room.”

He looked almost boyish when he said, “She wanted them…and she was looking a little forlorn after everybody left earlier and…”

She cradled his face with her hand and kissed him softly on the lips. “And you are the sweetest man I know and I love that you did that to make my daughter happy tonight.”

“I’d do anything to make her happy.” Sansa cocked an eyebrow at him. “Okay…anything within reason to make her happy.”

Sansa nestled up against his side to watch ‘Chopped.’ Jon took her empty glass and reached over to set it on coffee table…and grunted in pain.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just getting old apparently and feeling stiff from moving stuff all day,” he said. Sansa rose up to her knees and moved behind him on the sofa. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a massage,” she said as she began kneading his shoulders. His head lolled back and she gave him a quick kiss before continuing.

“I think I’ll quit my job.”

“What?!”

“I need to find something that involves hard labor so I can get a massage every night.” She swatted the back of his head and smirked at his chuckling. He reached back and grasped her hand. “Don’t stop, love…please.”

She squeezed and rubbed his neck and shoulders some more and couldn’t help but be satisfied by the groans she was eliciting. It was arousing. She worked her way down his back and started kissing his neck as she did.

“Can we go to the bedroom and turn this into a sensual massage?” he asked, his voice low and husky.

“Only if you’ll give me one in return.”

“That is a deal.”

“Do you think the girls are asleep?”

“One way to find out,” he said springing from the sofa and taking her hand.

They clicked off the TV and lights. Sansa put her glass in the sink and they crept down the hall to the girls’ bedrooms.

Lyarra was already snoring with Ghost in her arms. Jon stroked his daughter’s curls and closed her door.

The fairy lights reflecting off the periwinkle walls in Mina’s room gave it an ethereal glow and her auburn hair looked wine-dark spread out against her pillow. She was holding Lady to her chest and breathing slow and evenly. Sansa kissed her lightly on the forehead and asked Jon if he thought they should turn the lights off.
“Later maybe,” he said. “Or we could just leave them on for tonight if you like.”

Sansa nodded happily and let him lead her to their bedroom.

After everything today, they were both worn out but this was their first official night after she and Mina had moved in. That was something to celebrate, Sansa thought.

Kissing quickly led to touching which quickly led to stripping out of clothes which led to Jon playfully shoving her down on the bed. And if they were both snoring ten minutes after a fast and hungry fuck on the foot of the bed, there would be other nights for massages at least.
“Hey, come on in,” Theon said, opening his apartment door and beckoning Jon inside.

Jon had never had a proper bachelor pad of his own while Theon’s apartment had always been like one on steroids. Jon had gone from living with his mother to living in a dorm to living with Val briefly before going back to student housing. And then he’d moved back in with Val shortly before Lyarra was born and he’d become a father. So, Theon’s place had always held a certain mystique for him.

There was the standard-issue cheap, black leather furniture and the big screen TV that took up half a wall. The walls of this particular pad were covered in Liverpool paraphernalia. And the IKEA bookcases held nary a book but about seven different video game consoles, their assorted controllers and games.

The bar that opened to the kitchen had a neon Jack Daniels sign over it. The fridge typically held an out-of-date carton of milk, assorted beers, a jar of salsa and old take-out containers along with a lone brick of some processed cheese product for when times were desperate. There were usually some stale crackers in the cabinet along with Theon’s favorite sugary breakfast cereals and chips.

The Liverpool stuff and big screen was still there but Jon was more than a little surprised to see the bookcases had been replaced by newer ones that did not appear to be made of particle board or have cardboard backing. The old, worn-out leather (actually pleather) had been replaced with nicer, newer furniture. And instead of Jack Daniels, there was a painting hanging over the bar now. Okay, it was a replica of one of Coolidge’s Dogs Playing Poker series but at least it could be called art. There were even bananas sitting on the kitchen counter. Amazingly, they were more yellow than brown.

“What’s all this?” Jon asked, turning around with his arms spread out.

“Oh, just…you know. I’m thirty, time to grow up a bit,” Theon muttered self-consciously. “Thanks for coming over.”

“No problem. Rhae said she’d run it by your place after dinner tonight but I figured I could save her a trip,” Jon replied, handing over Theon’s work badge and I.D. “How’d it get lost in Rhae’s car anyway?”

“Um…probably slid out of my pocket when we ran to get pizzas yesterday,” Theon shrugged. It was a casual sort of shrug. Why’d it come off a bit weird…and guilty?

“Right. Well, I really appreciate you picking up lunch and your help yesterday.”

“Of course. So, tonight…dinner with Dad, huh?” Theon said, opening that door if Jon cared to walk through it.

“Yeah, tonight.”

“Should be…”
“A nightmare.”

“Hey, now. Not a complete nightmare. Sansa and the girls will be there. Rhae will be there. Elia’s nice.”

“Yeah, I know. Wait…how do you know Elia?”

“Uh…I don’t. I mean, she raised Rhae so…she must be nice.” His voice kicked up an octave and he said, “You’ve said she’s nice. Why you being so quizzy anyway?”

“Quizzy? Quizzy is not a word. And I wasn’t being quizzy. I was just…”

“Shut up, teacher. And your dad could never be as big of an asshole as my dad.” Jon hung his head as he chuckled. “It’s not funny, fuckface. Your dad may be a deadbeat shit of a dad but at least he never left you for dead.”

“You’re being a bit dramatic.”

“I was literally locked in a cage for 48 hours!”

“You got arrested.”

“I was wrongfully accused! And he was my only phone call! He said, and I quote, ‘Good luck surviving the big house. You’re a disgrace to my name.’”

“Okay…Balon’s an asshole. I’ll grant you that.” Eager to talk about something besides his father, Jon changed the subject. “So, Liverpool’s got a friendly in a few.”

“Against Wigan,” Theon scoffed. “It won’t air here.”

“Well, United plays Galaxy tomorrow. Wanna come over and watch at the house?”

“Are you sure Sansa won’t mind?”

“She won’t mind. She suggested inviting you over. She’s making chicken wings.”

“Oh! Well, I’ll be there,” Theon smiled. “Say, is your sister coming over to watch, too?”

“No, Rhae doesn’t really follow football that closely, you know.”

“Right,” Theon said. Strangely enough, his smile was gone now.

Jon had rolled his eyes when Rhae texted him the name and address of the restaurant his father and Elia had chosen. He’d never been but he knew it was fancy and expensive.

Sansa’s eyes however had lit up excitedly when he told her and she’d started an extensive search of their closet for the ‘right thing’ to wear. She could wear a burlap sack and she’d look gorgeous as far as Jon was concerned.

“Figures…unnecessarily extravagant,” he grumbled as he pulled on his shoes. “Has he never taken
“Just give it a chance, Jon,” Sansa called from the closet. “I’ve heard great things about it. Maybe you’ll like it.”

“And Lyarra…will she like it, Sansa?”

“Um, well…maybe Mina will rub off on her and she’ll give it a chance.”

He went in to find her holding up two different dresses, a pink floral one that hung down to her ankles and a little black number that made his pulse quicken.

“That one, love,” he said, nodding to the black dress.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to come across too…”

“Stunning? Radiant? Heart-stopping?”

“Slutty.”

“That dress is not remotely slutty. Sexy maybe…not slutty.”

“Says a man.”

“Says a man who knows what impeccable taste you have,” he corrected whilst stealing a kiss.

“What’s wrong with the floral one?” she asked, cocking one ginger eyebrow at him.

“Not a thing. Wear it if you prefer. I’ll still know how great you look under all those yards of fabric.”

She grinned and gave him a shove, walking him backwards out of the closet. “I’ll wear the black for you. Now, go and make sure the girls are ready,” she said.

“I can’t watch you get dressed?” he pouted.

“No, because of that right there. You’ll start something and then I’ll say there’s no time and then you’ll pout and we’ll be late and it’ll be all my fault.” He put his arms around her waist and tried pouting harder. “Go, Jon,” she laughed, giving him another shove. “And if you’re good…you can take this dress off me tonight.”

“I like that plan,” he said before leaving to do her bidding.

He knocked on Mina’s open door and entered to find her sitting on her bed already ready to go. Her red hair was neatly brushed. She wore a soft blue sundress, the starfish necklace Harry had bought her at the beach and a white cardigan. Jon wondered if Sansa had told her what to wear or if she’d chosen it herself.

Probably the latter, he decided. She looked like a perfect little lady. Sansa’s child through and through.

She was humming and brushing out her stuffed dog’s fur with a doll brush. His heart swelled at the sweetness of it.

“Hey, sweetheart. You’re ready, I see.”

“Yes,” she said, carefully continuing to groom Lady.
He started to go. Lyarra would likely be trying to wear her Man U jersey and shorts. And, he’d have to remind her to brush her hair. With the humidity, she’d need some help taming the curls anyway. But there was something that drew him to loiter and watch Mina with her little friend.

Mina had made it through the move alright but this was only the beginning. The four of them would have to learn to live together, to weather the ups and downs of family life. Just like he’d told Sansa, kids were resilient but that didn’t mean he didn’t worry. He wanted this blending to occur with as little difficulty for the girls as possible.

And, Mina was going to need time to get acclimated to her new home and then a new school in the fall. It didn’t seem fair in a way that Mina had more adjusting to do than any of them but his house was larger and more suitable for their family than the condo would have been.

And more suitable for a dog.

He’d not forgotten that for a moment. Lyarra wanted one of course but it was clearly Mina’s dearest wish and one he wanted to fulfill. He’d talked to Sansa about it a few nights ago. She’d said to give them a week or two to get settled in the house and then they could surprise the girls by going to the local shelter.

“Do you like your room, okay?” he asked after just standing there for a minute or two.

He was amazed at how neat and orderly she’d made it in a little over 24 hours. He was constantly reminding Lyarra to pick her dirty clothes up off the floor or put her toys away. All Mina’s boxes had been emptied and everything had already found a home.

“Yeah…it’s nice.”

“If there’s anything you want or need, I’ll…”

“It’s good, Jon,” she said. “Can we keep the fairy lights up?” He nodded. “Does your dad really have purple eyes?” she blurted out next unexpectedly.

He snickered and nodded again. Her eyes widened. He decided to sit beside her on the bed. She started brushing Lady’s coat again.

“His eyes are indigo…a dark purple. And, his hair is silver, not just because of his age. It’s always been silver.”

“Silver like Queen Elsa’s,” she said.

“Yes…the Snow Queen.” He has all the warmth of a snow pea, too.

“Lyarra says you don’t see him hardly at all. Does that make you sad?” she asked next.

“No…not anymore. I never saw much of him growing up either.”

“Didn’t he come get you on weekends like my daddy does?”

“No.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I…”

How could he tell her? He’d told Sansa. That had been painful enough. He couldn’t think of a way
to say it without either sugar-coating it or revealing the brutal truth. He knew Mina’s nature. She was the most empathetic child he’d ever met. She’d be hurt because he’d been hurt. He couldn’t hurt her, especially not before they were meeting his father for dinner.

He didn’t have to tell her anything though. He felt Mina’s hand on top of his and looked down to see blue eyes gazing up at him, innocent and wise at the same time.

“It’s okay, Jon. It’s not your fault. Some dads are just better than others.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him.

“Thank you, Mina,” he croaked, rising from the bed. He needed to check on Lyarra. He needed to get a grip before he bawled in front of Mina.

“Jon?” she called, stopping him in his tracks. He turned to see she had returned to brushing Lady’s coat again. “Just so you know…you’re one of the best kind of dads.”

Jon declined the valet service and parked the Pilot at the back of the restaurant. Sansa heard him inhaling deeply as they started unfastening their seat belts.

“What do they serve here?” Lyanna asked from the back seat in a peevish tone.

Jon exhaled with a huff and Sansa gripped his hand. He had groused before about Lyarra’s finnicky tastes. Sansa had witnessed it more than once by now. That was just the way some children were. She’d rarely seen Jon truly vexed over it. But tonight, he was already tense and Sansa wanted everyone’s evening to be as pleasant as possible.

“Mediterranean dishes…mostly Greek food,” Sansa answered. “It’s supposed to be very…”

“Will there be chicken nuggets?” Lyarra asked with a skeptical expression.

“Let’s go find out,” Sansa said sunnily.

She alighted from the SUV and took both the girls by the hand as Jon followed a few paces behind. He jogged ahead though to open the restaurant door for them. She caught his eyes roaming up and down her little black dress as she passed by him. She supposed her choice of dress was a check in the Keep-Jon-Happy-Tonight column at least. She winked at him and got a wink (an attempt at a wink anyway) and a smile in return.

She felt his hand low on her back as they approached the host. Now that they’d managed to make it here on time, she allowed herself to relish his touch. After all, the warmth of his arms around her or simply his hand in hers had made her feel stronger on occasions when she was feeling weak, upset or insecure. She hoped she did the same for him. She looped an arm around his waist in return while putting her chin on his shoulder, a silent but physical reminder that she loved him and she was by his side for this and all things. He turned and kissed the top of her head before the host acknowledged them.

When Jon gave his name, the four of them were immediately taken back into the elegantly appointed restaurant to a semi-private dining area where Elia and Rhaegar waited at a large round table. They
stood when they saw them coming.

Elia’s salt and pepper hair was swept back in a severe bun but her smile was warm and friendly. She was wearing a lovely floral-patterned dress of black, russet and gold. Sansa was pleased then that she’d went with Jon’s pick. *We would’ve clashed.*

Rhaegar wore a black suit and had his hair sleeked back giving him an austere appearance. The smile he gave did not sit as naturally upon his face as Elia’s did. Sansa did not take offense though. She’d only met him once but she suspected Rhaegar Targaryen was not easily given to smiles.

*And perhaps he is as nervous as Jon about this dinner.*

“I’m sorry if we’re late,” Jon said uncertainly.

“No, no…we were early,” his father said. “Rhaenys just texted to say she’s on her way. Thank you for joining us.”

The older man’s hand clenched and unclenched at his side before he offered it to Jon. There was a slight but noticeable hesitation before Jon shook it. Sansa tried to imagine her father and Robb meeting at a restaurant and behaving in such a way. She couldn’t.

“It’s lovely to see you both again,” Sansa said, extending her hand now which Rhaegar readily accepted. She shook hands with Elia and then looked at Mina fondly. “Allow me to introduce my daughter, Minisa.”

“Pleased to meet you. Call me Mina,” her daughter said in a perfect imitation of what she might call Mommy’s Polite Voice.

She held her hand out to be shook as well. Two pairs of eyebrows shot up for a fraction of a second before Elia laughed softly and Rhaegar smiled more naturally. They shook Mina’s hand as Sansa beamed at them. She hugged Mina and whispered a word of praise for her good manners as Lyarra was greeted.

“Lyarra, would you care to sit here?” Rhaegar asked next, indicating the seat next to his. He was plainly nervous now but he had only himself to blame for that.

Again, Sansa was struck by the difference between this and dinner with her father. Mina would never turn down an opportunity to sit next to Grandpa. Even before Mina could talk, they’d always been buddies, her chubby infant’s face lighting up with a toothless grin as soon as she heard his voice or laid eyes on Ned Stark from around the 6-month mark. And now they were forever conspiring when they were together and making each other laugh with secrets known only to them.

Lyarra’s eyes darted to Jon, looking for an answer. It pained Sansa that she instinctively felt the need to seek her father’s approval before sitting beside her grandfather. Jon smiled at her though, giving nonverbal permission. She nodded to her grandfather then and asked Sansa to sit on her other side.

After that, everyone took their places. Mina sat between Sansa and Jon and they left the space next to Elia open for Rhae. The waiter took their drink order and a conversation over the menu and the Greek foods that Elia loved commenced. Lyarra made her expected plea for chicken nuggets but seemed mollified enough when Elia suggested she try the Create Your Own Chicken Roll-Up platter.

*It may wind up being Create Your Own Masterpiece. At least she’ll have fun with her colorful selection of ingredients,* Sansa smiled to herself, knowing that if Lyarra would not eat it, she would create a work of art for them all. *There’s always PB&J or the McDonald’s drive-thru on the way*
Rhae arrived soon after, apologizing for her delay and kissing her parents on the cheek before hugging her brother.

“I’m so sorry,” Sansa could barely hear Rhae whispering to Jon while Mina and Lyarra were busy telling the others about the move yesterday.

“It’s alright. We’re doing okay,” he said. He glanced at Sansa, his expression soft and loving when their eyes locked. She released a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. She knew then that dinner would be just fine.

“Did your mysterious new beau run you behind tonight?” Elia asked, setting off a coughing spell for Rhae who had just taken a sip of water.

“Um…new beau?” Jon asked, smirking at his sister as she hacked and attempted to recover.

“There’s no beau! And who the he-heck says beau nowadays, Mom?”

“But I thought you said…”

“No beau, Mom!” Rhae reiterated and Sansa bit her lip to keep from smirking now.

“Well, this was…nice.”

“Yeah,” Jon said. “It was…nice.”

Things could’ve been nice all along though.

Jon bit the inside of his cheek and shook his father’s hand again. There was no reason to ruin the evening now by saying something hurtful or rude that wouldn’t change the past or the way things were between them.

They stood on the sidewalk after dinner where Rhae, Elia and Rhaegar were waiting for the valet to bring their cars. He hoped the valet would return with their cars before anyone decided to try and make future dinner plans.

When their car arrived, Elia hugged him. She had always been kind to him despite the pain his existence probably brought her. He hugged her back and glanced towards his father.

You do not deserve her, but I hope you’ve managed to bring her more joy than tears by now at least.

In turn, he could tell Elia was surprised and pleased when Lyarra hugged her…and then hugged his father.

You definitely do not deserve her, Jon thought, his heart clenching painfully for a moment as his father embraced his daughter.

But, despite her desire to act grown up and shove Jon away if he hovered too much on the pitch
when she was injured or dared to hug her in the hallway at school, Lyarra was affectionate. She could be generous with hugs when she was in good spirits. She would hug teachers, custodians and classmates alike at school if the day was going her way. He’d seen her hug crying opponents and even opposing coaches at matches. And naturally, any random, friendly dog or cat she met would be hugged if the owner gave her permission. He’d not read too much into a hug tonight.

Mina and Sansa finished saying their goodbyes and the four of them headed to the parking lot.


“I’ll bet you are,” he laughed, putting an arm around her shoulders. “You know, you might not be hungry now if you’d not been so busy building pyramids out of the chicken, diced tomatoes and sliced olives and actually eaten a few bites. You didn’t even try the feta cheese.”

Lyarra’s face scrunched up. “That cheese was not normal. I ate some of the pita bread.”

“You ate a piece the size of a tortilla chip and no chicken.”

“It was naked, Dad. It didn’t have its covering.”

“It didn’t have breading, you mean.”

“I liked all of it,” Mina said from his other side.

“I’m glad to hear it, sweetheart,” he said as he put his other arm around Mina’s shoulders.

His picky eater aside, there was a fullness in his heart that he recognized as joy. It had become a far more regular emotion in his life of late. He was more than just content now. He was happy. He was happy and in love with a wonderful woman and had his precious daughter and now Mina to cherish as well. What more could he want or need in his life?

He looked back at Sansa who was fiddling in her purse as she followed them. She was gorgeous and sexy as fuck in her dress and he remembered her earlier words about him taking it off her later. He still couldn’t quite believe that when the girls were in bed and the lights were turned off tonight, she’d be his to hold.

The dress was high waisted and the skirt of it flowed freely in the breeze around her thighs. He pictured her for just a moment round with child…with his child. He was overwhelmed by the sappiest of feelings at the thought. He wondered if he was worthy of these three at all. He said a silent prayer to do his best every day to deserve them.

He cleared his throat before emotion could reduce him to blubbering like a fool and said, “And since you were both wonderful at dinner and Lyarra is hungry and you cleaned your plate, how about a treat?”

Fifteen minutes later, the tension in his neck and shoulders from dinner had drained completely away as Lyarra busily dug into her Happy Meal in the back seat and Mina slurped the chocolate shake he’d purchased for her.

Sansa stretched in the passenger seat beside him and he had to remember to keep his eyes on the road and not on his fiancée’s legs.

Dinner might not have been the most awkward experience of his life. Top Ten maybe. No, that was hardly fair. But that was thanks to Sansa, Elia, Rhae and the girls. If it had been the two men alone at that table, it would’ve been much less pleasant despite the delicious food.
He wondered again what had prompted his father to ask them to dinner. While Jon harbored a great deal of resentment, he supposed that Rhae might have a point about his father having regrets. It didn’t change anything truly. There would be no seismic shift in Jon’s attitude or feelings towards his father. One of the basic roots of a child’s love for its parent is trust and no matter what amends his father might try to make, Jon would never be able to fully trust him. He’d been far too neglectful for nearly 30 years for that and Jon had suffered too much hurt from that rejection to ever forget it.

But if his father wished to make an effort to be a grandfather, he would permit him to try at least. However, protecting Lyarra and her feelings would remain his first priority. He had meant what he’d said to Sansa. He would never let his father hurt his daughter by showering her with attention for a day, only to show her nothing but indifference for a month or more.

At a red light, he reached over to take Sansa’s hand. She grinned when he brushed it with his lips.

“All right?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah…thanks for everything tonight.”

“Night’s not over yet,” she whispered, a teasing smirk playing at her full, pink lips.

He glanced back in the rearview at the girls who were busy sharing fries before responding. “No, it is not,” he grinned.

Once they returned home, Jon had promised the girls one episode of ‘Wild Kratts’ after their bath. Then, he’d flipped a coin to see who would take their bath first. There had been a small squabble over that as neither wanted to be the first to make that initial step towards bedtime. They liked the coin toss idea though, and while Lyarra may have pouted a bit when she lost, she went to it without any verbal complaint.

Jon had shed his dress shirt, shoes and belt but Sansa kept her dress and heels on. She’d made a promise of sorts and she could feel him watching her as she sorted through the box of photo albums for which she still needed to find a place. There were still some boxes left that needed to be emptied from the move. And even though she was already adapting to her new home, she knew the transition would not start to feel complete to her until everything was put away.

There were bigger issues to tackle of course. Mina was doing well but she fretted over her daughter dealing with all of these adjustments at a far younger age. And she hoped Lyarra was adjusting to them both being there, too. But those issues were too much for this late in the day. They’d made it through dinner which had been a trial for Jon she knew and putting photo albums away seemed like enough to handle right now.

“Can I put these here?” she asked over her shoulder, indicating a nearly empty shelf of one bookcase. The girls had just gone back to brush their teeth.

She nearly yelped when she felt Jon’s arms encircle her and his teeth grazing her ear lobe.
“I’ve got something I want to put somewhere,” he said in that tone of his, the deep, husky one that always made her hot. He pressed himself firmly against her ass and started nuzzling her neck.

“Careful, Dad…they’ve not been tucked in yet.” But she shivered as his lips ghosted across her throat and she felt the scrape of his beard. His hands glided upwards to cup her breasts. She could already feel her nipples tightening and her stomach muscles clenching in anticipation. “Jon…” she said breathlessly, not certain if she meant to push him away or urge him to keep fondling her.

Little feet racing down the hall alerted them that teeth were brushed though and Jon was standing a few feet away when the girls turned the corner.

“Sure, I think those would work well there,” he said. Sansa blinked at him dumbly. It took her a second to remember what she’d asked him originally. “Who wants who?” he asked the girls.

“I want you both,” Mina said.

“Me, too!”

“Easy enough,” he said casually.

Sansa was flushed and there was an ache in her loins he’d ignited from just a few seconds of touch and a half dozen words. It really wasn’t fair for him to be so collected after getting her revved up. But dear little faces that were excited by the prospect of being tucked in by them both brought her back to the here and now.

An hour later though with girls snoozing in their beds, the tables had turned.

“Sansa, aren’t you ever coming to bed?” he asked pleadingly.

She’d kept unpacking when he’d gone to the bathroom and just chosen another box to unpack in the kitchen. He was standing in the doorway in his boxers and undershirt. His hair was loose and begging for her fingers but she could be strong.

“Oh, you don’t have to wait up if you’re tired,” she said, smirking to herself.

She made a show of bending over to put away the pressure cooker she never used in the cabinet under the oven. She knew what she was doing of course. She still had on her heels and little black dress. Sure, it was not the most comfortable way to unpack but it had its benefits. She could feel the cooler air on her ass and knew he was getting an eyeful of stockinged legs, heels and even a hint of her black panties.

“It’s only ten o’clock. I wanted to get another box or two sorted before bed,” she said as she arched her back when she straightened again. Something sounding suspiciously like a whimper came from Jon’s direction.

_The old bend and snap. Elle Woods would be proud._

“Another box or two?! But…but we’ve got the rest of summer to get you settled and…” He stopped talking then and Sansa saw his eyes narrow. “You’re still wearing that dress.”

“I am,” she sighed, leaning back against the kitchen counter. “No one took it off me yet.”

He was upon her in less than a second, his irises nearly invisible for the black of his pupils. “I’m taking it off you right now.”
“Right here?” she asked with a feigned look of shock. “What if one of the girls…JON!” she screeched as he lifted her in his arms to carry towards their bedroom.

“While bending you over our kitchen table and fucking you in those heels and with your dress tossed up over your ass has appeal, I have enough self-control to wait till the bedroom. But that’s it.”

To be carrying a grown woman in his arms, he was surprisingly light on his feet as they passed the girls bedrooms. He set her down again once they reached their room and locked the door behind him. Sansa backed away coquettishly. He was far too quick though.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked with a grin.

He pinned her wrists behind her back and circled them with one hand. He started nuzzling against her ear and then kissing her neck again. Whatever game she thought about playing flew out of her head once he did that.

“I was just going to take off my shoes,” she said.

His mouth left her neck long enough to growl, “Leave them on,” in her ear before he returned to sucking at her pulse point and making her dizzy.

“My feet are tired,” she said feebly.

“I have every intention of getting you off your feet…and getting you off.”

He walked her back towards the bed. She felt the backs of her knees hit the edge and she landed with a flump on the soft comforter.

“I’m still in my dress,” she said as Jon knelt at the edge of the bed.

“Change of plan. I’m taking something else off first.” His thumbs hooked into the band of her panties and he removed them in one deft move. He yanked off his undershirt. Sansa squealed when he grasped her ass and slid her closer, bringing her pussy right within reach of that sensuous mouth of his. “Put those gorgeous long legs over my shoulders, love,” he husked.

Sansa did as he said, reveling in his authoritative tone. She squirmed when he nosed the hair on her mound. His fingers dug into her hips, holding her steady as he swiped her slit with his tongue.

“Mmm…much better than dinner.”

“You said dinner was delicious,” she whimpered as he licked her clit.

“It was,” he murmured into her folds and Sansa grasped the covers, and already anticipating sweet release.

Later, naked, breathless and sweaty but both thoroughly sated, Jon held her close, peppering her with gentle kisses.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I never would’ve made it through that tonight if not for you and the girls.”
“You did great.”

“Because you were there supporting me.”

“That’s what we do for each other, right?”

“Right.” His hand idly traced up and down her back and she burrowed deeper against him. “Do you think Lyarra was okay with it?”

“I think so. I wouldn’t worry, honey. She’s not as likely to overthink the meeting as you are. She went to a fancy restaurant and had dinner with us and some other grownups. But I think you should have a talk with her tomorrow. See if she has any questions.”

“Oh…before I forget. I invited your sister over to watch the game tomorrow.”

His brow crinkled adorably in confusion as she ran her fingers through his beard. He keened to her touch. Clearly, soccer was not on his mind, nor his sister.

“The game? You mean the Man U match versus Galaxy?” he asked at last.

“Yes,” she replied, moving downward to kiss his pecs and nipples while lightly scraping his belly with her fingernails. He hissed slightly at the sensation and she could feel his body tensing, eager for more.

“But…but I didn’t…fuck…Rhae doesn’t really care for…” he babbled as her lips brushed the line of hair that began below his navel.

“I mentioned that I was going to make wings for you and Theon and she mentioned that she liked David Beckham so I invited her.”

“But, uh…oh, God. Um…Beckham’s retired.”
“He is?” she said, her head popping up from where she’d been kissing his hip, edging her way ever closer.

“For years, love…not that it matters,” he quickly amended.

He might be somewhat amused by her lack of up-to-date soccer knowledge but he was not foolish enough to say more on the subject right now. His eyes kept darting back and forth between his cock and her mouth. He jerked his chin downward, a silent plea.

“Oh…well, she’s coming over all the same,” she finished before rising to all fours and sliding further down the bed. Sansa licked her lips with meaning and saw his cock twitch in response. “So…are you up to round two yet?”

She could feel the bed shaking he nodded so vigorously as her mouth closed around him.

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Dad had come to talk to her this morning after breakfast about their dinner last night with her grandfather and Rhae’s mom. It was plain that talking about this wasn’t easy for him though.

She told him honestly that she’d had a good time but that she wasn’t sure what to think of her grandfather or the whole situation. She had questions. But then, she hung her head and looked up at him apologetically.

“I don’t want to upset you, Daddy. I won’t ask if it bothers you.” Her heart got all achy at the thoughts of hurting Dad.

He grimaced and hugged her tight. “You can ask me anything at all, baby. I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel otherwise. You’re not really hurting me by asking.”

“Grams got upset once when I was little and asked about him.”

“Oh? How old were you?”

“Almost five. I can remember some things from being five.”

“Sure, you can. Anyone can. I remember turning five,” Dad said in a sad voice.

“My friend Miguel’s grandfather would come eat lunch with him twice a week during pre-school. I asked Grams why my grandfather never came to visit me. She cried and got upset. I felt awful. She said he wasn’t a good dad to you or a good grandfather. Afterwards, she made me brownies and said she was sorry for crying.”

“She did?”

“Please, don’t be mad at Grams, Daddy,” she begged. She couldn’t stand to think of them being upset with each other. The only thing that might be worse was if he and Sansa were upset with each other.

“I’m not mad at Grams, baby. She has lots of reasons to be upset when it comes to your grandfather and I do, too.” He sighed and held her hand. “Things between your grandfather and I are…we’re not
close and probably never will be but none of that is your fault. I’m sorry, Lyarra. Sometimes, it seems easier to not talk about a problem when we don’t want to think about it. But I should’ve shared more with you. It’s only natural for you to be curious. Whatever you want to know, feel free to ask, okay?”

“Well…what am I supposed to call him? All night at dinner the only thing I could think was what do I call him if I’m forced to get his attention. Do I call him Grandpa Rhaegar like I do Grandpa Ned? It didn’t feel right though. Or should I just call him Rhaegar like I call David just David? Mr. Targaryen would be too weird and I don’t remember Mom’s dad or…”

“I know. I should’ve thought about that. I suppose you can call him whatever feels comfortable to you.”

“Would Grandfather be alright for now? I know it’s still weird and too fancy in a way but he’s sort of…” She trailed off again and looked at him sheepishly.

“He’s sort of weird and fancy, too?” Dad asked.

“Yeah.” They both laughed and Dad hugged her again. She felt better about this. It was good to know she could talk to Dad about it. “How’d Aunt Rhæ wind up so cool?”

“That is a good question that we won’t ask her.”

“Maybe it’s Elia.”

“Must be.”

She drew a deep breath and plunged ahead with her next question. “Why do you think he wants to see us now?”

“I’m not entirely sure to be honest. Your Aunt Rhæ says she thinks he has some regrets over not being around for me when I was a kid and worries about missing out on being a grandfather.”

“So…is this kind of about him?” she asked, her nose scrunched up. Why did that seem unfair in a way?

Dad’s face was hard to read sometimes. It looked like he was feeling lots of different things. “Maybe so.” He cupped her face and kissed the top of her head. “You’re a very clever girl, Lyarra. We’ve been doing just fine for eight years now, right?”

She nodded. Dad was the person that mattered most in the world to her but it wasn’t just him really; it was him and Sansa and Mina and Grams and David and Aunt Rhæ. And Uncle Theon and the Starks, too.

“We’re a team,” she said. It was what Dad always said.

“We are. And if your grandfather wants a chance to be a part of that, he’ll have to show us. Until then, we’ll just see what happens, okay?”

“Okay.”

It was half time and United was up 3-0 when Lyarra had whispered in Mina’s ear to meet her in her room while the grownups went to the kitchen to get more food and drinks. Aunt Rhæ had come
over to watch the match which was unusual but Lyarra was glad she was there. She helped keep
Uncle Theon entertained since Dad was busy helping Sansa in the kitchen a bunch.

Dad reminded her of a puppy dog sometimes the way he looked at Sansa. She supposed that was
because he was in love with her. She’d never seen her dad in love before Sansa came along. He was
kind of a dork about it but she wouldn’t say that. She was happy to see him happy.

Speaking of puppy dogs...

“I think it’s time to ask,” Lyarra said.

“Are you sure it’s not too soon?” Mina said fretfully. “We just moved in two days ago. I think my
mom will say not yet. I think Jon might, too.”

“It’s already mid-July. School will be back in session in another month.”

“Don’t remind me,” Mina sulked.

Lyarra felt bad then. She might dread heading back but she knew Mina was nervous about starting at
a new school. She couldn’t blame her. If their roles were reversed, she’d be nervous, too.

She put her arm around Mina’s shoulders, just like Dad or Sansa might do. “It’ll be okay. You’ll see.
I’ve met most of the third-grade teachers and they’re all really nice. Maybe we’ll be in the same
class.”

“They don’t put twins in the same class at my school. They might not put almost-sisters in the same
class either.”

Lyarra didn’t like that. She had hoped Mina could be in her class. She needed to ask Dad about
that…or Brienne. It was a good thing to be buddies with the principal and Dad had mentioned going
in for a meeting next week. Maybe she’d ask to tag along with him like she normally did during the
summer…unless Mina’s Uncle Bran invited them over to swim.

“Well…even if we don’t wind up in the same class, we’ll have lunch at the same time and recess,
too.”

“That’s true. And it’ll be nice knowing Mommy and Jon are there.”

“Oh, yeah. Dad’s always around checking on stuff so you’ll see him a ton. I’m sorry in advance if he
hugs you or embarrasses you in front of your friends.”

“I won’t have any friends at first but you. And, I don’t mind him hugging me.”

“Well, he’s kind of bad about it at times. And I saw your mom a lot too once she started there.” Mina
was smiling again so Lyarra continued. “So…are you with me? Can we do this?”

“Yeah!”

The girls did their freshly-invented last night during dinner while waiting for yecky, blecky food
(okay, Mina liked it but that girl would eat anything) secret-sister handshake and left the room arm in
arm.

Dad had just sat down in his recliner with a beer and pulled Sansa into his lap. Theon and Rhae were
sitting next to each other on the sofa and whispering something when Lyarra cleared her throat to get
their attention and spoke.
“Dad…Sansa…I’m sorry to do this now but it just won’t wait any longer. Mina and I have decided we need to have a serious talk with you both about something that’s been on our minds with this move.”

Her dad and Sansa both froze. They looked worried. She saw them exchanging looks…more of that talking without talking she’d noticed between them before and she wondered how big of an uphill battle this might be.

“Um…okay…” Dad said uncertainly.

“What’s this about, girls?” Sansa said more calmly although with equal curiosity.

Lyarra started to speak but her mouth seemed to clamp shut of its own accord. Her palms felt sweaty now and she’d lost her nerve with all four adults staring at them.

“Uh…tell ‘em, Mina!” she stammered.

Mina gave her a frustrated look and Lyarra supposed she’d pay for this later. But Mina at least spit it out. “Jon, Mommy…we want to get a dog.”

Sansa’s lips were twitching and her shoulders started shaking but she didn’t laugh. Dad was not so subtle but at least he hid his face in Sansa’s neck. Aunt Rhae started giggling but Theon was the absolute worst as he roared with laughter.

“Oh, holy shit! You should’ve seen the looks on your faces when they marched in here saying they wanted to have a serious talk about the move!”

“Swear jar, Theon!” all five people in the room shouted at once.

Chapter End Notes

This was a long update that I hope you enjoyed. Next chapter, it'll be time to go looking for a dog among other things :)
Mina woke early on a hot and hazy July morning and immediately knew there was something special happening today. She stared up at the twinkling fairy lights hanging in her bedroom and tried to remember what it was as her heart’s tempo increased.

*A dog! We’re going to get our dog today!*

Jon and Mommy had been looking at shelter websites and reading up on breeds for the past several days since they’d made their plea while Theon and Lyarra’s Aunt Rhæ were over watching soccer. Then two days ago, Jon had come home and said he’d found a dog that he thought would be perfect for them.

“His name is Buddy. Well, that’s what the shelter’s calling him. He was found about a month ago. They said it’s obvious he belonged to someone but no one has come forward and they’ve not run across any ads that match Buddy’s description. He’s a lab mix, around two-years-old from what they can tell. He’s very well-behaved and loving,” he’d told them excitedly.

Jon had shown them a picture of Buddy from the shelter website. He was yellow and cute but bigger than what she’d pictured.

Part of Mina had hoped for a puppy…and a girl dog. But Mommy had been worried over training a puppy. She’d grinned happily at Jon’s news so Mina had decided to smile and be happy, too.

*A dog is a dog. We’re getting a dog and I won’t complain. Boy dogs are good. And a grown-up dog can be fun, too.*

Over the past couple of nights, they’d had ‘family discussions’ around the dinner table regarding the responsibilities of pet ownership, which was the grown-up term for Mommy and Jon repeatedly telling Mina and Lyarra all the hard work dogs were and what would be expected of them.

“We know! We know!” Lyarra had cried out in exasperation last night when Jon pulled out his latest creation. “You didn’t have to make a chore wheel, Dad! Sheesh!” Mommy had giggled at Jon’s
disappointed face but Mina thought it was a neat idea. “Just relax, will ya? We’ll feed him and give him fresh water! We’ll take him on walks every day and even scoop poop if you say so!”

“I didn’t say I’d scoop any…” Mina had started to argue.

“No one is asking you girls to do everything!” Mommy had quickly added, her nose crinkling up at the mention of doggy doo. Jon had smirked at her and she’d said, “They’re just eight, Jon. It’s unrealistic to expect them to do everything.”

Lyarra had folded her arms and huffed in disagreement but Jon had nodded and agreed with Mommy. Mina had been relieved. When she helped Uncle Bran or Uncle Rickon walk their dogs, she always stood back and held her nose when it came to ‘waste collection.’ And while she enjoyed running around Grandma and Grandpa’s backyard without too much fear of doggy landmines, she didn’t like to think about the unpleasant task that someone had to do to make that possible.

“The main thing is that Buddy’s going to be part of our family,” Mommy had said next once that situation was addressed. “He’ll need attention and love every day. He’ll need someone to play with him. But he’s not a toy that you can cast aside when you get bored or the newness wears off. He’ll be with us for many years hopefully and we want him to be happy. Right, girls?”

“Right,” they had both answered.

Of course, they would love him. How could anyone not love their dog?

After breakfast, they loaded up in Jon’s SUV and drove to the animal shelter. They were going to meet their new family member and, if everything went well, Jon said they could take him home today.

Lyarra’s leg was bouncing up and down where she sat next to Mina in the backseat. She did that a lot when she was excited but had to sit still. Sometimes, Mina found that habit annoying. But today, she couldn’t really say she minded. She was excited, too.

“I hope everything works out,” Jon said quietly to Mommy as they neared the shelter.

Mommy looked back at them and gave a sort of nervous-looking smile. “Me, too,” she murmured back to him.

Mina didn’t know what to make of that. Of course, everything would work out perfectly. How could it not?

There were benches and a little garden out front with stone markers on the ground with the names of people who had donated money to the shelter over the years. A sign above the door read, ‘Our Favorite Breed is a Rescue!’ Mina liked that sign. They were going to give a dog a new home.

*Buddy, our new best friend.*

They stepped inside and Mina could hear them before she could see them. Big dogs, medium-sized dogs and little dogs. From deep ruffs to yippy yaps, there was a chorus of barks coming from behind a green door that was on the other side of the shelter’s entrance.

A lady greeted them from her desk. There were two cages behind it with kittens inside. They could barely be heard over the dogs at first but, while Jon talked to the lady, Mina walked over to see them. They mewed, a soft little sound, and they had adorable, teeny-tiny paws that weren’t much bigger than Mina’s thumb.
“Awww!” she cried. “Aren’t they sweet, Mommy?”

She’d never thought much about cats. Cats were fine but Uncle Bran and Uncle Rickon had dogs. Uncle Robb had given her Lady for her birthday when she was little. Dogs were all she’d thought about but now she thought a cat might be nice, too.

“Would you girls like to hold one of them?” the lady asked. “It’ll take a minute for me to locate your pooch and put him in a visiting room.”

“Please!” Mina said.

Lyarra shrugged and said, “Sure. I mean, we’re here to get Buddy but…”

Clearly, she was not as impressed with the cats. Mina had overheard Jon referring to Lyarra as single-minded a time or two. She’d asked her mother what that meant. She had to admit it kind of fit.

But Lyarra’s face lit up when she was handed a furry little bundle. And then Mina got to hold one. It was wiggly and squirming in her arms but warm and soft, the softest thing Mina had ever held. It’s little pink nose was cold and wet and its whiskers were so cute. Its eyes were still big and round. It didn’t look all clever or tricky the way an older cat’s eyes always seemed to Mina. It was just a sweet baby kitty that needed a home. And then it stopped squirming and started purring.

Mina was in love. She was sure of it. She kissed the top of its tiny head and felt the vibrations of its purr through her hands. A little kitty wouldn’t be so much trouble would it? And cats used litterboxes. That’s what her friend Patty had told her. It’d be so much less trouble for…someone else…to scoop the poop.

“Mommy?” she asked nervously, already certain her heart would break if she was told no. “Can we…ahhh-choo!”

Mommy glanced up from where Jon had handed over a bunch of paperwork for her to fill out. Jon had said something about her handwriting being neater. Mommy had grumbled under her breath at him but started working. Mommy did have nice handwriting.

“What, baby?” Mommy asked.

“Can I…I…ahhh-choo! Ahhh-choo! Ahhh-choo!”

“Bless you,” the shelter lady said, coming back into the room and taking the kitten from her arms. “Are you allergic to cats, sweetie?”

“I…I don’t know.”

“We’ve never had one,” Mommy said, coming over to feel her brow. “But it’s possible.”

She pulled a tissue out of her purse and handed it to Mina. Mina wiped her drippy nose and used the hand sanitizer next. She sadly watched the lady put the kitten back in the cage. Lyarra was still holding hers and snuggling it now. She wasn’t sneezing at all. That didn’t seem fair.

Well, it doesn’t matter. A dog will be the perfect pet for us. Lyarra and I prefer them anyway, she told herself.

But then, the shelter lady started frowning at the four of them and wringing her hands.

“Mr. Snow…I’m so terribly sorry to tell you this. We always do our best with found pets to search
for their owners first but the circumstances with Max were unusual.”

Jon had been stroking one of the kitties through the cage and turned to face the lady. “Um…Max? Who’s Max?”

Mommy laid down the paperwork. Her shoulders slumped. She looked sad as she took Mina’s hand.

“Oh, I mean Buddy. Well, Buddy is Max. You see…the dog didn’t have a microchip but he actually does have an owner who’s been looking for him frantically since April. He got out of his yard in the middle of a bath so he didn’t have his collar on. He apparently had a big adventure before he wound up here. His family lives nearly twenty miles away. But he’s back with them now. So, while it’s a happy ending for Max and his family, I’m afraid it’s not such good news for you. But, we have lots of other wonderful dogs if you’d like to…”

Mina could tell from Mommy’s expression that this wasn’t a joke or mean trick. It took Lyarra another second or two before she realized what they were being told.

“But…but…but you said he’d be our dog, Dad!” Lyarra said hysterically. The kitten she was still holding didn’t seem to like that. It wanted down. Good thing Mommy swooped in to take it from her. “You said Buddy was perfect for us!”

“Lyarra…”

Jon looked so miserable. Mina wanted to go give him a hug and let him know she knew it wasn’t his fault. Except she was kind of mad, too.

Lyarra ignored her dad and turned to the lady. “There’s got to be a mistake! Dad made a chore wheel and I was going to be the first one to feed Buddy! Mina’s Uncle Bran gave us some dog toys for him! I offered to scoop poop!”

“There’s other dogs here…” Mommy started to say.

But Lyarra’s face became one big pout. Then, she threw her head back and started wailing like a baby.

Mina couldn’t blame her. She wanted to cry, too. In fact, she did…just not as loudly.

Fifteen minutes later, the four of them were in the memorial garden in front of the shelter. Sansa could feel sweat beading on her brow as the day promised to be a scorcher. But at the moment, she was doing her damndest to cope with the disappointing blow and not cry like the girls. She wanted to pinch herself for letting herself get so attached to the idea of Buddy before it was a sure thing but she couldn’t seem to help it. Plus, the day or two before her period started were normally a bit of a roller coaster for her emotional state.

*Keep it together, Mom. The girls need you both to be supportive and rational for them.*

Together, they’d managed to get Lyarra and Mina to calm down though their eyes were moist and the streaks from their tears were still visible on their cheeks. It never ceased to feel like a knife
twisting in her guts to see sad little faces like that.

Okay, so Buddy already had a home. Not a big deal and good for Buddy…or Max and his family. There’s plenty of dogs inside. We’ll just have to choose one together.

“So, are we ready to go in and take a look?” Sansa asked with what she hoped was a winning smile.

Jon immediately started shaking his head at her. He told the girls to hang on as they excitedly jumped to their feet. He took her by the arm and drew her out of ear-shot.

“Sansa…I don’t know if it’s a good idea to take them in there right now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, maybe it’d be best to investigate online again and…”

“Jon, we are not driving away without even looking after saying we’re getting a dog today. How can we after the whole crushing disappointment with Buddy?”

“Max,” he corrected and she wanted to stomp on his foot.

“Honey…I can’t bear to see them heartbroken all over again.”

“There are dozens of dogs in there and everyone of them needs a home, love. Don’t you think it’ll be hard enough to decide without the girls there falling in love with each and every one of them? It’s why we agreed to let one of us meet Buddy first, remember?”

Sansa nodded. He was right but it seemed so cruel to dash their hopes after coming this far. And ultimately, any pet adoption ran a risk that things might not work out. They could cross that bridge if they came to it. However, she did understand what he meant about the girls falling in love easily and finding it hard to choose.

She chewed at her bottom lip and looked at Mina. That was probably a mistake.

*Mina loves Shaggy and Summer so much. She’s been asking for a dog for years. She was already attached to the kitten in just a few seconds. It’ll be hard to tell her no. Especially now when she’s having to adjust to the move and us all living together and soon a new school. But, she’s such a wonderful little girl and deserves to enjoy a pet of her own.*

Sansa’s eyes filled with tears at the thought of denying Mina that. Then, she looked at Lyarra.

*Lyarra wants this so badly. She’s been so excited about it, talking about it constantly. She’s such a sweet girl. She’s never had a pet. Can’t this poor child have this one thing after losing her mom so young and…*  

*I am an emotional train wreck,* Sansa decided as she started sniffling. A tear or two may have escaped.

“Oh, Christ,” Jon muttered. “Fine…fine. Let’s go take a look.” He kissed her brow and called the girls over. “We’re going to look at the dogs inside. There’s a lot of them and hopefully there’s one that’s meant to come home with us. But we can’t take them all. We’re just getting one dog, okay?”

Three sets of teary eyes looked his way, smiling and nodding happily. “I am completely outnumbered and utterly unmanned by you all,” he grumbled as the girls skipped back towards the entrance hand in hand.
“We love you, too,” she laughed, wiping away her tears.

He grinned and grasped her hand. “Alright, alright. Now, brace yourself and don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

They were soon led back through the green door where the barking seemed to increase in volume ten-fold.

“Is it like this all day?” she asked Amber, the young lady who’d been helping them.

“Pretty much. You get used to it.”

“Reminds me of the cafeteria during lunch time,” Jon said under his breath. “Smells a bit better though.”

Sansa giggled behind her hand and had to agree…at least with the noise level. Kids could be loud. She knew it but she still couldn’t believe how much noise they could create when gathered together in one space.

They turned a corner into another room and found two dozen cages lining the walls of it. In every single cage there was a dog or sometimes two. Some were barking, some were sleeping, some were chewing on toys and some were just sitting there. And everyone of them needed a home.

How will we ever choose…

“Take a look in here but if you don’t find one you want, there’s another room,” Amber said.

“A whole other room of them?!”

She got a nod in response.

Sansa felt like crying again.

The puppies had been surrendered by their owner. They were a Husky/Shepherd mix and twelve-weeks-old. The girls were cooing over them in the ‘visiting’ room as Amber told their story.

“The owner seemed a bit, um…back-woodsy. Said he used to live on a farm but had to move to the suburbs a couple of years ago. He never got Mom spayed and…well, the birds and the bees and all that. He wound up with an unexpected litter of pups. He tried to find homes for them but surrendered these two a few days ago. He kept saying they were the runts of the litter but they’re perfectly healthy. Said he couldn’t handle more pets just now.”

Jon scrubbed at his beard and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet filling in the blanks in his own mind.

Two innocent little pups ripped from their mother. The smallest of the litter, unloved and unwanted, abandoned by some cruel and irresponsible monster.

Jesus Fucking Christ! Would you stop that?! He didn’t drown them. He surrendered them at least.
You’re as bad as the girls! You’re going to be sobbing in the corner like a baby next. Where’d you leave your balls today, huh? Toughen up, buttercup.

“They’re very furry…lots of shedding,” he commented, trying to harden his heart.

“Yeah, they’re so fluffy!” Lyarra squealed.

The white one was rolling on its back with its tongue lolling out. Its chubby, little paws were sticking up in the air as the grey one decided to tackle it. They started tussling. They were also growling as they played; the most adorable, least intimidating growls Jon had ever heard in his entire life.

Oh, shit…they’re so freaking cute.

Jon swallowed the enormous lump in his throat and looked at Sansa. There was a decision to be made and they were the grownups. Sometimes, Jon really hated being the grownup.

He led her to the other end of the room while the girls kept playing and getting acquainted with the pups.

“So, uh…tough choice, right?”

“Yeah…Lyarra’s already calling the male Ghost,” Sansa said.

“Well, he is white.” Jon had to admit he was a bit drawn to him as well. There was nothing wrong with the female though. She’d be a great dog, too.

No, no…you can’t take both. Aren’t we all adjusting to enough already?

“Jon, what if we…” She trailed off and gave him a hopeful smile.

“Two dogs, Sansa? No, not just two dogs. Two puppies. We said a dog. One. Uno perro.” Don’t make this harder on me. You’re supposed to be the other grownup. I want to be the good guy!

“You’re the one who said a puppy would be more work. It’ll have to be trained, you said. It’ll chew things up and pee everywhere until it’s properly housebroken. You’re the one who said the carpet would never survive.” She started frowning at him and he knew he was pressing his luck. “But now you’re suggesting doubling that?” There. Ball’s in your court.

“I know I said that…but they are both so sweet,” she said wistfully. He followed her eyes to where Mina was being licked by the little grey one now and giggling with delight. “But I guess you’re right and if you’re putting your foot down, I won’t argue.” Wait…when did I become the bad guy? “It’d be too much to take on, wouldn’t it?” she asked dubiously.

“Right,” he replied. He hated this. He hated having to choose and he definitely hated the thoughts of being the one to tell the girls. But he supposed he needed to be the strong one here…the authority figure…the bad cop…the villain. He needed… “Oh, come on!” he wailed in an anguished whisper. “Can’t we get them both, love? You think I want to tell either of them we can’t get them both? I can already hear Lyarra in my head. ‘Dad, they’re siblings…we can’t spilt them up.’ Ugh! What are you doing to me?!”

Sansa rolled her eyes and started snickering. “Would you listen to yourself? What are you doing to me? You think for one second I want to tell them no? Do you think I want to take one of those sweet pups home and leave the other one sitting here in a cage? I can barely stand the thoughts of walking out of here leaving any of them behind. Hell, I want to take that cage full of kittens but I’m telling myself maybe Mina’s allergic to keep from doing just that!”
“God, we are in so much trouble, aren’t we?” he chuckled. He put his hands around her waist and leaned his head against hers. “How are we going to say no to anything?”

“We will. We do already. We’ll say no when we must, honey,” she said, kissing his cheek. “So, can we please get them both?”

“Do you think for one second I want to tell you no?” he asked. “We’re in this together, right?” She nodded. “Okay…so we’ll adopt both.” Sansa clapped and hugged him tightly. “And may God have mercy on our carpets because I have a feeling those two won’t.”

She laughed and led him back to the girls to share the news that both their parents were complete push-overs.

Lyarra woke feeling sweaty and uncomfortable. She’d had a weird dream and wanted Dad. She sat up and blinked a few times.

“Daddy?”
She listened and listened. There was no response.

She noticed the doggy bed in the corner of the room. It was empty.

“Ghost!”

She scrambled out of bed. She looked under it and in her closet. No little white pup. Her heart started racing and she was scared. Where had he gone? Did she just dream everything?

_I didn’t just dream it. It was real. We brought Ghost and Lady home this afternoon._

They had adopted the puppies and then gone to the pet supply store. Dad and Sansa had bickered some over the cost of everything but overall they seemed happy. Dad had grinned really wide when Lyarra pulled out his chore wheel and said it was good he’d made it since now there would be two dogs to take care of. She figured a little fib wouldn’t hurt if it made him happy.

Then, they’d spent the rest of the day making their new family members feel at home. Lyarra had proudly been the first to scoop out their food into the brand-new dog bowls. Mina had given them water. She’d also had fun putting ribbons around Lady’s collar to ‘fancy it up.’ Lyarra wasn’t too sure about that plan but it seemed to please Mina.

_As long as she doesn’t do that to Ghost._

Ghost liked to play chase. Lyarra would pretend to chase him and then she’d turn around and squeal and Ghost would come running after her. He was a little clumsy at times but, if he stumbled, she’d pick him up and hug him. Then, they’d start all over. She thought he’d be good at hide and seek soon, too.

They’d played fetch with both dogs after dinner. Well, they’d tried. The pups mostly sat and stared at the sticks her and Mina threw in the backyard and then went to pee on the bushes. At least no one fussed about that.
Dad and Sansa had been rather busy trying to clean up messes the pups had made over the course of the day in the house. They would have to learn about the right place to do their business. Lyarra was sure they would. They were both really smart dogs. But they were still learning. She didn’t want Dad or Sansa to be mad and she kept following them around and apologizing for every accident.

They were quieter than Lyarra expected dogs to be. But at bedtime, the pups had started whimpering when Dad had tried to put their doggy beds in the laundry room.

“They’ll quiet down soon,” he’d said as he tucked her in.

They hadn’t. They were soon howling pitifully and her and Lyarra were howling along with them.

“Please, Dad! Ghost needs to be near me or he’ll get scared! The laundry room’s kind of spooky at night!” she’d shouted from her bed.

“Please, Mommy! Lady wants to sleep in my room! I’m her mommy now and she wants to be close to me!” she’d heard Mina crying through the wall.

Looking more than a little cross and worn down, Dad and Sansa had agreed. They had come tromping into each room with a doggy bed and a puppy. Both had complained of being exhausted. Lyarra couldn’t believe they were tired. She was way too excited to sleep.

Ghost had done a quick inspection of her room…and a quick piddle by the closet door. Dad had done a huffy breath and pinched the bridge of his nose before he went to fetch paper towels. Lyarra had sat up watching the pup sniff around until Ghost yawned sleepily and curled up in his bed.

*I’m going to watch him all night. I’m going to wait till I’m sure he’s asleep and Dad leaves the room and bring him to my b*[164x421]ed.*

“Goodnight, baby,” Dad had said, kissing the top of her head and turning off the lights. He had left the door cracked.

“Goodnight, Daddy. Thank you again!”

She had figured some more thanks were due. She planned on thanking him and Sansa every ten minutes from now until she turned nine.

She had soon heard little snuffling snores coming from Ghost. She could just imagine cuddling him close while she slept. She’d tossed her stuffed pal Ghost to the end of her bed. Just a few more minutes and it’d be safe to go get the real deal.

But then she had conked out.

“Ghost!” she called again in the empty room. “Daddy?”

She decided to go searching. She crept to Mina’s room.

*They’re brother and sister. They shared a cage at the shelter. Maybe Ghost missed her and went to sleep next to her.*

She was okay with that. But they’d need to take turns sleeping in her room and Mina’s if that was the case because obviously it’d be no fair for them to always sleep in Mina’s room.

She cracked open the door and peered inside. They were there, snuggled together in the little dog bed that Dad said they’d outgrow eventually. They looked so peaceful. She hated to bother them.
“Mina,” she said, shaking her by the foot.

“Mm…what?”

“Ghost is sleeping with Lady in here.”

“M’kay.”

“Can I sleep with you? Mina? Hey, Mina! Ugh.”

Mina was already fast asleep again. And she was in the middle of her bed. It would be cramped if she tried to climb in next to her.

She decided to go see if Dad would help her move Ghost…and tuck her back in. She retrieved her stuffed friend from her room. He was still good company and easier to tote around than a live puppy. Then, she padded quietly to the living room.

Dad and Sansa were still awake. She was surprised he hadn’t heard her calling. She peeked around the corner and could see the back of Sansa’s head. She was on her phone. Dad was on his laptop. They were sitting together on the sofa and didn’t notice her. Sansa hung up and they started talking. Lyarra kept quiet. She was curious after all.

“I think I found a couple of obedience classes that could work,” Dad said, closing his laptop.

“Okay.”

“What did Margaery say?” Dad asked. He pulled Sansa up against him and started kissing her.

Ewww…

Well, it wasn’t the grossest thing ever. She was happy they were in love but did Dad have to kiss Sansa all the time?

“She laughed and called us suckers,” Sansa said.

Lyarra wondered why Mina’s Aunt Marg would say that. She also wondered if she should go ahead and make her presence known.

“Did you tell her to wait till she’s a parent before she starts throwing stones?”

Sansa started giggling and he didn’t let her answer right away. Dad pushed her further into the sofa pillows and began kissing her neck now. Lyarra figured it must tickle.

“I didn’t. Let her find out the hard way, right? Besides, she was complaining that if Robb sees them he’ll be asking for a dog again.”

“Oh, a puppy and a newborn? I wouldn’t envy them that.”

“Yes. But, Margaery did tease that it might be good practice for us,” Sansa said. “For later…when we, uh…”

Dad sat up and stopped kissing Sansa’s neck. Obviously, Dad was as confused as Lyarra was based on the funny look he gave Sansa.

“Uh…Sansa?”
“No! No, I’m not! I didn’t mean it like that! Just when we start trying,” she laughed. “Marg just meant that puppies can keep you up at night and leave you with lots of messes to clean up.”

“True…but puppies aren’t the same as babies.”

*What does that even mean? Puppies are babies.*

“No, they’re not. But you must admit there are some similarities.”

“Well, yeah…” Dad started leaning in to kiss her some more. “You know, now I’m thinking about how much I envy your brother.”

“Oh, Jon…” she heard Sansa say all soft.

Dad was smiling now, that really dorky smile he gave Sansa a bunch. It was kind of sweet really. But if any boy at school ever looked at her like that, Lyarra might tell him to go see the school nurse…or stomp of his foot.

“And the puppies could be a form of practice, I suppose” he said, standing up and pulling Sansa to her feet. “But I can also think of some other forms of practice when it comes to that subject. I mean, we can’t get the cart before the horse. No 2AM feedings can happen until we take care of the birds and the bees and all that.”

Sansa was back to giggling again and Lyarra was more confused than ever.

*What on Earth is he talking about? He really must be tired.*

“In fact, I think it’s time we head to bed and do a little…oh, hey! Look, love! Lyarra’s out of bed!”

He kind of yelped that last part like she’d scared him or something.

Lyarra scowled at them both. She wasn’t sure what they were talking about and she didn’t like that. It always bugged her when she realized they were talking about something and it was going over her head.

But it was late and she was really tired now so she didn’t say anything. Plus, she was still supposed to be thanking them every ten minutes for the dogs.

She made her request to get her puppy back in her room but instead Dad carried her to Mina’s room. Sansa gently moved Mina to one side of the bed and Dad laid her down next to her. Lyarra curled up on her side and held onto Stuffed Ghost, letting Real Ghost keep sleeping next to his sister while she slept next to hers.

*Well, she’s almost my sister. Close enough anyway,* she decided as she closed her eyes.

She didn’t get back out of bed and disturb her pup that night. They could play together tomorrow, all four of them, all day. *Me, Mina, Ghost and Lady.* This was obviously going to be the best summer ever even if it was half over.
Has anyone ever had the thing with Buddy/Max happen to them? I've only heard of it but I know it occasionally happens. But they were really meant to find Lady and Ghost of course. And sometimes, I really hate being a grownup, too. Honestly, telling your kids no to something they want so desperately is just the worst. So, it's nice when you can say yes.
“You’re fucking kidding me,” Jon grumbled under his breath as he pulled his loafer out of Ghost’s mouth. Lady had already chewed up one of his Oxfords. “Could you two have, I don’t know, maybe just destroyed one pair of shoes instead of one shoe of two separate pairs?”

“Jon!” Sansa called from the kitchen where her and the girls were finishing up breakfast. “Your phone’s ringing! I think it might be the DA’s office!”

“Answer it, will you?” he hollered back.

He held up the drool-covered loafer and gave the puppies a stern look. They both whimpered and tucked their tails. They’d started obedience training two weeks ago but it was still an uphill battle most days.

Deciding that Ghost had been kinder to his loafer than Lady had treated his Oxford, he wiped it down and slid it on before selecting a tie. He laid it on the bed and brushed his hair back, attempting to tame the curls into something professional looking. Normally, when he and Brienne met to get things rolling for the new year, things were extremely casual. But, Brienne had mentioned they might have visitors from the Board of Education today.

“It’s the DA, Jon,” Sansa said from the doorway of their bedroom. She handed over his phone and plopped down on the bed petting the dogs who were still shooting remorseful looks his way. He groaned when he hung up. “What do they want?” she asked.

“Looks like I’ll be going to court next week over the accident.”

“Ugh…really? I thought they’d said it was a done deal.”

“Apparently, they were counting their chickens before they hatched. So now, I get to go testify about the accident which I don’t really remember. I get they want to lock the guy up for DUI…”

“Well, it wasn’t his first DUI and he could’ve killed you. He’s lucky Rhae and I didn’t find him first.”

He was almost tempted to snicker at the fierce expression on her face but figured that’d be a mistake. “Yeah, but I have no memory of anything from when I left your house that morning till I woke up in the hospital. They’re going to hold up pictures of my poor Jeep and ask me to say, ‘Yeah, that’s my Jeep that looks like a pretzel. I was driving it when the accident happened.’ I guess I shouldn’t complain but I’m afraid with more and more days that we’ll need to go in to prep for the upcoming year, we’re running out of lazy days with the girls.”
School would be starting back in two weeks. Starting today, he’d be there four out of five days helping sort schedules, class assignments and late registrations. Sansa would be going Tuesday and Thursday as well.

Plus, football would be gearing up again. He’d already spent a couple of nights registering players. Some of the older boys he helped coach had come around asking if he’d liked to participate in some pre-season scrimmages. He could’ve said no but he enjoyed getting a chance to go out and play with them. Sansa had seemed amused when he’d asked if she minded him being gone a couple of nights but she’d not said no. She’d said she’d like to watch him play. He knew he was not in his prime playing years but he was thrilled at the thought of her coming to watch him.

Then last night, they’d agreed to have a cookout for their family and friends next weekend to sort of celebrate the end of summer vacation but also to host something as a couple. Jon had never really hosted much of anything beyond Rhae and Theon dropping by for dinner before Sansa came along so he was a bit nervous about it. The Starks would all be there and Harry had been invited as well as Theon and Rhæ.

“Our days aren’t all that lazy,” Sansa laughed. “But, summer is slipping away. I’m just grateful for all the time we’ve had. I worked all last summer, you know.”

He started to concede the point until he saw his tie sliding off the other side of the bed. “No, Ghost!” he shouted as the pup took off down the hallway with Lady snapping at his heels. He could hear girlish giggles coming from the hall…and girlish giggles coming from behind him on the bed. “Real funny,” he groused at Sansa.

“Hey, Dad,” Lyarra said, bringing back his tie.

It was damp. Jon groaned and tossed it on his dresser before selecting another. But Sansa shook her head. “Nope, not that one.”

She chose another and sauntered over to put it around his neck. She stood in front of him, a sexy, flirtatious smile on her lips as she began tying it. He grinned at her as she looked up from beneath her lashes, biting at her lip in a teasing manner. At least, it seemed teasing in his opinion. Jon thought he’d like to nibble on those lips. He put his hands on her hips, prepared to say as much, but she stiffened and subtly shook her head. Lyarra was still standing there.

“Did you need something, baby?” he asked, chastising himself for letting his libido muddle his thinking.

Between the puppies and the girls, they’d been exhausted by bedtime every night for over two weeks now. Two quick and desperate fucks had taken some of the edge off but mostly, they’d had to be content with a little kissing most nights. The puppies would often get into mischief during the night or just start whimpering or howling. And both Mina and Lyarra sometimes had trouble falling or staying asleep. He missed being able to take his time with Sansa. He missed making love to his woman slowly and tenderly. He felt sorry for the lonely guy he’d been a few months ago but, now that he had Sansa in his bed every night, he only wanted more.

“Mina and I were wondering if we could go with you today?”

“With me?”

He was surprised. Lyarra had asked to go a couple of weeks ago when he’d had a meeting with Brienne but then Sansa had taken them both swimming over at the condo with Bran. She’d always complained in the past about being drug to school with him in the summers. But now that there was
another adult at home to leave the girls with, she seemed to want to go.

*Maybe she wants to show Mina around again.*

“Yeah, Dad. We’d rather go there than run errands.”

He looked at Sansa, unsure of what she thought. “I’m going to Wal-mart and Home Depot,” she shrugged. “It’s not exactly thrilling. But you’re the one working. It’s up to you.”

“Okay, sure. You can go. But some of the teachers are coming in to start organizing their classrooms and Brienne says there might be some people there from the school board so you might not be able to run off to explore or…”

“Okay, Dad!” Lyarra said, already darting off to tell Mina.

“They can just come with me if you prefer,” Sansa said, giving him a scrutinizing look.

“Nah, they’ll be alright. I worry more about these two,” he said, pointing at the pups.

“I’ll get them crated once you three leave.”

He nodded and started to put his hands back on her hips. He could lock the door. It wouldn’t take all that long. He could be quiet. Quick and dirty beat the hell out of nothing.

“You’ll be late, Mr. Snow,” Sansa teased.

“Ugh…”

____________________________________

“We’re going,” Lyarra said, coming to sit on Mina’s bed.

“Do you think this will work?” she asked doubtfully. They’d already asked Jon and he’d said it was unlikely.

“Hopefully. I mean, Dad’s just the assistant principal and he hates asking for favors. Ms. Tarth is the big boss though. She’s always been super-duper nice to me and she’s bound to love you, too. We’ll lay out our position and make it clear that it’d be, um…more practical if we’re in the same class. That way if we’re both sick one day, Dad and Sansa only have to go to one teacher.”

“Or if they had to check us out early for the dentist or something, they’d only have to go to one classroom.”

“Exactly!”

“Do you really get to play in the classrooms when you go to the school during the summer?” Mina asked.

She loved playing teacher. Since she’d started kindergarten, she would play class in her bedroom. She’d line up her stuffed animals on her bed and stand at her art easel and give lessons. Sometimes Mommy would let her borrow a pair of her heels or a scarf or cardigan.
She’d thought it would be fun to play that with Lyarra but, unfortunately, Lyarra seemed to think it was fun to act rowdy if she was the student and horrid if she was the teacher. Mina couldn’t quite grasp why Lyarra couldn’t enjoy just being a model student or perfect and sweet teacher. It was so much more pleasant that way. Of course, Lyarra usually wanted to play outside anyway but on rainy days they’d played class together a time or two.

Jon had caught Mina playing a few days ago and said he’d find her a nameplate if she wanted one for her ‘desk’ which was her dresser. She couldn’t wait. It would feel very official.

“Well, he usually won’t let me go into the classrooms unless there’s a teacher there who wants some help. Mrs. Glover used to love for me to make copies or help organize her book nook. Sometimes, if Ms. Frey’s there, she’ll let me play on her piano…not that I can play really.”


She could picture it so perfectly. She’d be in an actual classroom, standing in front of actual desks. There’d even be a whiteboard she could write instructions on. She clapped her hands together excitedly.

Lyarra looked at her kind of funny. “I don’t want you thinking this is the best thing ever. I mean, we’re going to talk to Ms. Tarth. Dad may let us run around a bit but mostly we’re just going to line up being in the same class, right?”

“Of course.”

They had both appeared to be giving him their full attention…

“So, you can play in the gym but you’ll need to put away any equipment you get out. Or, you may read in the library. Ms. Liddle said she doesn’t mind. Otherwise, you need to hang out in my office. No running up and down the halls. The custodians are here and won’t appreciate that. And, definitely no snooping in the classrooms, understood?”

“Yes,” they had both said.

“Excellent.”

Looking back, there was something vaguely reminiscent about it.

An hour later, Jon had no idea where the girls had wandered off to. They weren’t in the gym, Ms. Liddle hadn’t seen them and they weren’t in his office. He checked the copy room but only Mrs. Dustin was there making copies of the same old worksheets she used every year. She sniffed in a disapproving manner when Jon greeted her and returned to her copier.

And then, Brienne had called over the intercom for him to meet her at the entrance to greet their visitors. He couldn’t exactly run off to hunt down wayward girls while following Brienne and Superintendent Selmy around as they discussed potential renovations to the school.

Walking beside Jon was Jaime Lannister who served on the Board for the Western District. He’d
been a fixture downtown for a few years now. Polished and handsome with a way with words, Jon couldn’t pinpoint exactly why he didn’t care for the guy. He just didn’t.

A wealthy family and the right connections had seen him rise from a brand new high school teacher after he’d left his previous career in finance to the School Board in the space of two years. Maybe some people would say the same of him though. He’d certainly become an assistant principal faster than he would’ve expected…if he’d been expecting it at all. Jon had a hard time picturing Lannister in a classroom teaching but maybe some people would say the same of him.

But maybe I could picture it for myself again.

Teaching. He missed it. He loved aspects of administration but, more and more, he missed having a classroom of students that were his all year to guide and to mold. He missed hearing their creative ideas and watching their nimble young minds take old information and come up with something new to say about it.

It’d mean less money though. I wonder what Sansa would think.

Money could be an issue. His family of two was now four along with two dogs. And, he held hopes of expanding their family. Sansa wanted that as well. Her position didn’t pay very much but she would be finishing her degree in December if all went well. Still…he didn’t want her to feel like she had to work to support them if she wanted to stay home with a baby someday. She’d not had that luxury with Mina. He wanted to be able to give her whatever she wanted.

He kept walking alongside Lannister quietly, lost in his thoughts, until he became aware of the banter, bordering on bickering, between Brienne and Jaime. They seemed to get on well enough most of the time but he’d heard them get into heated exchanges in her office a few times. Brienne wasn’t exactly the sort of person who seemed to need any help holding her own in an argument but Jon had tried intervening a time or two. He’d always wound up feeling as though he’d intruded on something though.

Currently though, Brienne was tittering over some quip Jaime had made. Jon couldn’t say he’d ever before heard Brienne titter.

“Did you hear Donal Noye is retiring at the end of this school year?” Jaime asked him a moment later.

“Yeah. He’ll be missed.”

The head principal of Long Castle High had been talking about retirement for a few years now. He’d been the assistant principal and helped with the football team when Jon was a student and they’d been in touch since Jon had reached out to him when he’d decided to pursue a degree in education.

“There’s rumors going around about who might be a good replacement for him,” Jaime said with a meaningful look.

Jon glanced at Brienne who was speaking with Selmy again. “She’d be terrific.”

“Well, I won’t disagree with that but it’s not her name being tossed around.”

“You lost me.”

“God, Snow. Are you always so self-effacing? They’re talking about you.”

“Me? But…my degree’s in primary education and I’ve never worked in a…”
“Same as Brienne.”

“Brienne is the principal. I’m just the assistant. Why would she be overlooked? Not to mention that I’m sure there’s other more experienced administrators in the system. I’d be in over my head.”

Jaime rolled his eyes. “Noye’s always talking you up. So is Brienne. Don’t stand in your own way. Think of your career. You’ve got a daughter to put through college, right?”

“Well…yeah.”

Head principal at the high school would pay more, much more than his current salary. It could also involve many more headaches.

*Return to teaching and make less. Tackle something new, something you’re not even sure you’d be any good at but make more.*

He ignored Lannister smirking at him and kept walking.

They had entered the fourth-grade hallway where Brienne hoped to sway Selmy that the computer lab needed some serious upgrades when Jon heard them. Mrs. Dustin’s door was open and the lights were on which he expected since he’d seen her earlier. He did not expect to hear girlish voices coming from her room though.

He jogged ahead of the others in time to see Mina finish writing ‘Miss Hardyng’ on the whiteboard. The ‘i’ in Miss had a heart over it. But she’d failed to use one of the dry erase markers. She’d used a Sharpie.

*What the fuck?!

Barbrey was probably the bitterest old bitty Jon had ever met and certainly the crabbiest 4th grade teacher he’d seen this side of the twenty-first century. If there was one instructor in the entire school he wouldn’t want his girls to get on the wrong side of, it was her. He didn’t even want to be on the wrong side of her.

He glanced at where Lyarra sat in the one of the desks in the front row scribbling away on some worksheet.

“Please finish your work and turn it in,” Mina said crisply, clapping her hands together as she laid down her marker. She turned and Jon was shocked to see she’d thrown on one of Barbrey’s black cardigans and had a pair of her reading glasses sliding down her nose.

“Girls! What are you doing?!” he roared.

Both girls jumped and looked guiltily his way. Lyarra opened her mouth immediately though she’d not thought up an explanation yet. Mina’s was clamped shut but her eyes were already tearing up.

“Oh, is school back in session already?” Jaime Lannister laughed from behind him. “Are these your daughters, Jon? Wait…I thought you only had the one kid.”

He shot an irritated glance at Lannister before he heard a strangled cry. Barbrey had returned with her armload of copies.

“My whiteboard! My…are those my glasses?!” she shrieked.

Now Selmy and Brienne had joined them. Lyarra was sliding down the chair, looking to find a
hiding spot under the desk. Jon thought he’d like to join her there.

But Mina was facing all five adults. “I’m sorry,” she said meekly. She set down the reading glasses and took off the sweater, placing it carefully back at Barbrey’s desk. “I just wanted to pretend.”

His heart broke for her in a way even while the anger over their disobedience was already surging through him like a tidal wave. Jaime and Selmy stepped away with a muttered word about finding their own way to the computer lab. But Barbrey was not done.

“Mr. Snow,” Barbrey hissed, her eyes narrowed and her chin quivering with wrath, “I’m sympathetic to the fact you have no wife to care for your daughter but that does not mean that I appreciate…”

“Barbrey,” Brienne interrupted with a tight smile. “I’ll get one of the custodians to see to your board. I’m sure the marker will come out with the right cleaning agent.”

“We’ll clean it,” Lyarra volunteered from her hiding spot. “We’re sorry. Dad, we…”

Barbrey turned towards Lyarra, ready to tear his eight-year-old a new one. Mina was in tears now. Anger at their disobedience was mixed with his desire to protect them. He needed to remove them from this situation. He needed to remove himself from this situation at once.

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Dustin. I’m sorry, Brienne. I think we need to head on home for today. Girls, come with me,” he said gruffly.

They followed in silence, reminding him of the pups with their tails tucked from this morning. His mind churned over his instructions from earlier and this clear violation of those instructions as they climbed into the Pilot and he headed towards the house. He made it half way before his anger and embarrassment over the circumstances won out.

Sansa frowned as she pulled into the driveway and saw the Pilot sitting there. Normally, Jon backed it into the garage. But that wasn’t the real issue. It was only a quarter past eleven. She’d not expected them home until two.

As soon as she opened the door, the tension was palpable. There were no raised voices but it was almost as if she could hear their echoes. Both pups slunk towards her, tails tucked and whimpering. She could hear a girl sobbing from the living room and Jon’s soft rumbled responses. She could hear another one crying somewhere further away.

Oh, shit. “I’m home!” she called, giving the poor pups a reassuring scratch behind the ears. But do I want to be?

She walked into the living room to find Lyarra in Jon’s lap. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she was snotty-nosed from crying. Jon was still in his work clothes but he’d pulled his tie off.

Flustered was the first word that came to mind when Sansa looked at him but that didn’t cover all of it. He’d been angry recently. She was certain of it. And something in his eyes told her he’d been hurt, too. Sansa couldn’t say how she knew all this at a glance but she did. Mina’s intuitive nature
came from someone after all and that someone wasn’t Harry. “I hate her! I want her to leave! She can go live with her dad!”

“No, you don’t hate her, Lyarra. Don’t say that,” Jon said quietly as Lyarra broke down into renewed sobs.

She clung to his neck, mumbling apologies and telling him he was the best dad and she didn’t deserve him. Sansa knew exactly which ‘she’ Lyarra was referring to.

“What’d I miss?” Sansa asked, already cringing internally. She knew they’d fight at some point. She hoped they’d not fought at the school but apparently, they had.

Lyarra looked up at her. There was a mix of emotions to read there as well; anger, hurt and fear. She quickly buried her face in Jon’s shoulder again.

“Lyarra…I need to talk with Sansa.”

He stroked Lyarra’s hair and asked her to take the dogs into the backyard. She finally climbed out of his lap, still shuddering with sobs as she raced past Sansa without a word, as though she was afraid of speaking to her.

As soon as the backdoor closed, Jon put his hands in his face and groaned. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I feel like I fucked up majorly but I also feel like I was right. I was right…but I handled it wrong. I don’t know,” he said with a sigh. “I lost my temper and…I know I’m not her father. I…”

He trailed off and Sansa could tell from his expression he was hurting again. She sat down next to him and put an arm around his shoulders. “Tell me,” she said.

And he did.

In retrospect, they had set themselves up for this. Sure, they’d discussed being in charge of the girls, being the ‘parent’ to the child who was not their biological child. Jon had granted her guardianship of Lyarra and they were laying the ground work for adoption once they married. Things were a bit stickier in Mina’s case. Harry was her father. He had joint custody. He’d not argued over permissions regarding school, medical care and such for Jon but Jon would not be able to adopt Mina unless Harry wanted to surrender his parental rights which he would not do. Sansa didn’t want that anyway. For all his faults, Harry loved Mina and Mina loved him. But she knew it could leave Jon in limbo legally speaking with regards to his rights when it came to Mina.

So, they’d discussed all this a good deal between themselves but Sansa realized they should’ve discussed it more with the girls. ‘Listen to Jon,’ she’d told her daughter more than once when he’d been left in charge. ‘Listen to Sansa,’ he’d said to Lyarra. Looking back, it was more like something they might say to a babysitter. But they weren’t babysitting. They were supposed to be parenting.

And neither of them had made it plain to the girls that the other adult in the house was to be acknowledged with the same respect as their parent. They’d failed to make it clear that both adults had the right to enforce rules, agree to or deny requests and impose punishments if needed.

Partly, the oversight was understandable. Neither girl was what Sansa would deem as difficult. Lyarra was more given to high-spiritedness and drama but she was hardly a ‘problem child.’ And Mina, though sometimes a bit of a ‘know-it-all,’ was usually a very well-behaved child. They were victims of their own complacency and, unfortunately, the girls were hurting because of it. Jon was as well but that could be dealt later.
"After she called him, she said she wanted to be left alone," Jon finished. "I thought maybe that'd be best since...I didn't know what else to say."

Sansa walked to Mina’s room and found her daughter sitting on her bed, brushing one of her Barbie’s hair and still sniffing. Her daughter looked up at her with watery blue eyes, the hope and relief on her face at the sight of her mother. This was a new experience for Sansa. She had always been the bad cop, the enforcer. Harry was always the one who let everything slide. He was the cool dad. Now, Mina was looking to her to fill that role maybe. But she wasn’t here to play the hero. She was here to heal things for their fledgling family.

“I called Daddy,” Mina said.

Sansa knew that. Jon had told her, the wound clearly visible in his expression. She tried to tell herself that her eight-year-old wasn’t intentionally trying to sow discord between the two men. But children are clever and Mina didn't like being in trouble with Jon so maybe she thought bringing Harry into it would fix it. Harry was the good cop after all.

“And what did he say?” Sansa asked.

“He…I got his voice mail.”

*What a surprise,* Sansa thought to herself. It wasn’t fair though. Harry was in sales and he didn’t answer his phone when he was busy schmoozing a customer.

“I’m sure he’ll call back when he can,” Sansa said, sitting down beside Mina. *Although, I’m not sure what he’ll say about this. “What happened at school, baby?”* 

“I was only pretending. I said sorry. I didn’t know the marker was the wrong kind.”

“Didn’t Jon tell you not to go snooping around classrooms?”

“He yelled at me,” Mina said with a petulant scowl. “I said sorry and he yelled anyway.”

“He was angry. He’s sorry for yelling.” Mina huffed and Sansa stroked her hair. “I’ve yelled at you in the past when I was frustrated. We’re not perfect, darling.” Mina was silent. “Mina…he had the right to be angry. You did something wrong. You deliberately disobeyed Jon. You talked Lyarra into joining you.”

“She was bored, too,” Mina said, picking at her bedspread sullenly.

“Mina,” she said more sharply. “When you’re with Jon, he’s in charge. He’s…”

“Not my dad!” She was getting angry.

“No, he’s not…but he’s going to be your step-father.” Her heart rate was increasing and she was feeling short of breath. “And you already spend more time with him than you do your father!”

*He’s been more of a father to you in the past five months than…*

*Breathe, calm down.*

She had to keep control of her own emotions. Getting angry over Harry would not help matters right now.

“Mina…I’m sorry for what happened today. Jon and I have somethings we need to make very clear to you both. I’m sorry for leaving things…vague.”
“Vague?”

“Uncertain, I mean. I think we need to have a family discussion over dinner about our expectations and explain a few things to you and Lyarra. There’s some stuff we need to figure out as a family and work through.” She pulled Mina into a hug and whispered, “You want us to be a family, right? I want that. I want that very much.”

“Yes, I do...” Mina said as the tears returned. “But what if I ruined it?”

“You didn’t ruin anything.”

“I hurt Jon. I told him he wasn’t my dad, that he’d never be my dad and I didn’t love him anymore.”

“He knows you love him, baby.”

“Lyarra hates me.”

“No, baby. She doesn’t. She’s mad because...well, you did hurt Jon and Lyarra loves her dad so much.” Mina cried harder. “He’ll be okay.” She cupped her daughter’s face and wiped away the tears. “Sometimes, families say things they don’t really mean or hurt each other when they’re angry. But we can forgive each other and work through it, can’t we?”

“Yes, Mommy,” she said uncertainly.

Sansa held her close for several minutes, waiting patiently for the tears to lessen. They’d be alright. She knew they would. They’d just keep working at it.

"Could you come and help me unload the car? I was going to make a pie for after dinner. Would you want to help? You don't have to if you'd rather stay here but we always have good talks while we bake, don't we?"

Mina straightened and wiped away the last of her tears. "Okay, Mommy."

Sansa fetched Jon a Heineken and poured herself a glass of wine before rejoining him on the deck that night after dinner. The girls were playing on the swing set, chattering together happily as though nothing had happened earlier. She didn’t believe for a second that either of them had forgotten but they were choosing to move on and she was grateful for that.

They’d spend a good deal of the afternoon talking with each other, the adults with each girl and also as a family. Mina and Jon embracing tightly had been a sweet moment after the harsh words of earlier and the girls hugging each other tearfully, making their apologies at the same time, had been another. Talking was the only way to resolve these sorts of things; talking and listening…and patience.

The conversation had flowed to lighter topics during dinner; puppies, school supplies and soccer practice and tree forts that Grandpa Ned was going to start working on in a couple of days.

Jon had moved to the lounge chair when she came back out and she slid in next to him, allowing him to rest his head on her shoulder as she toyed with his curls.
“You okay?”

“Yeah…I’m fine now. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“The way you handled everything so well. I kind of let my hurt feelings hold me back. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you coming home and…”

“You would’ve handled it, Jon. It’s not always going to be easy but you’re capable. We both are.”

“What did Harry say?” he asked.

Sansa swallowed her sip before answering. She didn’t know Jon knew Harry had called her back after he got off work. Mina had used Jon’s phone to call him. She could only imagine the message Harry might’ve received.

“He was…concerned. But only at first. He understood.” She could see Jon’s brow furrow. “He knows you’re a good father. He knows you love Mina and she was angry when she left that message.”

“I know. I just hate feeling like a failure. I especially hate looking like one in front of others.”

“Don’t we all,” she chuckled. “I guess Brienne and the others were enough for one day though. Harry’s not casting any stones anyway.” She kissed his temple. “Do you think we made ourselves clear tonight?” They’d went over the expectations thoroughly before dinner.

“I think so.”

“Is Lyarra okay? With me, I mean. Earlier she was…”

“She loves you so much, Sansa. She thinks of you as her mother already.” Sansa inhaled shakily. It was wonderful to be that important to another child…and intimidating, too. “She’s scared of losing you.”

“She’s not going to lose me.”

“I know.”

They’d decided taking away television privileges for a few days would be enough of a punishment, as well as having the girls write Mrs. Dustin a letter apologizing for their actions. The girls had admitted their reasons for wanting to go to the school and Jon and Sansa had both explained to the best of their abilities yet again why siblings weren’t allowed to be in the same class.

"We know you're not blood sisters but when we get married, you will be step-sisters and..."

"We are sisters," Lyarra had said. She glanced at Mina. "Right?"

"We are," Mina had nodded. "And I guess if that's the rule, that's the rule."

“So, you're sisters all the time and you'll just go to different classrooms in the morning. You’ll still be coming home with us every day.”

That seemed to help bring the discussion to an end.

Jon glanced back over his shoulder at the clock hanging by the sliding glass door. “It’s getting late. I
guess we should take them in soon.”

“Let them run around a bit longer. Summer is fading fast enough. We’ll watch the fireflies come out.”

She finished her glass and set it down. Jon smiled, abandoning his half-finished beer as he nestled closer, his warm arms wrapped around her. She felt happy and loved beside him as twilight approached while girls played and laughed and puppies yipped and tussled.

The tension and distress from earlier was easing more and more. They hadn’t solved the world’s problems and there would be plenty of new issues to figure out as they kept building towards something together. There might still be plenty of challenges ahead for them as parents and as a family but for tonight, things were peaceful once more.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to the Peace Corps but Parenthood really is the toughest job you'll ever love.

I know, I know...Poor Mina just wanted to play class. Poor Jon struggling to handle it and getting his feelings hurt. Poor Lyarra caught in the middle. Poor Sansa the Peace-maker. A little growing pains is expected for them all though, right? They'll be fine as they keep building their relationships.

Next chapter we'll see Jon still thinking he's a teenager on the pitch (he's not) and both Jon and Sansa hosting friends and family at their home for a cookout. So we'll get some Starks, Harry, Theon and Rhae along with our four main characters at one event. Sansa might get a bit frazzled trying to be the hostess with the mostess and Jon might stumble upon an unexpected surprise.
This chapter turned out super long but I hope you'll enjoy it :)

And a little terminology for those who don't follow soccer/football. To nutmeg an opponent means to shoot/pass the ball between his/her legs.

“You alright, Coach?”

“Oh…yep…just fine,” Jon wheezed as he called for a sub. Just feeling every single one of those extra miles I have on you guys at the moment.

It was a beautiful evening to be on the pitch and, despite the fact his knees would probably be reminding Jon he wasn’t a teenager anymore come morning, he was happy to be out here.

Sitting in court for three hours today waiting to testify had been interesting, depressing and mind-numbingly boring by turns depending on what was happening. And then, after dealing with his nervousness about being sworn in and testifying on the stand, he was informed that the defendant had agreed to a plea offer after all, six months in jail with the option for him to spend that time in a residential treatment program to deal with his alcoholism.

“Thanks for coming down. We won’t be needing you,” the DA said.

“Wait…so that’s it for me?”

“Yes. Sorry for the hassle, Mr. Snow.”

“No, it’s fine. I just…”

He’d trailed off and let the young lady get back to her job. He supposed it was just business as usual to her.

He’d glanced over where the defendant sat wearing a navy blazer and blue jeans, talking with his attorney. He didn’t look like a criminal. He just looked like an ordinary, blue collar kind of guy who happened to like drinking a bit too much and made the terrible decision to drive afterwards. But when Jon thought of what his poor decisions could’ve meant for him and his daughter and Sansa and Mina, he decided it was best for him to leave the courtroom.

So, he was glad to be outside, enjoying the summer evening and playing his favorite sport tonight. He’d been asked to scrimmage with the Under 18s to help them get ready for the season and, though he would probably feel it tomorrow, he was happy getting to play. Theon had been trying to talk him into joining an adult indoor league with him but the games were late on Sunday nights and he figured that’d make Monday mornings tougher than they already were.

He was pleased that Sansa had come to watch him along with the girls tonight. She’d spread out a blanket on the little hill that overlooked the field. Lyarra had brought a ball. She and Mina were
currently taking shots on a spare goal nearby.

He drank some water and wiped the sweat off his brow before sitting down near two boys from the other side who were out at the moment. He gave Sansa a discreet wave and she smiled back at him. Lyarra had told him earlier she hoped he scored. He’d said it was unlikely but then Sansa had whispered he could always score later. He planned on that.

“Whoa, look at her,” one of the boys said. He was new to the team and the other players called him Little Walder. But he wasn’t remotely little. He was taller and heavier than Jon.

“Who? Mya?” Trystane Martell asked. He was a nice kid who had been on the team for a few years. “She’s here watching Mychel.”

“No, not Mya. The red head in blue over there.”

Jon smirked as he realized they were talking about Sansa. She did look amazing. She had just slid her sunglasses up into her hair that was swept over one shoulder. She had her long legs spread out in front of her. She’d kicked off her sandals and he knew her toenails were painted dark red. She was wearing a blue halter top and navy shorts. Jon looked forward to untying her halter later and pulling those shorts off her.

“Dude…she’s got two little kids with her. She’s a mom.”

“So? She’s a total MILF. I’d wear her like a belt and introduce her to Not-So-Little Walder.”

Jon’s smirk disappeared. He turned and growled savagely at the pair of them. “That’s my fiancée.”

Two sets of eyebrows disappeared into shaggy bangs that covered pimply foreheads.

“Sorry, Coach,” Trystane said.

Walder, the one who had labeled Sansa a MILF, said nothing. He just gave him a smug grin.

Little shit. Maybe I’ll wipe that grin off your face when we get back out there.

One of the defenders for his side called for a sub and Jon jumped up at once, eager to go play again and burn off his annoyance over the incident.

“You okay, Coach?” Little Walder asked him a few minutes later. “Not too winded, are you?” He was dribbling the ball, trying to get past Jon to set up a shot on goal.

“I’m fine,” he responded as he shadowed the kid’s movements, looking for an opportunity to steal.

“It’s hot out here tonight. Maybe you should take another water break. Wouldn’t want someone your age to get overheated.”

“Oh, I’m good,” Jon said right before he stole the ball from Walder and nutmegged him to pass it back up the field to one of his own midfielders. He was the one with a smug look when the mid went on a run, carrying the ball upfield to score. He looked over his shoulder at Little Walder who was still standing there. “You should focus on the game more than the chatter though maybe.”

The kid started to jog back up to center when he said with a glance towards Sansa, “Maybe I’m distracted by the view.”

You’re an adult. He’s a kid. Don’t punch him.

Fuck it, I’d like to punch him.
The ref blew the whistle for Walder’s team to kick off. Within a few minutes, Jon found himself defending once more against the kid. They battled for control of the ball. Walder was hacking at it. Actually, he seemed to be hacking at Jon’s ankles.

Yet again, Jon managed to steal the ball away and boot it back down towards his offense. He grinned to himself but would not say anything this time. However, it was then that he felt a like he’d been hit by a truck again as his face met the grass.

“Oh, sorry,” he heard Walder say.

His hands were already clenched into fists but it would hardly be appropriate to stand up and start something with a teenager. Besides, the ref had seen the foul and sent the kid off.

Trystane came over and offered him a hand up. “You okay, Coach?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” he said with a wave at Sansa who was standing now and looking concerned. The girls were watching. He would not behave like a hot-headed punk over this. “I’m just fine.”

“He’s a dick,” Trystane said. “Sorry…I mean he’s not…”

“Yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head,” Jon laughed.

“He’s not even that good.”

“Yeah…I kind of picked up on that, too.”

Sansa was admittedly not a huge sports fan. But she’d sat through her share of various sporting events for Robb, Arya and Rickon’s sake over the years so she figured she could handle soccer for Jon’s. And actually, she found it was rather pleasant on her blanket. It was hot to be out playing perhaps but for a spectator on a hillside with the evening breeze, it was lovely.

The girls had grown tired of sitting and run off to find their own fun. But Sansa had followed the game fairly well without their commentary. Jon was a skilled player despite his injury in college and she had to admit her man looked pretty fine out there. She particularly felt a bit of pride when he stole the ball from an opponent twice. But when the boy, who was taller than Jon was, bulled him from behind, knocking him to the ground, Sansa was certain that was not allowed and was concerned for Jon and concerned about how he might react. Back in high school, Robb might’ve punched the guy. Arya probably still would’ve but Jon seemed okay when he got up. He kept his cool and the referee handled it anyway.

She stood and cheered when the scrimmage ended and Jon came sprinting towards her. The look in his eyes reminded her of his expression when they’d visited Old Trafford, like an excited boy.

“Jon…the girls,” Sansa squeaked when he lifted her off the ground into a hug and then kissed her hungrily.

“They’re playing,” he murmured, staring at her lips. The excited boy was gone, replaced by a man riding the high tide of victory…her handsome, virile man.
“You’re sweaty,” she said next, wrinkling up her nose. She couldn’t very well swoon over her guy like one of the teenage girls watching the boys she’d noticed earlier, could she? Well, maybe a little.

“Sorry,” he laughed, setting her back down. “Got carried away by the game, I guess.”

“No…I don’t mind.” She did and she didn’t. She wasn’t all that fond of manly sweatiness but she loved the passion in his eyes and the heat of that kiss.

“Good game, Walder,” he called to one of the boys walking past, the big one who’d knocked him down earlier. “Oh, look. Your mummy’s here to pick you up. Have a good night!” There was something oddly cheeky about Jon’s tone. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it. The boy glared at Jon but he wasn’t bothered. “Come on, love,” he said, putting an arm around her waist. “Let’s get these girls home and in the bath.” He nuzzled into her ear and rasped, “Maybe I can persuade you to take a shower with me after they go to bed.”

“I like the sound of that,” she grinned, already titillated by the thought.

The ride home was filled with Lyarra’s assessment of the match, the parts she’d watched anyway, and Mina telling them about the bird’s nest they’d spotted in one of the shade trees. Jon was talking to the girls like normal from where he sat in the passenger seat but every time Sansa glanced his way, he was staring at her. It was feral and hot and had her smooshing her thighs together. He was grinning at her wickedly. She felt his hand on her knee.

“I’m driving,” she said out of the corner of her mouth as the girls were bickering over what type of bird might have been living in the nest. The grin widened. “Maybe you need to turn the air up and cool down some,” she said with a huff. She was biting her lip to keep from grinning back at him though. She felt like one of those teenage girls.

“I am pretty hot right now. I may need a cold shower.”

“Yeah, Dad, you could use a shower. You stink,” Lyarra said from the backseat, causing Mina to gasp and then giggle.

An hour later, the dogs had been seen to and the girls were settled in their beds. She hurried down the hall towards their bedroom. She heard him turn on their shower and she went to the bathroom. She started towards the shower stall when she felt someone grab her by the waist from behind. He’d been waiting for her behind the door.

“Eeeek!” she shrieked before he started kissing her with that same intensity as earlier.

“Surprise,” he chuckled darkly as his hands busily untied her halter strings. “I’ve been dying to have you all to myself for ages.”

“For ages?” She smacked his arm as he slid the top down enough to expose her breasts. “Uhhh…you’re still all sweaty,” she breathed in a half-hearted attempt to chastise him.

“Uh huh…I am.” He yanked off his jersey and spun her around to face their vanity before pulling her shorts and panties down around her ankles. “Put your hands on the counter, love.”
She bit her lip and jutted her ass back towards him when she heard him sliding his shorts down. He nipped at her neck and she shuddered when she felt his cock, hot and hard, pressed against her ass.

“Wanting to celebrate the big win right here, are we?”

“To the victor goes the spoils,” he groaned as he slid inside her.

“Unnn…Jon…the water…God…”

“Sorry to say this won’t take me all that long. But, I promise to take good care of you after. And, I want us both to enjoy watching your gorgeous tits bouncing in the mirror while I fuck you from behind.”

He started to move and damn if she didn’t enjoy watching as much as he did. Steam was soon obscuring her view but she relished every second of him pounding into her with desperate determination as his hands gripped her hips. Her hands were sliding across the counter, knocking over a few things.

“The mirror’s fogging up,” she whimpered as she felt her climax approaching.

But then he was grunting in her ear and rubbing her clit as he came. She forgot all about watching. She just closed her eyes and savored a win.

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Jon woke early the following morning and checked his phone. 6:12AM. Tons of time on a Saturday to keep sleeping. The cookout was later today but that was no big deal. Burgers and hot dogs on the grill, just more than he’d normally prepare. Sansa had kept talking about side dishes and desserts but he figured they could pick up some chips and ice cream or whatever later.

Deciding to get more rest, he rolled over and winced at the ache in his muscles.

*Fuck, I am sore. Must’ve slept funny.*

He put an arm around Sansa’s waist, nuzzling into her hair, and fell back asleep…very briefly.

“DAAAD!”

Jon blinked rapidly, his fuzzy brain trying to connect the dots.

“DAAAD! SNAKE!!!”

At that, he vaulted out of the bed. One of his knees buckled and every last muscle in his legs and back protested the activity. “God dammit,” he grunted as he collapsed to the floor.

“Swear jar, Jon,” Sansa murmured sleepily.

The pain was excruciating in his knee. He was probably a bit stiff from getting out of bed too fast, right? Nothing at all to do with the fact he’d be turning 30 next month, had played over an hour last night and then spent a decent amount of time on his knees in the shower pleasuring his fiancée, right?
Nah...

He was lying on his back trying to flex his knee when the bedroom door burst open. Mina was wearing her favorite puppy dog night gown, holding her stuffed friend Lady while the real Lady bounded in after her. She looked terrified. She jumped into the bed next to Sansa.

“Mina?” Sansa said, fully awake now. “What’s…”

“There’s a snake in the house! Ghost brought it in,” Mina cried.

A snake? There couldn’t be a snake in the house…could there?

“Oh, shi-oot!,” Sansa squealed. “Jon!” She made a little shooing motion with her hands as if she expected him to get up sometime today.

“I’m lying here in the floor unable to move. I’m done for. Save yourselves.” Sansa threw a pillow at him. “Alright, alright,” he grumbled, rolling into a sitting position. “Christ, I’m sore all over. Where’s this so-called snake, sweetheart?” Probably a worm.

“In the living room! And it is a snake! I let the dogs out back to go while I was watching cartoons and then Ghost came back in carrying a snake. Please, go get it, Jon!” she shrieked shrilly.

“Are you sure it’s not a stick?” he asked bemusedly.

“It was green and it wiggled!” Mina cried indignantly.

Shit. Maybe it is a snake.

“Where’s Lyarra?”

“She’s still asleep.”

“But she was calling for…”

He shut up as the realization struck him. It hadn’t been Lyarra calling for Dad. It had been Mina. He was sore all over, it was way too early on a Saturday and there was a reptile in the house. He did not care. Mina had called him dad and not in jest this time. She had been afraid and called for him to come.

She was hugging Sansa and looked up at him from beneath her lashes. He was certain she was conscious of what she’d called him and probably having her own thoughts about it. He knew making a thing of it would only complicate something that he didn’t want her to feel conflicted about.

He headed to the living room with Lady following excitedly behind him.

“Where is it, boy?” he asked Ghost.

The pup wagged his tail and nosed at something on the floor next to the couch. Jon was not fond of snakes but he wasn’t exactly scared of them either. And he certainly wasn’t afraid of a little green snake, all of twelves inches long, which was already dead.

Ghost was looking quite pleased with himself and Jon gave him a pat. The dog was only doing what dogs do.

“Yes, you’re a mighty hunter. Keep your kills outside though, okay?”
“Jon? Did you get it?” Sansa asked, peeping around the corner from the hallway.

Her hair was a mess and she was in her little tank and sleep shorts. Maybe they weren’t anything all that special but she looked adorable and sexy in them. And, a very devious little boy inside him wanted to pick the snake up to see if she’d shriek and run away.

*And then chase her to the bedroom…*

“Yes. Well, Ghost did anyway.”

Sansa sighed with relief and came into the room. Mina followed her as Jon got some paper towels from the kitchen to dispose of the snake.

“Is it dead?” Mina asked.

“Yeah, you don’t have to worry about it, sweetheart.”

He thought she’d be relieved but she walked over to see the little dead snake in the floor and burst into tears. Terrified of it one moment and then sad that it was dead the next. Upon reflection, that seemed about right for Mina.

“We can, uh…bury it if you want,” he offered, not wanting her to be sad.

He’d been planning on chucking it in the garbage can outside but he thought Mina might want more than that. He thought right. She nodded, rushed over to hug him and then thanked him. It made him feel ridiculously heroic.

He was still holding her when Lyarra staggered into the room wearing his old high school jersey and looking sleepy and cross. “What’s going on?” she grumbled.

“Ghost brought a snake in. Your dad was going to get rid of it for me but the dog killed it first,” Mina said.

“Cool.”

Mina scowled at Lyarra and said, “Jon and I are going to bury it.”

“Okay. Can I help?”

“How long is this going to take? I thought we’d just be grabbing a few things. This list looks like you’re stocking up for a blizzard.”

Jon had been frustrated since earlier. He’d complained about his knee hurting after they’d buried the snake. He’d been laying on the couch when Mommy said they needed to get to the store and then clean the house.

“It’s a cookout. Everyone will be outside. The house is already clean, love,” Jon had whined. Mommy had just stared at him with her hands on her hips. “Fine,” he’d groaned as he got up.
She’d suggested he use Ben-gay or Icy Hot on his knee and take some Advil. Actually, she’d said, “Suck it up, Buttercup. We’ve got things to do today.” Then, she’d suggested the medicine.

“We are NOT just offering our guests chips and dips, Jon,” Mommy said as they entered the grocery store. “I told you I had a whole list of things to get and most of them are for this cookout.”

Mommy was aggrivated. She could get kind of like this when there was something special going on. Eager to be a good helper, Mina raced ahead to grab a shopping cart. Usually, Lyarra yelled dibs on pushing the cart when they all went to the store but she was sticking close to the grown-ups.

“Tossed salad…potato salad…pasta salad…broccoli salad?” Jon said as he looked at Mommy’s list of ingredients. “How many salads does one cookout need, love? And what’s this?”

“Veggie burgers.”

“You know the Cerwyns are vegetarians.”

“I’ll grill some corn.”

“They might want something besides corn,” Mommy said, rolling her eyes.

“I figured they’d bring a dish of…whatever.”

“Jon…you don’t invite the neighbors and then expect them to provide their own dishes! I would think that’d be obvious.”

“I’m sorry, alright? I’ve not brushed up on my Emily Post lately! I invited the Tallharts when he let me borrow his edger but then I figured it’d be rude to invite them and not our other next-door neighbors.”

“I don’t mind you inviting them but we’re up to nineteen people now.”

“Hot dogs, ground beef, buns and chips. Beer, soft drinks, lemonade, ice. Maybe something sweet. That’s a cookout. That’s plenty for…”

“Nineteen people, Jon! You have to offer more than a mountain of potato chips!”

“Sansa…it’s a cook out. It’s supposed to be casual.”

“Of course, it is. This is casual.”

“I’d hate to see your idea of fancy,” Jon groused under his breath.

“What was that?!?”

“Nothing, dear,” Jon replied. He looked Mina’s way and sort of grinned. She giggled to herself and shot Jon a sympathetic look.

Mommy was big on things being just so when guests came over…not that they’d ever had anything this big at their condo when it was just the two of them. But even when family came over for dinner, Mommy liked to make everything special. She knew from experience this would be a long trip to the grocery store.

Lyarra was watching them both intently. She seemed nervous and maybe a little upset. She usually
didn’t mind grocery shopping.

“Wanna push the cart?” Mina offered.

“No.”

“Are you worried about Ghost? Mommy said green snakes aren’t venomous.” Mina had felt sorry for the little thing and then worried that it might have bit Ghost.

“No, Dad said it was harmless. I just…I don’t like them fighting,” she whispered, pointing at the adults.

“Fighting?”

Mommy and Jon were just ‘expressing some feelings’ as Mommy might call it. Mina knew this wasn’t serious. Grandma and Grandpa sometimes bickered like this. She’d seen Uncle Robb and Aunt Margaery do so as well.

A couple of times, when she was younger and Mommy had thought she was asleep in her room, Mina had overheard her parents really arguing. Those arguments were not like this. It was upsetting when she heard Daddy and Mommy yelling at each other like that. This was nothing. Jon and Mommy’s tone was more playful than really angry. But Lyarra was worried.

“It’s okay. They’re just…squabbling. Sometimes we squabble, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Mommy gets like this sometimes. And Da-...your dad’s just not sure what to think about it. And maybe he’s still upset about the snake business and his knee being sore. They’re fine though...trust me.”

She couldn’t believe she’d almost called him Dad again.

The other night Lyarra had had a scary dream and Mommy had went to check on her. Mina had heard the commotion and got out of bed to check on her, too. Lyarra was going to be her sister. She was older by a month so of course she should check on her younger sister.

But then she’d overheard Lyarra call her mommy Mom. And, just like when the lady in London had called her Mrs. Snow, Mommy hadn’t corrected her. She hadn’t been sure how she felt about that. She knew Lyarra’s mommy had been dead since she was a baby. She could understand Lyarra wanting a new mom. Mina felt like crying at just the thought of her mommy being taken away. So, she decided it was okay even if she felt a little jealous tinge over it. She wanted them to be a family. And, it wasn’t as if Lyarra had started calling her Mom all the time. It was just that night after her nightmare. She always called her Sansa the rest of the time.

Mina couldn’t really say why she’d called Jon Dad this morning though. She had a dad. She loved him very much. And Jon seemed fine with her calling him Jon. But maybe some little part inside of her had wanted to try it out and, when Ghost brought in the snake this morning, she’d panicked and it had slipped.

She wondered what Lyarra would think of that. She wondered what Jon thought. She really wondered what Daddy would think. That kind of made her tummy hurt so she didn’t want to think about it anymore right now.

“Let’s see if we can help them and get this over faster. Then, we can help Mommy in the kitchen
with all the stuff she’s making.”

“Like the desserts, right?” Lyarra asked, perking up already.

“Exactly.”

By the time they had finished and went to check out, Mommy and Jon were laughing together and touching each other like always. And Lyarra was no longer worried looking at all.

It was decidedly pleasant in Jon and Sansa’s backyard Margaery decided. The food smelled good as Jon and a group of the men including her husband were gathered around the grill like cavemen over a fire. The girls were playing with the neighbors’ kids now in the tree fort Jon and Ned had built. Earlier, Mina had led her to the spot where they’d buried a snake of all things this morning and showed her the rock she’d painted in its memory. Her niece really was so sweet. It made Margaery feel all warm and fuzzy inside at the thoughts of having a little one of her own.

She stretched out in the hammock which she’d decided was her new favorite thing.

*I definitely need one of these.*

She wondered if Sansa liked it. At the moment, it would be hard to believe that Sansa had ever used it at all judging by the way she kept scurrying to and fro between the kitchen and the deck and hustling over to the guests ever so often to check on them.

“Do you want some more lemonade?” Sansa asked when she made another trip Margaery’s way.

“No, I’m fine. Why don’t you join me?”

“Oh…well, I’ve got to finish the…”

“Sansa, these things are supposed to be fun for everyone, not an endurance test for the hostess.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Come on. There’s plenty of room. I’m not that big yet.”

“You’re not big at all! You’re only 15 weeks,” Sansa laughed as she carefully climbed in next to her. “So how’s everything going?”

“It’s good. I still haven’t hit that mythical burst of energy yet but the morning sickness is fading.”

“It’s not mythical. It’ll hit eventually. You might not feel like you’re hopped up on Red Bulls but you’ll definitely feel more energetic than you have been.”

“Good. I think your brother is tired of being married to a slug.”

“I highly doubt that. And he may find himself rather busy soon,” Sansa snickered. Margaery could tell by the blush on her cheeks what her sister-in-law was referring to.
“The mythical horny phase?”

“It’s not mythical either.”

“Well, I guess you’d know,” Margaery said. Then, she cringed at her thoughtlessness as she glanced over to where Harry was standing with the other men, nursing his soda. “Shit, Sans. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. Harry was hit or miss during most my pregnancy…a lot of miss actually. But I had my trusty vibrator.”

Margaery covered her mouth to keep from laughing too loud. “I have a feeling you won’t need it with Jon. You know, if you’re…”

“Yeah, we’ve talked about it. Not discussed when exactly yet. I mean, we’d like to get married first but we’ve, uh…we’ve talked about it.” Sansa looked sort of wistful as she glanced over at Jon and smiled. “Lyarra called me Mom the other night.”

“She did?”

“Yes. She’d had a bad dream and I heard her first. She was so sweet and…I got kind of choked up, you know?”

“You’re getting choked up telling me. I can imagine you would.”

“Jon thought something was wrong when I got back in bed and started crying. Then, he got a bit teary when I told him. It was…well, it was nice. I’m not sure she was fully aware she did it. She hasn’t done it since that night but I hope she’ll do it again.”

Margaery nodded and hugged her. They enjoyed swaying together for a few minutes, listening to the kids some more.

Arya came to join them soon after. She’d brought her ‘friend’ Gendry and had apparently had enough of her brothers’ teasing.

“Scooch over,” she told them both and then without further ado she climbed into the hammock with them. “I’m going to kill all three of my brothers if I don’t get away for a few minutes and I can’t do that to Mom. It’s a sad day when Shithead’s being…”

“Aunt Arya,” Sansa cautioned.

“Sorry. It’s a sad day when Harry’s being the politest guy in the group…barring Dad and Jon.” Sansa and Margaery both raised their eyebrows and gave her a delighted grin. “Shut up. Don’t you two start.”

“Gendry seems very nice,” Sansa said diplomatically.

“I can’t believe you left him to the tender mercies of the Stark men,” Margaery giggled.

“I warned him it’d be sink or swim when we arrived.”

“Arya!”

“Why are they such buttheads? We never treated you this way, did we, Marg?”

“No…but your sister and I have been friends since grammar school, long before I dated Robb.”
“We never treated Meera like this.”

“We’re far more mature than our brothers.”

“Why didn’t Jon get grilled like this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe ‘cause they’d met him at soccer before we got serious.”

“Before you got serious? You two got serious awful fast. It was ‘hey, this is Mina’s coach.’ Then, ‘hey, we’re in love…and fucking.’”

Sansa sniffed and Margaery knew she was choosing to ignore that. Having no blood sisters of her own, she sat back to enjoy their interplay.

“Well, maybe they didn’t grill Jon because I didn’t keep them waiting for nearly two years before bringing him ‘round to be introduced. Why’d you wait so long anyway? He’s really sweet.”

“Ugh…he can be so annoyingly bull-headed. I couldn’t make up my mind if I liked him well enough to go through the hassle of listening to Robb, Bran and Rickon making their wisecracks.”

“Liar,” Sansa said, giving her a playful shove.

Arya shoved her back but she was smirking when she said, “Shut up.”

“Hey! Stop rocking my peaceful hammock!” Margaery complained.

“I’ve got to get back to the kitchen.”

“Yay, more room for me!” Once Sansa had left, Arya asked, “So could you say something to your husband at least? Dad’s being super nice to make up for the idiots but I don’t want the other three scaring him off.”

“Are they that bad?”

“Well…kind of.”

“Alright. Help me out of this thing and I’ll bet I can get all three of them to leave ‘Friend’ Gendry alone.”

“Thanks. He’s not, uh…he’s not just a friend actually.”

“Really?! I never would’ve guessed,” Margaery said sarcastically.

“Shut up, Tyrell.”

Jon flipped the burgers and listened to Ned telling the other men about them building the tree fort the past few days. They’d just finished it yesterday.

*Maybe another reason I’m so freaking sore.*
He wasn’t complaining about that though. He’d enjoyed helping Ned and he’d learned some stuff, too. It had felt very father-son like and he had to admit he’d loved it. Plus, the girls were delighted with their new fort.

All day, Jon had been feeling sore and wanted to do nothing but stretch out and rest. He could hardly dump everything on Sansa though. This cookout had been his idea and then he’d went and invited nine extra people. He did want to have everyone over. But at the moment, he looked longingly at where Margaery was swinging peacefully in the hammock once more after giving her husband and two brothers-in-law a stern warning about pestering Gendry. He’d been as amused as Ned when she’d marched over and told Robb, Bran and Rickon to lay off with their questions and cracked her knuckles menacingly. Arya might be fiercer in some ways but Margaery was a force to be reckoned with when she was cross, kind of like Sansa.

Speaking of Sansa, she’d been on edge all day. He could see the tension building on and off and, once people started arriving, it had tripled. She’d disappeared into the kitchen a while ago saying she’d start bringing out the side dishes. He hoped she hadn’t decided to whip up another dish. She’d already prepared enough for twice their numbers. He’d need to remember that the next time he got the bright idea to entertain guests.

“Ned? When you and Cat plan casual get-togethers, does she ever go kind of overboard?”

Ned laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Yes. And Sansa is very much like her mother in that respect.”

“So, I should remind myself to go with the flow and pitch in as needed, right?”

“If you want a happy wife and peaceful night, you will.”

He took up the last of the burgers and dogs and told everyone it was almost time to eat when the two late arrivals made it at last. “About time,” he said to Rhae and Theon.

“Sorry,” Theon said with a sheepish shrug. He looked sorry, too. When was Theon every really sorry about anything?

“Look at you, little bro. It’s very suburban here with the kids running around and the men grilling meat. Are you all going bowling later?”

“Shut up. Did you ride here together?”

“Yeah…I’ve been having some trouble with my car,” Rhae said. She took a sip of her beer and looked at Theon for a second. “Well, that’s not the only reason. Jon, we kind of need to talk to you about something.”

“Okay, sure. What’s…”

“Hey, Jon?” Harry said, coming back outside from where he’d went to fetch more ice for the cooler. He turned towards him and Harry leaned in close. “Uh…Sansa’s kind of having a minor freak out in the kitchen. I thought you might want to know.”

“Christ. I’ll be back,” he said to Rhae and Theon before heading inside. “Actually, could you do me a favor and grab some more folding chairs from the garage for me?”

They followed him inside and then quietly slipped through the kitchen into the garage when Jon found his fiancée crying over burnt brownies. Cat was with her, stroking her hair and consoling her.
“It’s not a big deal, darling. You have three kinds of ice cream, two varieties of cookies and you made two pies for crying out loud. No one will miss brownies.”

“They’re Dad’s favorites,” Sansa sniffled.

“Hey, Cat. Would you mind getting everyone gathered together? I’ll help Sansa with the rest of this.” He sat down next to her as she started wiping her eyes. “Sansa…”

“I’m sorry I’m being silly about this,” she said. “I got a little carried away.”

“You’re fine.”

“I just got kind of worked up about having everyone over.”

“I noticed.”

“I was nervous about how it might go.”

“Me, too.”

“I wanted everyone to see how happy we are and I wanted everyone to get along.”

“Everyone seems to be getting along…and we are happy.”

She smiled at that. “Yes, we are. I’ve never really done much entertaining on my own, not like this.”

“Me either.”

“Mom always made it seem so…effortless.”

“She’s had more practice. You’ve done beautifully. All the guys were raving about your spinach queso dip.”

“They were?”

“They were. It’s already gone.” She smiled wider and leaned against his shoulder. He put an arm around her.

“Does your knee still hurt?”

“It’s tolerable.”

“I’m sorry if I was kind of…”

“Nope, you’re perfect. Hey…you know what I want to do tomorrow when it’s just us and the girls here?”

“What?”

“I want to take a nap in that hammock out back with you. Margaery’s been making me jealous. Seeing you and Margaery there together made me even more jealous.”

“It’s very comfy. I like the sound of that,” she sighed.

“Come on. Let’s feed these people and then kick them out. I may need another shower tonight after all this grilling.”
“Okay,” she laughed.

They were heading back outside when Jon heard muffled voices from the garage. He supposed Theon and Rhae would wait till they knew the coast was clear but he didn’t want them stuck out there forever.

He opened the door and it took a minute for his brain to make sense of what his eyes were seeing.

Theon had Rhae pressed against the side of Jon’s Pilot. He had his tongue shoved down her throat and his hands were on her…

“Wha… WHAT THE FUCK?!”

“Jon…” Theon said guiltily.

“You son of a bitch! Why the fuck were you kissing my sister?! Why were your hands on her… on her…”

“Tits, Jon. His hands were on my tits. You can say the word. I’ve heard you say it a time or two.”

“Rhae!”

“Jon…” Sansa said from behind him. “Why don’t you come with me and cool off. We’ll…”

“He was kissing Rhae, Sansa! That traitor was making a move on my sister! He’s a…” Rhae started laughing. Sansa started laughing. Theon at least had the good sense not to laugh. “I’m… they were… he…” he sputtered.

“Come on, honey,” Sansa said again. “Let’s go eat. We can have a little talk about how you’re feeling about this.”
The girls were tucked in at last. Tomorrow would be the first day of school and a busy day for all four of them. Sansa was looking forward to crawling into bed, too. Actually, she was looking forward to sex first and then sleep.

But at the moment, they were busy with one of the many less-than-exciting elements of adulthood, paying the bills.

Tonight, they were working on a game plan for paying down her student loans. It was about as much fun as a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.

Jon had also mentioned discussing their wedding budget. That idea held some appeal to Sansa at least, not the budgeting so much as the wedding planning part. She was too practical at this point in her life to beg for the fairytale wedding she might have imagined as a girl. A horse-drawn carriage, couture wedding gown, string ensemble, lobster dinner and dancing till dawn at some picturesque lake-front venue were not going to be their reality. But Jon knew she wanted more than a trip to the county courthouse and a family cookout afterwards, though Sansa believed that would’ve suited him alright. He was determined they could strike a happy balance between a lovely wedding and still ensuring their girls could attend college someday.

At the moment though, they were knee deep in the completely unromantic stuff. And, Jon’s phone kept pinging with texts which he kept ignoring.

There had been a lot of expenses between the move, the trip to England and all those unexpected things that crop up in life. This aspect of their relationship was something they were still easing their way into. She didn’t want to quarrel with him over money but Jon had said that while they might not always agree, that was alright. They could work it out together.

Sansa had always felt like she was walking on eggshells when her and Harry had discussed their meager finances back when Mina was a baby. It had often ended in an argument with him storming out for some ‘air’ while she sniffled back tears and tried to make heads or tails of their overdrawn checkbook. She wondered if Jon had struggled with money when Lyarra was little and he was first out of school. Her parents had always offered to help but Harry had refused out of pride. When he left for the final time and Sansa was stuck with more bills, she’d had to swallow her own pride more than once. Her daughter had to come before her pride.

“I can’t believe they raised the tuition again,” she complained. “I only need two more credits but of course the costs would go up.”

Jon made more money than her and she owed more debt. Her evening classes would be starting back soon and tuition was due for her final semester. She hated feeling like a burden to him.

“Don’t worry about your tuition. I can cover that.”

“Jon, I can’t have you do that. You’re already covering most of the bills and…”

“Sansa, what’s mine is yours, alright? We’re getting married, we’re making a life together. My
money is your money. Your dreams are my dreams.” He snatched up her hand to give it a kiss. She stroked his beard as he adjusted his glasses and looked back at the spreadsheet he had open on the laptop. “It’s just one more semester. I can’t wait to see you get that degree in December.” She smiled.

God, she couldn’t wait either. “I think we could use half our income tax refund next year to pay down a portion of your loans if that’s okay with you,” he said when he finished typing in his calculations.

She nodded begrudgingly. She hated her student loan debt. She hated debt, period.

This was a new experience, having a partner in her finances. She definitely didn’t hate it. As much as she didn’t care for dealing with the bills, she liked how Jon was committed to discussing these things with her and there was a lot less stress when she wasn’t trying to manage it on her own. This was different and Jon was right. They were building a life together.

“You’re good at this, you know?” she said.

“At what?”

“Balancing the budget, handling the bills, making a financial plan.”

“Yes, I’m your man when it comes to all the unsexy paperwork,” he grinned.

“I think you’re plenty sexy,” she teased. His eyes lit up and the grin became a smirk. But then his phone pinged with another text. “Aren’t you even going to respond, honey?”

“No.”

“You’re being childish.”

“We’re trying to do the bills.” Sansa rolled her eyes. “We’re trying to do the bills and I’m being childish,” he amended.

“At least you admit it.”

“He broke the Bro Code, love.”

“The Bro Code? Interesting. Sounds like something Harry would’ve told me back in college.”

“You take that back!” he gasped.

She snickered at his mock-outrage. “Where exactly is this code written? I’d love to look it up.”

“It is more implied than written, mind you. But ‘Thou shalt not fuck your friend’s sister behind his back and lie about it,’ is definitely part of it.”

“He never lied about it.”

“A lie by omission is still a lie.”

“Jon…”

“I didn’t make the rules. Did you see how high the water bill is this month?” he asked nonchalantly.

“The water bill is high because there are twice as many people living in your house now; twice as much laundry and twice as many showers. Tune in next month, Mr. I-Want-to-Fuck-You-Against-the-Bathroom-Counter-Even-Though-I-Just-Started-the-Shower.” A salacious grin appeared.
“However, that was the worst attempt at changing the subject I’ve ever witnessed, Jon Snow.” He had the decency to look abashed at that. “Now, I want you to answer Theon’s texts. He has been your best friend for more than ten years. Rhae is your sister. They are both adults and their love life in not really anyone’s business but their own. Stop being an asshole. You’ve had 24 hours to stew over this and that’s long enough. So what if he didn’t tell you immediately? Rhae didn’t tell you either but you’re not blaming her.”

“That’s diff-“

“If you say that’s different because she’s a woman or some such bullshit, I’m sleeping on the couch…or you are.”

“I didn’t mean it like…”

“They didn’t owe you the exclusive about their burgeoning relationship.”

“I never said they…”

“They intended to tell you at the cookout.”

“Yeah, but instead I wound up walking in on…”

“Because I was busy having a breakdown in the middle of our party! Otherwise, you would’ve known before you saw anything. Now, I realize it might take a little getting used to for you. I’m sure they do, too. But punishing Theon by shutting him out and ignoring him is a dick move. You’re not a dick, Jon. You’re sister deserves to be happy, right?”

“Of course.”

“Theon deserves to be happy, doesn’t he?”

“Well…yeah.”

“Don’t you think there’s a chance they might make each other happy?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So he didn’t tell you right away. Every couple deserves that bubble of time when they’re working at getting together without everyone else in their life being in the middle of it.”

“It felt like we didn’t have much of the bubble,” he grumbled.

“Why? Because my parents and your sister probably knew exactly why our daughters were spending the night with them the first time we had sex? Because Harry showed up that first morning after we slept together?” she asked laughingly.

“Exactly.” He started laughing, too. She grasped his hand and looked meaningfully at his phone. “You’re good at this, you know?” he said.

“At what?”

“At making me see things in a different light and calling me out when I need to be called out.”

“Good.”

“I’ll quit being a dick to Theon. Happy?”
“I will be after you call him and say as much.”

“But we didn’t finish with the…”

“All this unsexy paperwork will still be waiting on us tomorrow, Jon.”

“Alright,” he sighed.

“Good. Now, call your friend.” He nodded. “I’m going to bed. I’ll be naked when you join me.”

The salacious grin returned and he immediately started dialing.

She was chasing Ghost through the backyard as twilight fell and fireflies sparkled around them. She could hear Mina calling for her to climb up in the fort with her. Mom and Dad were in the hammock, laughing quietly together about something.

It was the sweetest dream…but somehow she knew it was just a dream.

“Rise and shine, baby!”

Ugh. The dreaded day had arrived.

Dad cruelly peeled away her blankets and immediately started singing ‘The Duck Song’ which he had done every single first day of school since Pre-K. Lyarra hated it. Okay…not really. But she was in 3rd grade now! ‘The Duck Song’ was so preschool or maybe kindergarten.

“A duck walked up to the lemonade stand,
And he said to the man running the stand,
Hey! (bum bum bum) Got any grapes?”

“DAD! NOOOO!”

“YES!” he cried back at her, laughing. “Up, up, up! It’s a great day for up!” Why’d he have to be so dang chipper on the first day of school? “What are you going to wear?”

“A jersey,” she mumbled as she attempted to burrow back under the covers.

“Which one?” He was already digging her out again.

“Alex Morgan.”

“Good choice.” She started to pull the covers up again. “Get up, Lyarra. Sansa’s making breakfast and Mina’s already dressed.”

Of course, she is. Mina was excited about today. She’d been like a bundle of energy talking about it last night. Lyarra did not understand that girl sometimes.

A small game of tug-of-war over the covers began.

“Lyarra,” Dad said warningly, “I will sing the entire song to you in the hallway outside your
classroom if you don’t get up in ten seconds.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

“Dad…”

“One…two…”

“I’m up!”

The butterflies were fluttering like crazy all through Lyarra’s tummy as Mom flipped pancakes and scrambled the eggs.

*She’s not my mom…but she’s going to be.*

A different sort of flutter spread through Lyarra at the thought, up into her chest. It was good and a little frightening at the same time. Sansa was going to be her mom. Dad and Sansa had both talked to her about it when Mina had been with her dad yesterday. They’d said once they got married, Sansa was going to adopt her and it would be all official.

“Would you be okay with that?” Sansa had asked thoughtfully.

“Yeah,” Lyarra had answered.

She hadn’t said anything else but asked if she could go outside and play with the dogs. She had kind of wanted a little time alone to think about it. They’d nodded and let her go.

In her head, Lyarra had already started calling Sansa mom though. She’d only said it once out loud and that was after a really scary dream. She didn’t even know if Sansa had noticed. She wondered if she’d mind. She really hoped Mina wouldn’t mind.

Lyarra darted a glance at Mina who was dressed in a pale-yellow blouse and blue skirt with sunflowers all over it. Mom had French braided her hair. Mina’s new backpack sat at her feet, a pretty blue and yellow floral pattern. Had she picked out her outfit for today to match her backpack? Lyarra shuddered. They were going to have to have a talk about cool.

Lyarra was wearing her U.S. Women’s Team jersey and her hot pink Adidas shorts. Her new backpack had a similar floral pattern to Mina’s but it was orange and purple. Absolutely nothing matched. She was okay with that. She hadn’t done anything to her hair though and she noticed Mom looking at her hair and biting at her lip.

“I’m gonna brush it.”

“Oh, I know you will, sweetie. That is my favorite one of your jerseys. The blue is so pretty.”

Lyarra grinned and Mom set a plate in front of her. Pancakes, scrambled eggs, and diced fruit. Was she supposed to eat all this? Her tummy was already doing somersaults. She’d never had such a big breakfast on the first day of school. It was always coffee and toast for Dad and cereal and juice for her. Dad was always running behind that first day and hollering that they needed to get there early. But today, he was whistling the dang duck song as he sat down with a plate of his own and coffee.

“Hey! (bum bum bum) Got any grapes?” he sang, peering at Mina’s fruit.

Mina giggled while Lyarra rolled her eyes. Okay, she may have snorted in her juice a bit, too. Dad
could be such a goof sometimes but she loved him for it.

Thirty minutes later, everyone was ready to head out to the SUV. Lyarra thought it was neat that they could all ride to the same place together. Mom searched around the radio until she found an older song her and Mina really liked. It was kind of relaxing. Maybe music put those imaginary butterflies in your stomach to sleep.

‘You would not believe your eyes

If ten million fireflies

Lit up the world as I fell asleep…’

Mom was singing and Lyarra started to sing, too. Dad was driving but smiling at them. She could see him stealing glances at her in the rearview mirror. He must like their singing.

But Mina was quiet now, much quieter than she had been during breakfast. Lyarra thought she might know why. This would be her first day at Chelsea. They’d met their teachers the other night during Open House and Mina had got Old Mrs. Flint for this year. Dad said she was a great teacher but she seemed sort of stern to Lyarra.

She wished Mina could be in Miss Manderly’s class with her. She was cool and liked soccer, too. Her hair took a little getting used to but she was super nice. This year was going to be a piece of cake. She hoped it wouldn’t be too hard for poor Mina.

“I’m sure it’s going to be great,” she whispered to Mina.

“You think?” Mina asked nervously.

“Of course.”

“What if she doesn’t like me? What if she asks me a question I don’t know the answer to? She might want to test the stuff I learned at my other school. What if she expects me to have the multiplication tables memorized already. I’ve only got up to 6 times memorized.” She’d obviously been thinking a lot during the ride.

“Mina…that’s…she’s not going to do anything like that. And she’s a teacher. She’s supposed to like everyone.”

“I don’t think Mrs. Dustin likes me.”

“I don’t know if she likes anyone. But look at it this way, today’s the first day. And it’s just a half day. It’s not like she’ll give you homework or anything. And don’t forget Abby’s in your class, too.”

“Yeah…that’s true.”

Their teammate had transferred schools too over the summer. Mina had been so excited to see her at Open House. Lyarra thought Abby was a bit of a cry baby but she wouldn’t say that. It’d be nice for Mina to have someone in class she knew when Lyarra couldn’t be there with her. And it’s not as if they were going to be sisters or anything like her and Mina were.

“Do you think they’ll walk us to class?” Mina whispered next, pointing towards the front seats.

“Yeah. Dad always does the first day but he’ll stop after today if you tell him to.”

“What if I don’t want him to stop?”
“Uh, well…if you don’t want him to stop, I guess that’s…I’m just warning you, he’ll want to hug you and do silly little goodbye routines if you don’t stop him.”

Mina seemed unconcerned by that. “When Mommy worked for Mr. Baelish, she had to be there really early. I always had to sit in the gym every morning until we were allowed to go to our classrooms. She’s never got to walk me to class the first day.”

“Well, this year will be different then.”

Mina grinned and looked happy again. She decided to start singing along to the radio, too.

Mina was still nervous. The first day of school always made her nervous and this was a new school where she’d have to make some new friends. She’d had trouble sleeping but instead of feeling sleepy she was ready to bound out of bed the moment her alarm went off. She’d just wanted to get on with this.

At home, things had been okay though. Mommy had made her favorite breakfast and Jon had been funny singing and doing silly things to make her smile. She loved that about Jon. She didn’t know why Lyarra thought it was embarrassing.

But in the car, she’d started fretting again. She appreciated Lyarra’s words on the way there but as soon as Jon parked the Pilot and she saw all those unfamiliar faces heading into the new school it all came back.

She was very grateful Abby was in her class though and Lyarra was just two doors down. They were bound to see each other in the halls and Jon had said the 3rd graders had recess all at the same time. So there were good things to focus on but it didn’t stop her from being nervous.

Sometimes, feelings were kind of like a roller coaster. You thought you were doing okay and then they kind of dipped on you again. Luckily, Mommy always seemed to know when the roller coaster was getting to be too much.

“Hey, Jon? We’ll catch up in a bit, okay?” Mommy said. “Have a great first day, Lyarra,” she said next before giving her a hug and watching the two of them walk in together. “Come over here, baby.” Mommy led her the picnic table in the courtyard that Jon said some of the teachers occasionally ate lunch at when they didn’t have lunch duty. “Worried?” Mommy asked.

Mina nodded and immediately hugged her, afraid she’d start crying. She didn’t want to start the first day of 3rd grade crying. What would her new classmates think? But she needed that hug. Mommy gave great hugs.

“Mina…it’s alright to be nervous. It’s only natural to be a little nervous when you’re starting something new. Did you know I was nervous when I had my interview here?”

“You were?”

“Yes.”
“But Jon was here and Ms. Tarth is really nice.”

“I didn’t realize Jon would be here and I’d never met Ms. Tarth then. I ended up crying in my car I got so nervous.”

“You did?” Mina couldn’t believe that Mommy had been that worried about something. Mommy nodded. “But you got the job.”

“I did. There’s a bit more to the story that we don’t have time for this morning but I just wanted you to know it’s okay to be nervous. Grownups get nervous, too. Did you know there’s a couple of new teachers at the school this year? Jon told me. It’s their first year teaching. I’ll bet they’re nervous this morning. And I’ll bet several of your classmates feel the same as you. Even if they attended Chelsea last year, it’s still a new teacher and a new class of students, right?”

“Right.”

“So, it’s okay to have those butterflies in your tummy. We all get them. They’re just a reminder that something is important to us and we want to do well. But don’t let them stop you from trying to make the best of your day, alright?”

“Alright.”

Mommy always seemed to know how to say things in a way that made her feel better. Mommy took her hand and they headed inside. Ms. Tarth was holding the door open for students, greeting everyone with a big smile and a friendly ‘Good Morning!’

Mina spied Jon when she turned down the 3rd grade hallway, waiting outside her classroom door. He smiled so big for her and she gave him a hug as soon as she saw him, except now she didn’t feel like crying. He gave great hugs, too.

“Ready, Freddy?” he asked.

“All set, Ivette. So, I’ll see you later, Alligator?”

“After a while, Crocodile.”

“Adios, Cinnamon Toast.” They’d had fun coming up with silly ways to say good-bye the other day.

“See you soon, Macaroon,” he finished with a kiss on top of her head.

She hugged him tight again and then let Mommy lead her into the room. It would be a good first day.

“Ugh…can’t we just go?! This was the worst first day!” Lyarra complained as they waited by the doors at noon.

“We can’t leave without your dad, Lyarra,” Sansa said.

Jon was still in the office, sitting with a boy whose parents had apparently forgotten it was a half day. Even though the first day is always a half day. Even though we sent home reminders in the mail and
via a telephone, text and email.

“Why was it the worst first day?”

“Miss Manderly is making us write a paper and it’s due tomorrow! She wants a whole paragraph! Who gives homework the first day!!”

Oh, horrors. Sansa didn’t say anything though. She understood from an eight-year-old’s viewpoint that was serious business.

“I had a good day,” Mina chimed in. “Mrs. Flint is actually pretty nice. She can be sort of stern when people get off task so I just kept reminding myself to stay on task a lot. I like her book nook. You can sit in one of her bean bags and read if you finish your work early. She has lots of American Girl and Magic Treehouse books, even a few I’ve never read. Today, we did some review worksheets, drew a picture of our family and went over class rules.”

“Oh, that’s good, baby. Can I see your picture?”

“A picture?” Lyarra huffed. “I wish I could’ve just drawn a picture. I’ve got to write a whole paper about my summer vacation! She wants a whole paragraph!”

“Yes, we heard,” Jon said, coming up quietly behind them. “I think everyone who’s still here heard.”

“Dad! You said she was a good teacher!”

“She is.”

“But she gave us homework! On the first day!”

“Oh, no. Whatever will we do?”

“Dad!”

“Come on. Let’s go home and grab some lunch. I’ve got to come back and help Ms. Tarth this afternoon.”

The four of them drove home and Jon made sandwiches while Sansa slipped off her heels and changed into shorts and a tee shirt. She didn’t have to go back with him later. She’d asked Bran if they could come swimming. Despite the epic paragraph assignment, she figured the girls would like that.

When she entered the kitchen, Mina was showing Jon her picture. The people were stick figures but she tried to add details to the faces.

“This is you,” Mina was telling Jon. “And that’s Lyarra and Lady and Ghost. Mommy and I have the red hair of course but Mommy’s taller than me. And that’s Daddy. Then, I added Grandma and Grandpa and Grandma Anya. I put in Grams and David, too. I didn’t have time to add everyone else. Mrs. Flint said I had a nice family. Do you like it?”

Jon kissed her cheek. “I love it. Can I hang it on the fridge?”

Mina nodded and they found some magnets to put it up. Sansa walked over to Jon and put her arms around his waist. They both were smiling. This was what they both hoped for, a nice blending of their families and their girls thinking of everyone as part of that.

Lyarra joined them and told Mina she liked her picture. They ate lunch and then Jon headed back to
work while the three of them headed over to Bran’s.

“Thanks for having us over,” Sansa told her brother once she’d finished slathering both girls up with sunscreen by the pool.

“Yes. Thank you, Uncle Bran. Can we get in yet, Mommy?”

“Not yet. It’s got soak in for a couple of minutes.”

Both girls groaned pitifully and Bran laughed. “They remind me a lot of us as kids, Sans. Remember how Mom would bring that old-fashioned timer to the Y’s pool to keep up with sunscreen and how long we had to sit out between snacks?”

“Are you calling me Mom, Brandon?”

“Maybe.”

“Compliment accepted. I remember how Dad used to let us jump right in until you and me and Rickon got so burnt that time on the lake at Uncle Benjen’s.”

“Oh, yeah. Mom was pis-uh…really upset.”

“And I remember Mom’s timer and how you and Rickon broke it.”

Both girls were no longer groaning but eagerly listening now.

“We just wanted to see if it was waterproof. It was a scientific experiment.”

“Right…science. So how’s the thesis going, Dr. Stark?”

“Don’t jinx me! I won’t have that title till December at the soonest. And, I am out here in the sunshine enjoying a day at the pool with my sister and my nieces. Who wants to think about all that dreadful research I’m supposed to be doing…or the lesson plans I need to prepare for the upcoming semester.”

Sansa grinned widely. She loved her family so much and thought the world of them all but the fact they’d all fallen right into including Lyarra and Jon as part of the family made her unbelievably happy.

“Oh, I am with you on paperwork!” Lyarra piped up. “I am just trying to focus on having some fun swimming and not worrying about that paper I have to write later.”

“You’ve got to write a paper? After the first day of 3rd grade?” Bran asked incredulously.

“I know! I couldn’t believe it either! A whole paragraph!”

Sansa caught her brother’s surprise turn to amusement and figured Lyarra wouldn’t appreciate it if he started chuckling at her. “Oh, look at that! Time’s up. You girls can go ahead and jump in.”
“I didn’t ask about it,” Jon grumbled as Brienne passed him another stack of forms.

“Why not? It’s a great opportunity for you.”

“It’s not even officially been posted yet. No one’s said a word to me except Lannister. I’m not sure I’m cut out for it.”

“You’re cut out for this.”

“This is different than that. I still feel like I’m in over my head here at times. And I’ve got you to rely on and back me up.”

“You’re a natural leader, Jon. You’re good at this.”

“I guess. Sometimes, I miss teaching.”

“So do I sometimes. Do you miss it enough to go back to it full-time?”

“I…well, I don’t know. There’s other things to consider.” Money mostly. “I do enjoy what I do!”

“That’s nice to hear,” Brienne said wryly.

“I just don’t think I’m cut out for administration at the high school. I’d need to talk to Sansa about it.”

“You haven’t mentioned it?”

“It’s not like I’ve had a job offer,” he said defensively.

He knew he should’ve mentioned it by now. He also knew Sansa would tell him to do whatever made him happy. And he was happy. He was happy here at Chelsea. He was really happy with all four of them riding to school together this morning. He loved walking the girls to class and seeing them on and off throughout the day. He liked riding home together, too.

And if he told Sansa the sole reason why he’d even consider applying for the principal’s job at the high school, he knew she wouldn’t like it. But the extra money would come in very handy in the years to come for their family.

He’d had to return today to help Brienne with some new enrollees and put out some fires that were brewing. There were already parents who’d be asking to have their student transferred to another class after the half day for various reasons such as there was another student in the class that their student didn’t get along with, the teacher seemed mean or flighty…or had green hair. Some cases had merit and some not so much but they all had to be listened to along with phone calls, emails and hand-written notes to which they’d have to give a response. Not to mention there were always teachers with questions or concerns as the school year got rolling again. Jon knew from experience things would settle soon enough. The first couple of weeks were a trial but he could handle it.

Potentially taking on the role of head principal at the high school next year though with twice the student population, new issues and being the one at the top of the pyramid was something Jon wasn’t sure about in the least.

“Talk to Sansa,” Brienne said kindly when he’d been staring at the same form for three solid minutes. “This isn’t something you have to decide on your own.”

“I know. I will.”
A couple of hours later, Jon drove down to Jack’s Pub to meet Theon as agreed after their phone call last night. Theon was standing by his car waiting for him when he pulled in.

“Okay, get it over with,” Theon said, jutting out his chin, once Jon got out.

“I’m not punching you.”

“You sure? I figured that might make you feel better.”

“Look, I said last night I was sorry for being a dick, okay? That’s why I asked you to meet me here after work.”

“Alright. So, beer?”

“Beer. I’m buying. But just one beer for me. Then, I’ve got to get home.”

“I’ll take it,” Theon smiled.

Sansa had been right of course. He’d been overreacting. His sister was older than him and Rhae didn’t really need her little brother looking out for her when it came to men, especially Theon.

He might’ve played around a good long while but Theon had a good heart. Jon knew that. He just hated the thoughts of seeing either of them hurt and, perhaps selfishly, worried that if things didn’t work out for them it would lead to a lot of awkwardness down the line. He hoped not.

But, being non-supportive and cutting off his best friend certainly wouldn’t help anyone.

“I know you’ll be good to her,” he said once their drinks arrived.

“I’ll be good to her. If I’m not, go ahead and kick my ass.”

“Deal. And, I’m happy for you both. Is Rhae pissed at how I acted Saturday?”

“Have you met your sister?”

“I’ll call her later and make it up to her, too. If I don’t, go ahead and kick my ass.”

“Deal.”

They clinked their bottles together and took a pull before he set his back down and asked what was on his mind. “When did you start to notice her…that way?”

“Rhae? Since the moment you introduced us.” Jon’s eyebrows shot up. “But she was way out of my league and a little older. That doesn’t matter now but it did when I was 19. I told myself it couldn’t be. I know the Bro Code and at the time I always figured some amazing guy would come along and sweep her off her feet. I decided there was no point in working myself up to pine endlessly, you know? But none of those guys she dated were ever good enough for her.”

“No, they weren’t.”

“And then I started thinking the past six months or so, I could try and pull my act together and take a shot. I thought about it a lot but I’d chicken out.”

“So what changed that?”

“You and Sansa.”
“Me and Sansa?”

“Yeah. You guys are just… I realized seeing you two together and with the girls that I wanted that. Well, not kids yet but I wanted something special like you guys found. And, I figured if a dork like you could land a goddess like Sansa, surely a stud like me could nut up and see if Rhae might give me a chance.”

“I’m equally flattered and insulted.”

“That’s one of my many talents.”

“Hey, Theon?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a pretty amazing guy and I’ll bet you could sweep her off her feet.”

“Thanks, Jon. But I’m not kissing you no matter how many beers you buy me.”

After dinner, Lyarra had headed to her room to struggle over the dreaded paragraph while Mina went outside to play with Lady and Ghost. And Jon found himself back at the kitchen table with the love of his life staring at loads of unsexy paperwork again.

He’d decided once the bills were paid he’d ask to discuss something with her and bring up the potential position at Long Castle. However, Sansa beat him to the punch.

“I’d like to talk to you about something,” she said quietly as soon as he closed the laptop.

“Of course.”

“Can we move into the living room? It’d be more comfortable for this discussion.”

“Sure.”

His stomach clenched up a bit. He could tell by her body language this was something important. His mind immediately started running the gambit of what it could be. Given his penchant for pessimism at times, he was already imagining worst case scenarios.

“I’ve got an appointment with my doctor next week.” Oh, shit. Is she sick? “My gynecologist.” Wait… is she pregnant? “It’s just for my annual check-up.”

“Okay…”

“I was thinking about us and the things we talked about in May. I know I’m graduating in December. I’ll have my Marketing degree and I could look for a job. It’d pay more than what I make at the school and I’d enjoy pursuing something in that field.”

“Of course. I…”

“Wait. I’m not done.”

“Shutting up.”

She laughed and put a hand on his knee. “No, I do plan to pursue something in that field but I’m also
happy at Chelsea. And...well, I’m seeing the doctor next week.” She smiled at him, a meaningful sort of smile. He wasn’t quite following. “What I’m saying is, I’d like to come off birth control. I don’t know if I want us to start trying yet but Margaery said she had issues getting her ovulation back to normal after being on the pill for years. Maybe I won’t have that issue but…”

“Oh,” he exhaled. “Oh! That's...oh.”

“Please say something other than ‘oh,’” she grimaced. “Jon, if you think this is too soon to talk about or…”

“No! I...I want that. I want that so much,” he said, kissing her to emphasize the point.

“We could use condoms until we’re sure we’re ready to start trying in earnest.”

“How soon should I go get some? I can run to the store right now.” She laughed again. He cupped her face, pressing his forehead against hers. “Sansa...I love you so much. I'd love to make a baby with you. Whenever you feel ready, I’m ready, alright?”

She nodded happily, her eyes welling up with emotion. He kissed her again. Career talk could wait a day. He would tell her about that possibility and they would discuss it, like partners, like a husband and wife. He’d never been a husband before and he meant to be a good one. But tonight, he was going to hold his fiancée and relish of possibilities for their future, possibilities that were so much dearer to his heart that climbing the ladder of success in education administration.

Lyarra found them cuddled together on the couch. She grinned at them, not making a face like she sometimes did when she saw them kissing.

“I finally finished,” she said dramatically as she held a single sheet of wide-ruled notebook paper in front of her.

“Great. Do we get to hear it?” he asked.

She shuffled her feet and looked down. “Yeah...I guess.”

She read in a monotone voice mostly, as if she was reciting a recipe or grocery list, but Jon could tell she was nervous.

“My summer by Lyarra Snow. This summer I got a dog. He is white and I named him Ghost. He is a lot of fun. Mina got his sister and named her Lady. She is kind of brown and grey. She’s a nice dog. I went swimming thirteen times. Last year I only went swimming six times. We went to England and I saw my Grams and David and we toured Old Trafford. Sansa and Mina moved in with us and Dad’s going to marry Sansa. I’m going to have a mom again. I am very happy. It was a good summer.”

Her head popped up from the paper, anxious for Sansa’s reaction. He darted a glance beside him and saw Sansa’s eyes sparkling with unshed tears. He hoped Lyarra would not misunderstand those tears.

She didn’t though because Sansa blinked away the tears and said, “That was...the loveliest paragraph I think I’ve ever heard.” Lyarra beamed at her in response. “If Miss Manderly gives it back to you, I’d really love to keep it, sweetie.”

“You can keep it,” Lyarra said softly. She walked over slowly to them and Sansa pulled her into a hug.
Jon cleared his throat before he got all emotional, too. “I’ll call Mina in. I’m sure the dogs are getting
tired. I think we’ve got time for a board game or some family fun before bedtime, don’t you?”

They nodded and he called Mina in. He agreed wholeheartedly with Sansa and Lyarra both. It was a
lovely paragraph, it had been a good summer and he was very happy.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I'm not cool and can't enter links but if you're curious about 'The Duck Song,'
here you go... https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtN1YnoL46Q

Other lyrics from 'Fireflies' by Owl City.
She’d felt the warm, moist huff of his breath against her naval as his fingers hooked into the waist band of her sleep shorts.

“Jon? What time is it?” she’d murmured.

“Early. Lift your hips, love.”

“What are you doing?” she’d laughed softly...as if she hadn’t known.

“Starting the week off right,” he’d replied as he tugged off her shorts.

“What about the girls?”

“Still snoozing.”

“The dogs?”

“Same.”

“I have morning breath.”

“I don’t care,” he’d rumbled. “And I’m starting elsewhere anyway.”

Her back had arched as she’d felt his nose nudging her legs apart. All further Monday morning concerns or questions had soon flown away.

“Good morning, ladies!” Sansa sang out cheerily to her co-workers as she entered the office a couple of hours later two weeks after school had started back.

“It’s Monday morning. What’s good about that?” Shae grumbled as she idly scanned her phone.

“The sun is shining but there’s a delicious nip in the air and I brought muffins for everyone.” She happily sat the plate down on her desk.

“That nip in the air is just a reminder that winter is coming to freeze our asses off. And muffins are good but it still doesn’t change the fact that Monday mornings suck.”

“I don’t think Sansa’s Monday morning has sucked,” Randa said with a wink. “In fact, I think it’s been quite good so far.” Shae’s head popped up from her phone. Soon, both women were smirking at her. Sansa felt her cheeks growing hot. “Oh, shit. I’m right. Look at her blush!”

She had not thought the source of her good mood would be so obvious. It’s not like I’m normally as grumpy as Shae anyway. But she supposed waking up on a Monday morning to find her fiancé’s head between her legs might have made her a bit more sunny than normal.
“What was good?” Megga asked distractedly, clearly not catching the drift right away.

“I’m taking bets that Jon was this morning,” Randa cackled.

“No bet,” Shae said. “I’d lose.”

“Oh, Randa! You’re wicked to suggest such things!” Megga protested. “I’m sure Sansa doesn’t want us inferring anything from her morning greetings. And it’s hardly professional to speak of Mr. Snow in such…”

“Hey, Kettle? This is Pot calling. Um…you’re black. You’re the one always gossiping around here, Megga! And, I’m merely giving a woman in a radiant state of afterglow a hard time because I’m…”

“Good morning, ladies!” Jon interrupted with an almost abrasive cheeriness that made Sansa cringe as he passed through. “Oh, there’s those muffins!” He took a bite of one and gave her a suggestive leer when he added, “Mmm…delicious.”

If she was blushing before, Sansa was certain to be beet-red now. And of course, Mr. Oblivious had the benefit of slipping into his office while Sansa was left to stammer at the three ladies.

“Um…so…how was your weekend? Megga? Shae? Randa? The girls had fun at that book fair I mentioned. Oh, and my other class starts tonight. Global Marketing Strategy. Should be loads of fun.”

It was no good. All three of them were standing there with their arms crossed and saucy grins on their faces.

“Sansa? Could I borrow you for a sec?” Jon asked, poking his head around the corner.

“Sure.” A second, a minute…a week.

She heard the three of them tittering behind her back as she entered Jon’s office but she would not be ashamed.

He’s my fiancé. We’re getting married. We live together. Brienne has no problem with us working together. This is all good. We are professionals and…

“Oh! Jon!” she cried as he lunged for her.

“Sorry,” he murmured, his deep husky voice playing havoc with her professionalism as his arms circled her waist. “I just had to say I love you and I think every Monday morning should start off like that.”

“They are already giving me hell out there,” she chided, putting him at arm’s length.

“Why would they give you hell?” he scowled.

“Because apparently we’re both wearing signs over our heads to tell the world we had sex this morning.”

“Yeah?” He appeared way too pleased with himself at that.

“Megga would say this is hardly professional, Mr. Snow.”

“Right…professional. I’m sorry, Sansa. That was…um…”
“It’s alright. I forgive you for your…enthusiasm. It’s not as though your advances are unwelcome. Just not here, we agreed.”

“Yes, we did. Sorry again.”

“So unless you really needed something…”

“No, thank you. I’ve got everything I need.”

“Good.”

“Meet me at the Pilot for a quickie during lunch?” he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Jon…”

“Sorry. So tonight?”

“Tonight…after you and the girls get home from practice and I get home from class.” He grinned. “If I don’t have too much studying to do.” His chin dropped to his chest and his shoulders slumped. He looked like a little boy being told he couldn’t have any cookies. “Be good, Mr. Snow. I’d hate to have to phone your mother.” A devilish grin now. Oh, my… “Maybe I’ll stay up late for you tonight regardless of my studies.”

Holding her head high, she marched back out to her desk.

She selected a muffin and said, “I suppose not all Monday mornings are bad,” as she took a bite. “Sometimes, they can be surprisingly good.”

All four of them started laughing then, loud enough that Jon poked his head out again. When he asked what was funny, he got a chorus of ‘Nothing!’ followed by giggling. He smiled at them uncertainly before darting back inside.

Three hours later, Sansa was sitting at the front counter, frustrated as she texted with Harry.

SANSAS: I told you Jon and I have plans Friday night. Mina’s been talking about seeing this movie with you for the past week. Lyarra, too.

She hated for the girls to be let down. And, she hated to tell Jon this. Agreeing to allow Harry to take both girls to see a movie had been a big step for him. Not that he didn’t trust that Harry could manage to successfully take two eight-year-olds to see the live-action doggy adventure movie. But it took a certain level of trust to put your child in the care of someone else who wasn’t their parent even if Jon was committed to having a good relationship with Mina’s father.

On a more selfish note, they were going out with Robb, Margaery, Theon and Rhae. She’d never been on a triple date. She hadn’t even been on a double date since high school and only then because only one of the four kids had had a license and a car. She was looking forward to this time out with other adults they cared about to have fun and feel a bit carefree for a couple of hours.

And Jon would be turning 30 next week. This was supposed to be a pre-celebration of sorts for him
that didn’t involve overly-iced cake, too many candles and cards made from construction paper. Not that he’d care. He loved that stuff but it would be fun to raise a toast to her fiancé that didn’t necessarily involve apple juice.

HARRY: I know. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to them. Bob asked me if I could stay late Friday and I hated to say no. Sales are down and the rumor mill is churning about lay-offs.

Was that true? Why was it so hard for her to believe him?

Because he spent years feeding me lines of bullshit when Mina and I weren’t convenient for him.

She stared at her phone angrily for a minute and then shot a text to her mother. Please, Mom…

HARRY: Sans, I get you’re pissed. I didn’t mean to let you down. Did you have a chance to look over that paperwork I asked you about?

SANSA: No. And don’t change the subject.

HARRY: I can take Mina to soccer tonight if you want.

She rolled her eyes at the unnecessary offer. All the times you could’ve helped out before and now you want to drive her to soccer.

SANSA: Jon’s taking them both to soccer.

Duh, he’s the coach and lives with her!

HARRY: Sans…I’m sorry.

SANSA: I’ll look over the paperwork later this week. I’ve got class tonight.

HARRY: You’re getting close now, right? I’m happy for you.

Yeah, really happy for me to finally get my diploma at 27, no thanks to you.

SANSA: Got to go. Talk later.

Her mother replied just then that she’d be happy to take the girls to the movie. She even offered to have them spend the night.

MOM: You think I’d say no to my granddaughters?

Granddaughters. She read that line repeatedly with a huge smile.

SANSA: Thank you! You’re the best.

As she laid her phone down, she heard Randa muttering, “Oh, fuck no…”

She waited for the expected chastisement from Megga but none came. Instead, for the first time, she heard Megga use profanity.

“Shit. I thought that bitch was still off having plastic surgery or something.”

“Bali was the cover story.”
Shae rolled her eyes at them. “You mean drying out, right? Bali was a cover story for the plastic surgery which was just a cover story for the rehab.”

“Who…” Sansa started to ask before she spied a woman approaching through the office windows. Mid to late 40s, golden blonde hair and beautiful, she was dressed quite fashionably with a Prada handbag slung over one arm.

“Tell me about Mondays again, Sansa, after you meet Her Royal Highness…Cersei Lannister.”

The door opened cutting off any further discussion and the admittedly regal-looking woman swept into the office like she owned the place.

“Hello, ladies. Long time, no see. Myranda, have you lost a pound or two?”

“Fifteen actually.”

The woman looked her up and down with a smirk. “Well, keep at it, dear. Megan, can I get a coffee?”

Megga stared at her blankly for several painful beats before she squeaked, “My name’s not Megan, Ms. Lannister. It’s, um…Megga.” Not that the woman seemed to care. Actually, she seemed annoyed that Megga had corrected her about her name.

“Aw…we’re fresh out, Ms. Lannister,” Shae said sarcastically. “I’d have run down to Starbucks if I knew you were coming.”

She shot a scathing look at Shae before asking Randa, “Is Brienne in?”

Without waiting for a response, she headed past the front desk as though she was just going to barge right into Brienne’s office. Megga, who was nearest, rose to stop her. The woman’s emerald green eyes widened with an affronted look and a savagery that had Megga quickly shrinking back.

“She’s out today, Cersei,” Randa said. “And Mr. Snow is elsewhere before you check his office.”

She was indeed heading right towards Jon’s office. Sansa’s initial dislike was cemented into something bordering on detestation. Who the hell did this woman think she was?

“Well, he surely can’t be out today, too. What would happen if you ladies were left unattended? You might stage a coup,” she teased with a smug little grin. “Where is he?” she demanded next, all pretense of courtesy dropped.

“We don’t put a bell around his neck when he leaves the office, you know,” Shae snarked.

But Randa was capable of putting on a polite front. “He’s dealing with an issue in the cafeteria. He’ll be back shortly.”

“I know my way to the cafeteria. My son does go here after all.” She reached over the counter to where Sansa was sitting to help herself to a visitor’s badge when she appeared to notice her for the first time. “Oh…someone new?”

“Yes, Cersei. This is Sansa. She started here last spring.”

“Uh huh. Well, I guess I missed this new addition.” She smiled at Sansa, a cat-like smile that put Sansa on edge. “I had to spend a few months in Bali and then I’ve been so terribly busy that I’ve not been around as much as usual.” The green eyes narrowed. “Sansa, is it? That’s a pretty name.”
“Thank you, Ms. Lannister. It’s nice to meet you.” Sansa started to offer her hand even though she didn’t much want to.

“Does your last name happen to be Stark?” she asked as her hand wrapped around Sansa’s tightly.

“Yes, it is.” She quickly withdrew her hand from the awkward and painfully firm handshake.

“Such a small world. I believe you know my oldest…Joffrey Baratheon.”

“Oh! Yes, uh…Joffrey,” Sansa gulped. I can see the resemblance now. You’re both assholes. Her three co-workers were staring at her like a parcel of owls, their curiosity peaked. “We, um…dated briefly last year,” Sansa blurted out before she could stop herself.

“Yes, I know. Joff has mentioned you…more than once,” Cersei said, with more than a touch of malice in her tone.

“You dated Ms. Lannister’s son? Ooh, isn’t that funny? Sansa and Mr. Snow got engaged over the summer,” Megga chimed in. “Their daughters are in the same grade, too. It’s really very…” She trailed off as all heads turned towards her. “I, uh…was just mentioning it for…yeah. I should be filing these,” she hastily added before sweeping all the papers off her desk and fleeing to the back.

Cersei lost all interest in Megga and turned back towards her. “You’re going to marry Jon, are you?”

“Yes.”

“And you both work here…together?” she asked with a very skeptical look.

“Uh…yes.” She stood up from her stool and brushed down her blouse and pants, allowing herself a quick glance at the diamond ring on her finger. She refused to be cowed by this woman. Their relationship outside of work was none of her concern. She was not the boss. Jon was going to be her husband and anyone who didn’t like it could bite her ass. “Yes, we’re engaged and both work here,” she said more firmly.

Cersei smiled…another one that put Sansa on the defensive. “Well, many people find true love at work, they say. One of my exes was my boss once upon a time,” she whispered as though she was sharing a great confidence. “Too many late nights filing and such. Things can get…well, you know,” she added suggestively.

She was probing. Sansa didn’t want to discuss how she’d met Jon or any of it with her. She thought of her mother’s words from long ago: ‘Courtesy is a lady’s armor.’

“And I suppose he could use some help raising his little girl. Men can be rather clueless when it comes to children, especially little girls, right?” she laughed.

Oh, fuck you. He’s not marrying me to be his daughter’s nanny. Sansa started to open her mouth when the woman cast her final line.

“I guess Brienne won’t have too long to keep an eye on her lovebirds though. One year and he’ll be gone.”

“One…um, excuse me?” Sansa stuttered as the air seemed to leave her lungs all at once.

“Well, when Jon leaves here next year, I guess it won’t matter if you’re dating…or if you really wind up getting married even.”
I’m sorry…what?”

Keeping a smile on his face when he didn’t want to was not something Jon had excelled at as a boy. In truth, he’d sucked at it most of the time. His mother had enjoyed teasing him some about always wearing his emotions on his face when he’d been a rather sullen teenager who was edging towards manhood.

‘If you don’t like people taking the piss, Jon, you can’t forever be letting them know they’re managing to get to you.’

But years later, many of those spent in a profession which required a high degree of patience, tolerance and diplomacy, he had learned how to put on a mask as needed when dealing with unpleasant people. He needed every ounce of that skill when it came to dealing with Cersei Lannister.

Jaime’s twin sister, she thought she was some sort of supervisor around here simply because her brother was on the school board. Jaime knew he had no direct authority over Brienne or himself but his sister seemed to think they all waited around for her to pop in and tell them how things should be run.

Her son Tommen was a sweet kid but Jon would readily admit he was glad that the boy would be moving on to middle school next year so Cersei would have no further reason to visit Chelsea. At least, he hoped she wouldn’t.

Cersei had been one of those mothers early in Jon’s tenure at Chelsea who had been fascinated by the new and, more importantly, single assistant principal. He’d heard gossip of some sort of competition running amongst Cersei and her circle to make him something of a conquest. But her superficial charm and physical beauty did not disguise her cruel streak and rather puffed-up sense of self which Jon found very off-putting in anyone. Plus, he’d been far more invested in making a good impression in his new position and taking care of Lyarra to have any interest in becoming the school’s man-whore to the bored PTA ladies. And when the rumors stared to swirl that obviously Jon Snow was gay, he did nothing to actively discourage them. He just wondered who had started them but was mostly relieved when a majority of the ladies stopped trying so hard at that point.

But by the time he'd escorted Cersei to the exit doors after listening to her petty complaints about Tommen’s teacher on top of having dealt with a food fight fiasco in the cafeteria, Jon’s smile more closely resembled a grimace.

He entered the office to find the other three ladies with their heads together. They shot him a withering glance. It was incredibly tedious at times to feel like an outsider around here simply because he possessed a Y chromosome.

So when he found Sansa waiting for him in his office with her arms folded across her chest and a pinched look on her face, his tone might have been slightly acerbic when he asked, “What?” She gulped and he knew he’d already screwed up. “Sorry, love. I’m…”

“Were you ever going to tell me?”
She sounded torn between tears and rage. His brow furrowed. He couldn’t think of anything he’d done to upset her. Sometimes, our instincts are slow though.

“Tell you what?”

“About what everyone around here already knows except your fiancée apparently,” she said with an audible huff.

He scratched at the back of his neck. He was missing something. And I might be in trouble. But again, he didn’t know what it could be.

“What everyone around here already knows?” he repeated. He knew who always thought she knew everything around here. She was usually full of horseshit, too. He started to chuckle. “Don’t tell me you’re listening to Megga again.” Sansa’s lips curled back into a snarl and Jon winched. Way to sound like a patronizing dick, idiot. “That came out wrong,” he started to say while raising his hands in a placating manner.

“I’m not talking about Megga!” she shouted. He jumped and she seemed rattled that she’d raised her voice. She was not much of a screamer. Except the good sort. “I’m not talking about Megga,” she hissed this time. “I’m talking about you, my fiancée, all set to leave for a new position next year and not even telling the woman you’re planning to marry! I’m talking about the next principal of Long Castle High leaving me to look like an idiot in front of that busy-body bitch! ‘Are you saying you didn’t know?’ she asked in this insufferable, mocking tone. She had a lovely laugh at my expense, I assure you.”

“Cersei,” he sighed as it hit him at last. “Oh, shit.” She hadn’t breathed a word to him about meeting Sansa or the position but he didn’t doubt she was hoping to stir up a shitstorm between himself and Sansa. And she likely has.

“Sansa…”

“I thought she was deranged but then after she left Randa said she thought I knew,” she said next. “That was the worst part. She was right and the other girls standing there looking at me sympathetically.” The rage was gone and now her eyes were shining with tears. He’d rather she scream at him some more. “I thought you’d share things with me, Jon. I thought we’d…”

“Sansa, I’m not…I would never take another job without discussing it with you first. I’ve not accepted any position at Long Castle.”

“It’s not true then?” she asked with such…hope. Hope that you’re not a big, fat liar who’s going to hide things from her.

He hated himself as he answered, “No…but also yes. Will you please sit down?”

He closed his office door as she begrudgingly took a seat across from his desk. He had some explaining to do…and a huge apology to make.

“What do you think he did?” Lyarra whispered to her on the soccer field that evening.

Jon was working with a couple of new players and asked her and Lyarra to lead the other girls
through a drill. She liked that. It was sort of like they were in charge.

Mina pursed her lips as she thought about Lyarra’s question. “I don’t know. He messed up somehow though. I’ve seen Uncle Robb around Aunt Margaery when he messes up. It seemed the same to me.”

But, Mommy hadn’t looked mad at all when they’d been driving home from school despite Jon acting weird. Once they’d got home, he’d kept following her around the house and offering to do stuff.

“Okay, I hauled off the garbage, replaced that lightbulb over the front porch and got everything folded from the dryer. I can cut up the peppers and onions if you need me to, love.”

“I’ve got it, Jon.”

“I can set the table.”

“The girls have already done that.”

“Would you like a glass of wine with dinner?”

“I’ve got to go to class tonight.”

“Of course…right. Sorry,” he’d said dejectedly.

“You could take the dogs out.”

“On it!” he’d shouted before whistling for them both.

“Sansa…we just took the dogs out,” Lyarra had said.

“I know, sweetie,” Mommy had said. Then, she’d gone back to cutting up onions and laughing to herself.

She could sort of see why Mommy thought it was funny. He reminded her a bit of how Lady or Ghost might act when they’d peed or pooped in the house and knew they were in trouble and would do anything to make up for it.

“Whatever it was, I know he didn’t mean to do anything bad,” Lyarra said worriedly.

Mina started to tell Lyarra what Aunt Arya had said about men being idiots but stopped herself. She knew Mommy would not like her saying that. And, she figured Lyarra wouldn’t want to hear her say that about her dad.

Actually, Mina didn’t want to say that about him either. He was her dad as well in a way. Her own dad wasn’t perfect. She could hardly blame Jon if he wasn’t either. Besides, he was sweet to Mommy and to them. She agreed with Lyarra. If he messed up, he didn’t mean to. He loved Mommy very much. He loved her, too.

And I love him even when he messes up.

That was the thing to keep in mind, the wise sort of thing Mina was sure that Grandma or Grandpa might say under these circumstances. Everyone messes up sometimes. Everyone. No exceptions.

Or as she’d overheard Uncle Rickon shouting at Aunt Arya once, “You’re such a hard ass! Haven’t you ever studied the teachings of Buddha? Life is short. Forgive and forget shit and move on
maybe?”

Mommy and Grandma had been very angry at Uncle Rickon the rest of the day after he had said that where Mina could hear but they’d forgiven him.

What mattered most to Mina was that Mommy didn’t seem troubled by any of it.

“Don’t worry,” she finally told Lyarra. “I think whatever he did, he’s already working to make right.”

But that evening, when they climbed into the Pilot to head home from practice, Lyarra couldn’t seem to stop from asking, “So, how big exactly did you mess up, Dad?”

Mina had started giggling at the look on Jon’s face when he turned around to stare at them both.

“She asked that?” Sansa laughed as he brought her a glass of wine that night when she got home.

“Thank you.”

“Yes. And you’re welcome.”

Since they got home from practice an hour ago, Jon had been busy doing everything he could think of to make sure Sansa didn’t feel the need to lift a finger after her long day.

Yeah, okay…I’m sucking up a bit. She deserves some sucking up.

“Are they still awake?”

“I think Lyarra might be. Mina fell asleep kind of quick. Want to go see them?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she answered as she took a sip.

They walked down the hall, hand-in-hand, and pecked in on Mina first who looked like an angel sleeping under the fairy lights that he was never taking down unless she asked him to. Lady’s head rose from her paws as she watched Sansa sit down on the edge of Mina’s bed before she lowered it again. Jon stood in the doorway and watched her lovingly stroke her daughter’s hair.

When they moved to Lyarra’s room, Ghost was already snoring but Lyarra was still just barely awake. She smiled sleepily as Sansa sat on her bed now and repeated the same gesture, lightly running her fingers through his daughter’s dark curls.

“I’m glad you’re home, Mom.”

“I’m glad to be home, sweetie.”

Jon quickly stepped back into the hall to clear his throat. He wondered if the tenth time or maybe the hundredth or thousandth time he heard Lyarra call Sansa Mom would be enough for him to stop getting choked up over it. He doubted it.

Somewhat composed once more, he took her hand again as they returned to the living room. He
urged her to put her feet in his lap and started massaging them.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to unless you mind.”

“Oh, I don’t mind.” She arched her back and settled more comfortably on the couch, taking random sips of the wine.

“I’m sorry again about…”

“Jon, we discussed it. You’re not in the doghouse…although you’re very cute doing all these things to please me.”

“I’d do them anyway.”

“I know that.”

He hadn’t meant to hurt her by not discussing the position at the high school with her sooner. He could kick himself for letting her find out the way she had. He also wished he could kick Cersei Lannister but the pain he’d caused was completely his fault. He’d admitted it and apologized. Sansa, being Sansa, had accepted it and soon been ready to move past that even though he’d felt wretched all afternoon. He knew how little trust there was between her and Harry, how much Harry had done to erode any trust between them over the years. He didn’t want her to doubt she could trust him. And part of trust was always being open with her.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to talk it over with her. And he certainly wasn’t planning on making career and life decisions without her input. She was going to be his wife. He’d never been married before but he already loved having someone with whom he could share his burdens and concerns. He still needed to practice communicating things though.

And, as he’d explained earlier in his office, he’d been avoiding discussing the opening at Long Castle and the rumors surrounding it because it wasn’t something that held a lot of appeal to him but he thought it might be his duty to do it anyway.

“That’s my MO typically. Avoid something I’d rather not deal with as long as possible.”

“And then do your duty when you’re faced with a decision whether you want to or not?”

“Something like that.”

“Jon…why do you see it as your duty to apply if you don’t really want the position?”

“Because we’re a family and we want to have a bigger family and I want to be able to support you all and…”

“Stop right there, please. This decision of whether or not you apply should ultimately be about what makes you happy and you want to achieve professionally. I know you’ve mentioned going back to teaching.”

“That’s less money. And I like what I do here. I’m not sure I can see myself going back to teaching full time and being satisfied with that now. But Sansa…I want you to be able to stay home if you’d prefer when we…expand our family.”

She’d smiled then with tears in her eyes. “You want to take care of me?”
“Always.”

“That’s really very sweet.” No it wasn’t. She’d not been taken care of enough in his opinion. He meant to change that for her. “But I am looking forward to pursuing some career dreams of my own that don’t involve answering someone else’s phone with no voice in how things are done or fetching coffee all day, you know.”

“Of course. I get that. I wasn’t suggesting you shouldn’t work if you want to. I just meant…”

“I know what you meant and I love you for it.”

Sitting together in their living room now, Jon felt more content as he gently squeezed her feet, enjoying the soft moans and whimpers he was eliciting with his efforts.

“Oh, I meant to tell you. Harry’s bailing on us for Friday but I already got Mom lined up to cover.”

“What was up with Harry?”

“Work…he says.”

“Alright. I’m looking forward to taking you out.”

“I’m looking forward to it, too. And Mom said the girls can spend the night.”

“Wait…so you’re saying we’ll have a date night and then a whole night alone here?”

She smirked at him. “Should I order some special lingerie.”

“I’ll set up the video camera.” She laughed and smacked his arm. “I’m serious.”

“I’ll be looking forward to the end of the week all the more now.”

“Me, too. I’m sorry if our Monday turned out sort of…”

“Our Monday got off to a terrific start.” He grinned and nodded. “I think it should end that way, too.”

He hopped off the couch in a flash and pulled her to her feet. She shrieked rather adorably when he picked her up and started carrying her to their room.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Chapter End Notes

Couple of notes:

1. There will be career decisions to be made ahead so I don’t want anyone to assume that this is the end of the matter although (again) their jobs are not the focus of the story.

2. Among other things, next chapter will include Jon’s birthday and triple date time where the guys will engage in a bit of friendly (in other words-childish) competition.
Thanks for reading!
Quick notes: The girls don't get any POVs this chapter (I'm sorry!) because I wanted to focus on the grownups bonding with other grownups but they'll be back next chapter. And, I want to say a big thank you to those of you continuing to follow this story and this little family in the making! I love writing this story but your comments really keep me inspired.

Speaking of inspiration...

Thank you to Mahe729 for inspiring me to include Joey Tribbiani's famous line in this chapter.

Thank you to Val of Winterfell for getting me psyched to write their wedding in a few chapters with your pic sets. They've set the date now.

And thank you to Natalie for basically inspiring me every damn day to write and share Jonsa. You're the best :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Since it was a birthday celebration of sorts for him, Jon had found himself in the awkward position of making Friday night’s plans for the group. He’d tried to defer to Sansa but she’d been insistent that he make a suggestion.

“How about we stay home and fuck like bunnies as soon as your parents pick up the girls?”

He’d earned an eyeroll for that.

So, Friday had rolled around and Jon was still fumbling for something to suggest when he overheard a couple of students talking about their weekend plans. Go-karts were mentioned. It sparked an idea at least.

Jon didn’t care much for dancing. Okay, he would admit that he liked holding Sansa close and swaying to a slow song upon occasion but neither snooty night clubs nor line-dancing honky-tonks held much appeal for him. And while movies and going out to dinner were all well and good, with six people in their party he figured it might be more fun if they did something that allowed them more opportunity to mix and mingle.

And if the ladies had laughed initially over his suggestion of Adventure Station after everyone arrived at the house that evening, he knew that Theon at least would be on his side. Sansa and Rhae had seemed to enjoy it the time they’d all taken the girls there. He was a bit worried about what Robb and Margaery might think though.

He liked Robb very well but most of their time spent together had been at family functions or at the fields. He was pleased when Robb’s eyes had sparkled with unfeigned interest.
“That’s the place that has all those old-school arcade games and batting cages, right?”

“Right.”

He hoped Margaery wouldn’t mind. She was around four months pregnant now and he figured go-karts were a no-no.

“I’ll stick to mini-golf and enjoy watching my husband make a fool of himself,” she assured Jon when he asked her.

Granted, it was only seven when they arrived and most of the crowd were half their age as they all couldn’t help but notice. In fact, Jon ran into a former student from his very first year of teaching… who happened to be on a date.

*Holy shit, time flies.*

“Hey, Mr. Snow! Where’s your little girl? I remember how cute she was as a baby from the pictures on your desk.”

“Oh, she’s not here, Alys.”

“But…you’re here,” the girl said incredulously as she stared at the group of adults.

“Um, yeah…okay. Wow, so it’s good to see you and I hope you’re enjoying high school! Looks like your date’s got your tickets.”

“I am feeling kind of ancient,” Robb commented after their two rounds of go-karts. None of them had been in last place but not first by a long shot either time.

“That number nine kart was definitely slower than the rest!” Theon complained. “I should’ve tried to switch before our second race.”

“Did you see how recklessly that boy with the hat was driving?!” Jon added. “It’s like he had no fear or something!”

“They don’t at that age. Neither did we probably,” Robb replied. “Good God, I sound old,” he added with a shudder.

“Please, don’t tell me you’re going to start the whole ‘Why, God, why?!’ thing again,” Margaery snickered as they rejoined the three ladies since Sansa and Rhae had sat out the second round to hang with her.

“I might,” he grinned as he wrapped his arms around his wife. “Maybe I’ll wait till you turn 30 so you can say it with me.”

“As if,” she signed dramatically.

“Well, I know one section of this place where we won’t have to worry about feeling so old,” Theon said.

Along with a mix of go-karts, mini-golf and arcade games, the entertainment location also had a bar for those who were of age which served decent wings and other pub grub.

The music was a bit loud he thought while they waited for an open table but when Sansa started singing quietly along to Ed Sheeran, Jon decided maybe he didn’t mind. It never mattered what she sang. He just loved hearing her.
“Alright, everyone!” Rhæ announced an hour later when their server had returned with five shots of Jack and one shot of Coke. “I’d like to raise a toast to my adorable baby brother who’s turning 30 in a few short days!”

“Must you call me that, Rhæ? It’s not like you even knew me when I was a baby.”

“But you were adorable! I’ve seen the pictures. Lyanna is always so kind to share. I love the one of you sitting on your potty seat in her old living room while you’re watching ‘Sesame Street’ the best. She gave me a copy before she moved back to England. You know…in case I ever needed to blackmail you.”

“I’d never say this to Mum but I’ll say it to you: Fuck you,” he hissed as the others were laughing their asses off.

“She’s not lying. I’ve seen it,” Theon said, wiping his eyes.

“And double fuck you, asshole.”

“What if I wanted to see it?” Sansa smirked.

“I’ll fuck you,” he murmured in her ear.

Rhæ passed out the shots of Jack to all but Margaery. “Here you go, madam…enjoy a shot of Coke instead.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure you should drink that, baby?” Robb asked.

Margaery grumbled irritably at her husband. “I’m having one and a half ounces of a caffeinated beverage, Robb. This is the first caffeine I’ve had in three months even though the doctor said I could have up to twelve ounces a day. Are you gonna make me feel bad about it?”

“Uh…”

“How many beers have you had already as you attempt to keep up with Theon and Jon?”

Robb’s ears turned red as he sheepishly said, “Right…sorry.”

He lifted his glass along with everyone else when Rhæ led the toast, “To Jon.”

They all repeated the words and clinked their glasses together. He felt Sansa squeezing his knee beneath the table as his heart felt a squeeze as well, a good one. He had to admit that he was having a wonderful time tonight, not only with her but with everyone.

“Speech!” Theon demanded of him as they all slammed their glasses back down on the table.

“No,” he tried to demur but the others were backing Theon up. “Alright, alright…” he said, holding up his hands in surrender.

How could he possibly express what was in his heart at this moment?

He listened to the song playing as he pretended to think up something to say and thought of his birthday last year when he’d been turning 29. Rhæ had bought him a cake. Theon had given him a raunchy card that he’d had to burn so Lyarra wouldn’t see it. The office ladies had sung to him over the announcements at school and embarrassed the hell out of him. Lyarra had caught a cold a few
days beforehand and fallen asleep on him on their couch that night right after dinner. She hadn’t even wanted any cake she’d been so miserable. He had considered himself lucky all the same.

But now, he remembered how lonely he had felt in one respect that night. He’d wondered what it might be like to have someone to share…*my life with.* He also remembered how scary that had seemed. It didn’t seem scary now that he’d found her.

‘*…where’d you wanna go?*

*How much you wanna risk?*

*I’m not looking for somebody*

*With some superhuman gifts*

*Some superhero*

*Some fairytale bliss*

*Just something I can turn to*

*Somebody I can kiss…’*

He pulled Sansa closer, nuzzling into her hair and inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo and just her.

“I would just like to thank you guys for being here with us tonight. But most of all, I want to thank Sansa for…” She craned her neck up to look at him and he drowned in those blue eyes once more before trailing off with “…*everything.*”

Adventure Station was really cool in his opinion but, at the moment, Robb Stark was struggling to stay cool. He could not understand what was going on tonight. Every game he played, he was sucking it up. Margaery had even beaten him at mini-golf and, while he’d smiled and congratulated his wife, that was unprecedented. Robb Stark was supposed to kick ass at mini-golf! And go-karts! And…any damn sport or game he attempted!

At least, he used to…

*Why, God? Why?!*

Sansa had even asked if he was feeling alright with that pert little look on her face that made him want to stick his tongue out at her like he might’ve when they were little.

*‘I had a friend was a big baseball player*

*Back in high school*

*He could throw that speedball by you*
He hummed along to the Boss while following the pair of them. They’d moved indoors to the arcade games and things weren’t going any better.

“So, March 23rd, huh?” Theon asked.

“Yup,” Jon replied as he exchanged some bills for more quarters.

“Someone’s going to make an honest man of my boy at last.”

“Very funny. Spring Break seemed like a good time. Plus, Mum said David should be able to make it that way.”

“And what about your father?” Theon asked. Jon shrugged indifferently in response. “Jon, you know your sister’s going to…”

“We’ll see, alright?” he replied a bit huffily.

It was hard for Robb to imagine his father not being invited to his wedding but then again, from everything he’d heard, Rhaegar Targaryen was no Ned Stark…not even close.

Regardless of whether or not Jon wanted his father at his wedding though, Robb couldn’t be happier for Jon and Sansa. He’d liked Jon from the moment he’d met him last spring but never dreamed he’d be his brother-in-law by the following one. However, even if their courtship was quicker than most and while the two men might not share a passion for the same sport, there was no question they were in complete agreement when it came to the way Sansa and Mina deserved to be treated. Jon clearly adored them both and his daughter was a fantastic kid that all the Starks were already happy to consider part of their family.

Theon shot Jon a look so Robb decided to diffuse the situation. Obviously, Jon didn’t want to discuss it and Robb wanted to keep the focus on what mattered tonight. Like them all having a good time…and Robb winning something.

“Margaery is relieved you guys changed your mind from the New Year’s plan. She was dreading being around 8 months along and in the wedding. She would’ve done it but…well, now she’s hoping she can fit into something decent since the baby will be around six weeks or so by then.”

“Yeah, Sansa mentioned that. Said she had to keep her Maid of Honor in mind with our planning,” he said with a smile. “This one?” he asked a minute later as Robb pointed emphatically towards the air hockey table. “Are you sure?”

“Hell, yeah. Air hockey is my game!”

“I thought you said skeeball was,” Theon said with a smug grin.

_Bite me, prick._

Jon’s friend was alright…until skeeball. But when he’d crushed him and Jon both (five times!) and started singing _‘Nothing can stop me, I’m all the way up!’_, Robb had been more than ready for a new game.

Admittedly, Theon was good at skeeball. Actually, he fucking owned it. He claimed the high score was his and Jon said he wasn’t shitting him.
To draw attention away from the topic of his skeeball humiliation (the first time he could ever recall actually having one of his balls hop the divider into someone else’s game), Robb turned back to Jon. “Speaking of Peanut, Marg and I wanted to talk to you and Sansa later about something, okay?”

“Sure.”

“What’s going on over there?” Theon asked as the crowd let out a loud whoop from across the way.

“Some kids playing that dancing game. So, are we playing this or not?”

“Oh, we’re playing,” Jon said with a smirk.

“Good. Now, I don’t want to discourage you fellas but I’m about to hand your asses to you both. I rock at air hockey.”

Theon started laughing. “Oh, really? He says he’s good at air hockey, Jon. You want to take the first round against him?”

“Why, sure. Be happy to.”

Robb should’ve known Jon’s Cheshire Cat-like grin was bad news.

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Sansa was having such a good time tonight just as she’d hoped. She might have been amused by Jon’s suggestion initially but this was exactly the variety of outing that was ideal for their group. Becoming a mom at a young age and keenly feeling the weight of that responsibility, she’d purposely avoided making plans that drew her away from Mina very often. She’d dated some but those had seemed more like a chore than anything before Jon. And going out with friends was something she’d rarely permitted herself to enjoy. She had always wound up feeling guilty despite her mother constantly telling her not to.

“Live, Sansa. Enjoy your youth,” her mother would say.

“I am, Mom.”

And she had been in a sense…but, if she was brutally honest, she’d have to admit she’d mostly been living it for Mina. Even when Harry had her, Sansa had felt like it was important to be available, ready and able to swoop in whenever needed.

Now though, she felt like she’d climbed down off the proverbial shelf and wanted to enjoy everything the world had to offer with Jon, their girls and tonight with their friends and family.

“We should’ve asked Arya and Gendry to come along,” she said to Rhae and Marg.

They’d left their men in the midst of a cut-throat Skeeball competition to search for something they could play without listening to Theon’s singing or Robb’s whining.

“Next time, we definitely will, assuming Arya will allow the poor guy back in our midst. So what was the story with Harry tonight?”
“Work…he said.”

“Work on a Friday evening?” Marg asked with a raised eyebrows.

Sansa shrugged. “Yeah, I know. I’m trying to have a little faith but it’s not easy.”

“And what about the paperwork he was hounding you to look at?”

“He was just wanting some advice. He’s got some great uncle or something who’s been trying to make contact with him through an attorney. Anya isn’t his birth mother,” Sansa clarified for Rhae. “They’re related but she adopted him when he was around two. She doesn’t want him to have anything to do with that part of the family but he doesn’t see the harm now and wanted a second opinion. I agreed with him.”

“Maybe Harry’s uncle is rich and looking to make him his heir.”

“Yeah…fat chance of that.” She came to halt when she spied something she’d not noticed when they’d brought the girls here last time. “Oh, my God! Margaery! PLEASE!!” she pled, hopping up and down and clapping like Mina might. They were laughing at her. She didn’t care.

“Sansa,” Marg laughed. “I’m not getting on that thing in my delicate condition.”

“You’re still running two miles every morning!”

“Yes, I am…for now. Let me put it this way. I can’t allow you to make me look ridiculous when you kick my butt at Dance, Dance Revolution. My pregnant ego is fragile enough as it is.”

“I’ll play,” Rhae said.

“Okay,” Sansa said. It might have sounded a touch dubious but her and Marg had been playing Dance, Dance since they were ten. “Have you ever…”

Rhae’s dark eyes narrowed but she was smirking when she said, “Watch it, Stark. I was kicking ass at Dance, Dance Revolution back when you were sitting on your own potty seat.”

“Alright, Targaryen…show me your moves.”

Thirty minutes later, Sansa had been forced to throw her hair up in a ponytail and was praying her deodorant was holding up as sweat was trickling down the back of her neck. All while attempting not to get her ass handed to her too badly. Rhae was good. Better than good. Sansa had thought her and Margaery were good back when they were teens and been obsessed with the game but Rhae was amazing. Not that Sansa was too shabby considering she’d not played in years. In fact, they’d attracted a crowd and were being cheered on by a group of spectators, most of them kids half their age.

What would your mothers think?! Sansa thought when one of the boys present wolf-whistled at her.

“You’ve got this round, Red!” some guy shouted at her.

She started to call the kid out but blushed when she realized it was her brother. “Don’t distract me, Robb!” she hollered back just as she missed two steps in a row and lost. “Shoot!”

She stepped down to see Jon and Theon were standing there, too. Jon circled her waist and gave her a hearty kiss as she reached him. She wondered if that was partly to stake his claim in front of her fans. She didn’t mind if it was.
“Sorry I’m all sweaty from my failed attempt to beat your sister.”

“I like you all sweaty,” he grinned as the rest of the crowd erupted to cheer for Rhae’s victory.

“Ah, yeah! That’s right! My woman is the champ! Bow down, bitches!” Theon announced to the world at large. “No offense, Sansa.”

“Shut up, you dork,” Rhae said as she hopped down and offered Sansa her hand to shake. “Good game, Sansa. I forgot how much I loved that game. We should teach the girls to play.”

“Oh, yes! I think they’d love it!”

“How about another round?” Theon asked, pointing to the bar.

“Whatsoever you guys want is fine but I’m done drinking,” Jon said.

“Done?! You’re nowhere near drunk, Jon.”

“I am driving,” Margaery offered.

“I don’t want to get drunk. I’ve got plans later,” he said with a mischievous wink her way which made Sansa blush again.

“I’m pretending not to hear any of these comments, you know?” Robb groaned. “But I can only pretend for so long.”

“Hey, I’ve got to do the same every time that dipshit over there puts his hands on my sister’s ass,” he said with a scowl at Theon…who happened to have his hands on Rhae’s ass at the moment. “Christ on a cracker! Save it for later,” Jon said, turning away. “So, do you want another drink, love?”

“I think I’d prefer water after that.”

“Good,” Robb announced. “Then, we’ll grab waters and head back outside. It’s time I schooled everyone at something tonight.”


“Yes, God! Yes! Batting cages! Let’s go, people!”

“I don’t think I’ve even held a bat since high school gym class,” Jon said.

“Me, either,” Theon added.

“Perfect!” her brother said, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

Thirty minutes later, Sansa could tell Robb’s manhood had obviously been vindicated and he was happy once more. But Theon seemed okay with that. He was getting batting lessons from Rhae who’d played softball in high school. Jon didn’t appear to care that Robb had thrashed him soundly either.

“I never have cared for baseball anyway,” he whispered in her ear.

“That’s fine. Just never say that out loud to my brother or Dad. In fact, don’t say it about football either.”

“Gotcha. So, what do you think about what they asked us?”
They were alone, relatively speaking. He pulled her over to the bleachers behind the batting cages. Sansa happily allowed him to pull her into his lap, resting her head on his shoulder and savoring the feel of his arms around her. She glanced over at the others. Robb was still hitting homers while Margaery cheered for him. Rhae was still giving Theon pointers in the next cage. Sansa suspected they were both enjoying the excuse for her to have her hands around him.

“I think I’d like to do it…if you would.”

“I would. I’m honored they’d ask us.”

Robb and Margaery had asked them to be their child’s godparents. It was unexpected and certainly not something to take lightly but there was no question in her mind or her heart about it.

“Okay then,” she sighed, her heart feeling very full.

She felt the pad of Jon’s thumb brush her face. “Why are you about to cry, love?” he asked though he was smiling.

“Because my big brother and my best friend are in love and have this little person on the way, coming to be part of our family in a few months and I’m so happy for them. And now they want us to be his or her godparents. Basically, I’m hopelessly sappy.”

“I love that you’re hopelessly sappy,” he said before kissing her softly. “Will you promise to be this sappy for me when I knock you up?”

” She snorted at his phrase before saying, “Sappier.”

“Perfect.”

They weren’t trying yet but Sansa knew it wouldn’t be long. Jon had said he was ready whenever she was. They’d set a wedding date and they were moving forward with those hopes and dreams they’d shared with each other back in May. She felt like she’d be ready to start trying very soon.

And wouldn’t it be lovely if the little cousins weren’t too far apart in age?

So much of her twenties had felt like she was in stasis, like she’d been running herself ragged on a hamster wheel and not really achieving anything while she’d struggled with being a single mom stuck in dead end jobs. Now, things were changing and she welcomed the changes.

She stood and pulled Jon to his feet. “Come on. Let me teach you how to get a hit.”

“I know how to hit,” he laughed. “I was just trying to make your brother feel better.”

“Sure you were,” she said dryly. “Are you saying you wouldn’t enjoy a lesson like Rhae is giving Theon?”

They looked over at the couple. Rhae still had her arms around Theon as he gripped the bat but now she was kissing his neck and making him laugh under his breath as she whispered things in his ear.

“Yeah, okay…I might enjoy a batting lesson from you. But let’s move down to the other end. That way, your brother won’t be giving me the stink eye and I won’t be forced to give it to Theon.”

“That’s a deal.”
At a quarter till eleven, Marg and Robb dropped them back off at the house after running Rhae and Theon to her place. Jon could always tell himself that Theon would be getting in his vehicle and driving home from there. Except Theon was pretty buzzed.

*He can just sleep it off on Rhae’s couch. Yeah…that’s it.*

Jon wasn’t buzzed though. Maybe buzzing with anticipation. A package had arrived yesterday afternoon. There wasn’t anything unusual about the package but Sansa had immediately grinned mischievously at him when she carried it in the house and whisked it to their bedroom before the girls could ask what it was and if it was for them.

So, he wasn’t all that surprised when Sansa purred into his ear the minute he closed the door behind them, “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“Yeah? What kind?” he asked, pressing himself against her.

“It’s black and lacy.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Let me go slip it on. I’ll come get you,” she said with a seductive glance over her shoulder before she left the room.

“Please, hurry!” he called after her, making her laugh.

No sooner than she’d left his sight, his phone started buzzing in his pocket. He was tempted to toss it across the room but knew it could be the girls.

*Please, don’t be one of the girls wanting to come home,* he thought as he pulled it out.

Sansa had spoken to Cat earlier. They’d both been asleep already but he knew one of them could’ve woke up.

But, it wasn’t the girls. It was Harry.

Jon scowled at his phone and thought about letting voice mail get it. He’d bailed on taking the girls to a movie tonight. Was he bailing on picking up Mina tomorrow as planned, too?

*Fuck. Just answer it and find out.*

“Hello?” Three beats of silence. “Harry?”

“Jon,” he finally responded in a flat tone. He heard him inhaling and then more silence.

“Harry…are you alright?”

He huffed, a shaky sounding breath. “Am I? That’s a good question. I guess the answer would be no…not really. They fired me.”

“What?!”

Sansa came back into the living room, half-dressed in some delectable negligee and her eyes wide.
with worry.

“I should’ve known. They asked me to stay late on a Friday. They’ve never done that before. Wish I’d just taken the girls to the movies instead.”

“What happened?”

“Got to stay competitive, sales are down…yadda, yadda, yadda. But, my sales weren’t down. My team had the top sales last quarter, not that it matters to them. They’ve been looking for a reason to get rid of me since they had to help pay for my fourteen-day program and the therapist.” Jon heard him moving around, opening and closing cabinets or something. “I’m going to lose my health insurance. It was one damn thing I was always able to do for Sans, you know? I was always able to cover my little girl’s insurance.”

“Harry…”

“I’m sorry if I’m interrupting your night. I’m sure you’ve got better things to do. Fuck, you’ve got Sansa there without the girls, don’t you? If I was in your place, I wouldn’t have answered the phone.”

“Where are you?”

“Home.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“No…not yet. My sponsor’s out of town. His sister’s kid’s getting married. He told me to call a friend. I…I don’t have any of those. Least not any who would encourage me not to drink.”

Jon looked at Sansa and thought of Mina. He took her hand and told Harry, “Yes, you do. I’m on my way.”

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from:

'Something Just Like This' by The Chainsmokers & Coldplay

'Glory Days' by Bruce Springsteen

'Nothing Can Stop Me' by Fat Joe & Remy Ma
Brad, I'm expecting a specific gif in your comment regarding the final section. No pressure...lmao.

Seriously though, I honestly think this is one of my favorite chapters I've ever written for anything. I guess that's good since it's really myself I write for but I hope you all enjoy it as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mina was curled up next to Grandpa in his favorite easy chair. He smelled good to her like he always did. There was an outdoorsy, piney scent that seemed to cling to him all the time but it was faint. Not like the strong cologne that Daddy sometimes used to wear.

She put her hand in his larger one and snuggled closer. She’d woke up extra early and started to feel sleepy again now that her tummy was full of pancakes.

“Goal!” he shouted suddenly causing Mina to stir. “Sorry, Little Red,” he added with a kiss on top of her head and a nice squeezing hug.

Little Red. Grandpa said he’d called her that since she was knee high to a grasshopper and her uncles called her that, too. She thought it was funny that Theon used the same nickname for her. They made it seem like her red hair was special. But Parker, who was by far the cutest boy in Mrs. Flint’s class, had declared that blonde hair was the prettiest the other day and left her feeling kind of glum.

“It’s off sides,” Lyarra told them in a bored tone. Sure enough, one of the referees was waving his flag.

“But…but,” Grandpa stammered, “but it was…that was a perfect goal!”

“Yeah, it was pretty but he was still off sides, Grandpa Ned.”

“I think it’s like an ineligible receiver down field, Dad,” Uncle Rickon chimed in.

“It’s okay, Grandpa,” Mina said. “Jon says off sides is one of the trickiest rules of soccer to understand.”

Grandpa huffed something under his breath just as Grandma came into the living room. “Mina, your father’s here.”

Mina sprang to her feet and raced towards the front door. She’d been afraid Daddy might not make it today. He’d said last week they’d do something special today. He’d had to work last night and couldn’t take them to the movies like they’d planned. She worried he might have to work again today, too.

She was surprised when she opened the front door and found both Daddy and Jon standing there.
“Hey, Princess,” Daddy said, picking her up and giving her a big hug. His face looked kind of puffy. It had been a while since his face had looked like that but he didn’t have that strong cologne smell he used to have some mornings.

“Hi, Daddy. Hi, Jon. Are you picking up Lyarra, too? She’s watching the match.”

“Good morning, sweetheart. Yes, I am. Did you have a fun night?” Jon’s face looked really pale, and there were dark patches under his eyes like he was extra tired. She hoped he didn’t have trouble sleeping with her and Lyarra away.

“We did! The movie was so good! Did you and Mommy have fun on your date?”

“We did,” Jon answered and Daddy looked away for a minute. Mina doubted it could’ve been as fun as the movies but she wouldn’t say that. Maybe Daddy was doubting that, too.

“Princess…I wanted to talk to you a second about something, okay?”

“Sure, Daddy” she said.

He carried her outside to Grandma’s front porch swing as Jon went inside to find Lyarra. Maybe he could help explain the off sides rule to Grandpa. They sat side by side and swung for a couple of minutes before Daddy spoke again.

“I thought we might go to the zoo today.”

“Oh, I love the zoo! We’ve not been there in months! And the baby gorillas will have gotten bigger. They might be playing now instead of just clinging to their mommies all the time.”

“Yeah, I know. But I was thinking, and this is only if you don’t mind, that maybe Jon and Lyarra might like to go with us.”

Mina’s brow furrowed for a second or two. Her days with Daddy were precious to her. And it was always just her and Daddy. Well, sometimes Grandma Anya came along for stuff. But she did love Jon and Lyarra a whole bunch. She’d only been to the zoo with them the one time back before Mommy and Jon had even fell in love.

“We could see the zoo with them but then I thought we’d have lunch back at my house, just you and me,” Daddy added. “We’ll pick up your favorite pizza.”

“With ham and pineapple but no peppers?”

“You bet.”

She liked that. Fun at the zoo with Jon and Lyarra but then lunch with just Daddy. “Okay. Sounds good to me.”

Daddy hugged her before they went inside to invite Jon and Lyarra to join them.

“If there’s only one boy gorilla, how come there’s three babies by three different moms, Dad?”
Lyarra asked as they stood outside the Western Lowland Gorilla habitat.

“Um…”

He heard Harry snickering under his breath and stared at the surly-looking 400 pound male trying to think of an answer to the question that wouldn’t raise a dozen more. But then, the daddy gorilla roughly (at least to human eyes) brushed one of the rambunctious baby gorillas to the side before he got up and stalked menacingly towards the other two.

“Oh, no!” Mina cried, covering her eyes. “He’s going to hurt the babies!”

But the little gorillas simply scurried to their mothers and peered curiously at Dear Old Dad, the Grump, as he took a seat again a little further away from the viewing window.

“No, princess. That’s just typical gorilla behavior. I’m sure he’s okay as gorilla dads go. Just a bit gruff. Right, Jon?”

“Right,” he answered, grateful the spectacle had diverted Lyarra’s attention from her question for the moment. “Shall we see what the chimps are up to?”

“Oh, can’t we stay here? Just a little longer,” Mina begged. Lyarra nodded in agreement with her.

“Oh, Of course,” Jon smiled. He was happy to indulge in watching the gorilla family dynamics with them as the curious and down-right mischievous kids annoyed their old man some more.

*Just don’t ask me to explain how he’s the dad of all three babies again, please. I’m not up to those sorts of talks today.*

He stifled a yawn and decided to take a seat further from the viewing window as more people came to do some gorilla watching. Instead, he observed Harry chatting easily with a couple who had their twins in a stroller and a daughter closer to the girls’ age. They were laughing at some comment Harry made as were the girls.

Sansa had told him Harry was a natural salesman who could talk to anyone and was quite charming when he was ‘on.’ Jon tried not to think about how that charm and ability to say the right thing combined with his good looks had worked to his advantage with women over the years, especially when it came to Sansa. But, he couldn’t help but envy him somewhat. Jon’s profession had required him to overcome his more reserved nature but there were times he would close his office door just to savor the silence and a bit of solitude.

*I am craving a bit of that now actually.*

Not that he wasn’t happy to be here. He’d suggested joining them at the zoo this morning to Harry and was pleased when Harry had agreed. But he did have his own agenda, so to speak. Partly, he felt Harry might not be up to a busy, one-on-one day with Mina after yesterday. And partly, Jon wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to leave Harry solely responsible for Mina all day after he’d come so close to slipping last night.

However, despite suffering from the same lack of sleep as himself, Harry was busy talking away now. But the strangers weren’t seeing the same Harry Jon had encountered last night. If Harry was a salesman and men’s careers were often an enormous measure of their own self-worth, this man had had that part of his identity ripped away last night and tossed in the shredder.

Sansa had been worried about him going but also been supportive and thankful to him for being willing to do it. As soon as he’d hung up though, Jon had been wondering what the hell he’d gotten
himself into. He wasn’t a counselor or a priest. He wasn’t a psychiatrist or a fairy godmother with a magic wand either. He didn’t know that much about addiction beyond what he’d learned in a couple of psych courses back in college. And what exactly might he be walking into? Harry had sounded so broken over the phone. Sometimes, broken men did rash and terrible things.

He’d been on autopilot the entire drive to Harry’s, unusually cognizant and strangely ashamed of the three beers and the shot he’d drank at Adventure Station hours earlier.

He’d breathed a sigh of relief when he’d parked the SUV but then gripped the wheel, rousing his courage to get out.

*Mina. You’re doing this for Mina,* he’d reminded himself as he walked up the path to Harry’s door. *And all of us.*

After that, knocking on Harry’s door hadn’t been so hard.

And while the night had contained its awkward moments and uncomfortable silences at times, the more they’d talked, the better he’d felt he understood Harry and the more he knew he’d made the right decision to answer his phone earlier.

A couple of hours later, the girls were starting to drag their feet and lunchtime was looming but the dads gave in to a plea for snow cones.

“*We’re pushovers, aren’t we?*” Jon asked as the girls found a seat with their treats where they could still view the gibbons swinging along their vines while hooting, howling and screeching at each other.

“Pushovers? Well, I don’t know about you but I just wanted a snow cone,” Harry laughed, licking some of the sticky red syrup off his thumb. Jon smirked and took a bite of his own. After a while though, Harry spoke again. “I never…I didn’t thank you last night.”

Jon had come to him in his time of need. He’d talked but he’d also listened until 2AM. He’d slept on Harry’s couch and fixed them both coffee this morning. He didn’t require a thank you for it. He knew he had his own selfish motivations, namely preventing Mina’s father who she loved from drowning his sorrows in a bottle and likely running his life further into the ground while he was at it which would only hurt an innocent child in the long run. However, he also liked to think his mum had raised a decent guy.

“It was nothing,” he said breezily.

“It wasn’t nothing…not to me. To me, it meant the difference between drinking and not drinking. It meant the difference between spending a day with Mina versus wallowing in self-pity with another hangover as I fed Sansa some bullshit excuse and disappointed my daughter yet again. And, I know you have your own life to enjoy with Sans and the girls which I respect. So, let me say this now. Thank you, Jon. Thank you for last night. And, thanks for everything you do for my daughter and her mother.”

It was not an easy thing to say, especially for a man whose pride had already been pricked more than once in the past 24 hours. He couldn’t reply with some pithy remark like he might do with Theon when the man was being that open and honest and vulnerable.

“You’re welcome, Harry,” he said, meeting his eyes despite the slight embarrassment he felt. He tossed his snow cone and wiped off his hands, watching their two daughters who were growing to be sisters giggling with their heads together as they discussed the gibbons. “She loves you, Harry.
She loves you so much and it’s clear you love her, too. Jobs can come and go. You’ve got plenty to offer as far as that goes. You’ll find something. But she’s…”

“She’s where my focus needs to be,” Harry finished for him. “Yeah, you’re right. I know I’ve failed at that.”

“Prepare to fail again. We all do.”

“Not you,” he scoffed.

“Oh, yes, I’m not exempt. I’ve made my share of mistakes as a father. But I keep trying to do my best every day.”

“One day at a time. That’s what we always say at the end of our meetings. It’s a good outlook for parenthood, too.”

“It is.”

6AM on a Tuesday morning and Sansa had got up early enough to lock the bedroom door, brush her teeth and hair and slip on the black, lacy thong which had come with her naughty negligee before she’d given Jon his Birthday Wake-up. He seemed quite appreciative.

“Mmm-unnn…fuck, Sansa,” Jon moaned as she teasingly swirled her tongue around his cock.

“Quiet, Birthday Boy. Don’t want to wake the girls until I’ve finished giving you your present,” she hummed before she began sucking again.

“You’re my present, love,” he murmured, carding his hands through her hair.

She glanced up to find him staring at her with those dark, soulful eyes so soft and loving. She smiled, as much as she could with his cock in her mouth anyway, and then proceeded to take him in as deep as she could. His eyes rolled back and he had to brace himself to keep from collapsing on his pillows.

His eyes were nearly black in the darkened room and his breathing sounded uneven as he tugged lightly at her hair. “Get up here. I’m finishing inside you.”

“Condom,” she reminded him as she pulled off him with a plopping sound.

“Uhhh…fuck me. Yeah, condom,” he agreed as he reached into the bedside drawer.

They’d agreed to start trying around Christmas. In the meantime, they were both struggling at times to remember the condom when they were already in the middle of foreplay.

She grinned and climbed on top of him as soon as he was covered. He tugged the wisp of lace aside, urging her to slide down his length. She was already aroused and the moment he filled her and started suckling on her breasts she was moaning…loudly. He gave her a cheeky grin and smacked her ass.
“Quiet, Birthday Present. Don’t want to wake the girls until I’m finished fucking you.”

“Ohhhh…right there, Jon,” she whimpered as she rocked in time with his thrusts. “Oh, shit…I’m…”

“Already, huh?” he asked with a roguish twinkle in his eyes. She nodded and he gripped her hips and started pounding harder. “Fuck, yes. Come, Sansa. I want to…ahhhh, Christ!” he cried as he came.

She didn’t care though as she was in the midst of her own orgasm, her breath coming out in little pants and mewls. *You’re my present, too.*

“Do we have to get up?” he asked a few minutes later as they lay together in a sweaty tangle under the covers. He’d thrown his boxer shorts back on but she was still in her thong.

“We do.”

“But it’s my birthday. It’s all rainy out there. Don’t I get a wish?”

“What’s your wish?”

“You in bed with me all day and you can’t wear anything except this thong. More sleep, then sex again. Then, more sex, followed by more sleep. Home all day. No one’s allowed to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to me in a public place. And, I want a big, ridiculously high caloric breakfast. United’s playing this afternoon and…”

“Get up, Mr. Snow,” she laughed, launching herself from the bed just as his phone started ringing and there was a knock at their door.

“Hey, Dad! You locked your door by mistake!” Lyarra called through it.

“Nothing about that was a mistake, baby,” Jon said under his breath.

“It’s your mother,” Sansa told him without even looking at the phone. She knew Lyanna would want to get in her birthday wishes before they left for school.

“Ugh, she always calls so early. Would you…” He gestured at the door before answering, “Morning, Mum.”

Sansa threw on her robe and unlocked the mysteriously locked door so both girls and dogs could come stampeding in with their hand-made birthday cards and shouted wishes. They jumped on the bed as Jon was thanking his mother for calling.

“Ms. Tarth said we can sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to you over the announcements this morning with the office ladies, Dad!”

“Ms. Tarth said what?!”

“The whole school will hear us! It’ll be like we’re famous!” Mina squealed.

“That’s…fantastic,” Jon said, trying not to cringe too visibly.

Sansa squelched her urge to laugh at him as her heart swelled at the sight of the three of them on the bed with the dogs. The happy domesticity of the moment was so sweet. Then, she decided to head to the kitchen and make her man a big, ridiculously high caloric breakfast. He could have that much of his birthday wish this morning at least.
Friday rolled back around and Sansa had the day off. She’d agreed to meet her mother and sister for lunch and then meet Harry after to discuss some of the changes ahead for them both. She was also getting her car serviced, working on an extra-credit project for her marketing class and if she had time she might rearrange the pantry, clean out their closets and dust the entire house.

*Me, biting off more than I can chew? No way!*

They dropped her car off and she then drove Jon and the girls to school in the Pilot, giving them all hugs and kisses before promising to return at 3 to pick them up.

“Text me when you hear from your mother.”

“Will do. Don’t worry though. I’m sure he’ll be fine. Be sure and do something nice for you today, okay?” Jon urged.

“I’m having lunch with Mom and Arya.”

“Well, that is nice but don’t be cramming in tons of other stuff. Relax and just do the things you really want to do. Take a nap, curl up with a good book, take a hot bath. You could go shopping with Cat and Arya. Something like that.”

“Shopping with Arya? Have you met Arya?”

“Fair point. I just want to know you’re enjoying your day and not reordering the closets or scrubbing the windows inside and out…unless that truly brings you joy.”

Sansa bit her lip at how close he was with his guesses. She knew what he meant but also felt guilty at the thought of just relaxing all day. This was an entirely new experience for her, getting paid time off to do whatever she liked without Mina to take care of. Mr. Baelish had given her one paid week of vacation a year and that was always spent with Mina. The school didn’t pay much but they gave her sick and vacation time even with ten weeks off during the summer.

She drove home and fired up her laptop to look at the extra-credit project.

*I already have an A in this class. I don’t need extra credit and even if I did this isn’t due for three weeks. Why am I doing this?*

She turned the laptop back off.

Next, she opened the pantry and stared at it a few minutes. She knew where everything was. What’d it matter if everything wasn’t arranged to correspond with what aisle it was found in at the supermarket?

And dusting? Sure, she would need to do it eventually but on her day off?

*Screw that.*

Instead, she took the dogs out back to play and enjoyed tossing the ball half a hundred times for them to fetch. Then, she went back inside and looked at their bed which Jon had failed to make this
morning. She could make it but then again she could just lay down, just to stretch out for a minute or two. She laid down on Jon’s pillow and reveled in the scent of his cologne, shampoo and…just Jon.

*He left this bed unmade on purpose,* she decided as her eyes drifted shut.

“So, David’s okay then?” Jon asked his mother a second time from inside his office before lunchtime.

“I said as much a minute ago, didn’t I? He’s perfectly fine, only annoyed with me for hiding his latest espionage novel and not letting him watch the telly…which I didn’t make the rules and he can have them both back as soon as 24 hours has passed like the doctor said!” she ended with a shout for David’s benefit more than Jon’s. “Would you like to speak with him, darling?”

“Wha-oh, no. I’m sure he needs to rest and recover. I wouldn’t want to…”

“He had cataract surgery, Jon. There’s not a thing wrong with his voice or his ears…much as he pretends not to hear me sometimes. I’m sure he gets tired of hearing me nattering in his ear but honestly, the man needs to be looked after after having eye surgery for God’s sake. Why don’t you speak to him? Tell him I’m only making sure he’s following doctor’s orders.” Before Jon could even think of refusing, his mother was shouting again. “David! Your step-son who is worried about you and knows better than to argue with me is on the line!”

There was a few beats of silence and then Jon heard David’s soothing rumble voice with hints of his native Yorkshire accent bleeding through. “Hello, Jon. The girls alright?”

“Yes, thanks. How are…”

“And your lady?”

“She’s fine, thanks. How are you?”

“Bored stiff sitting ‘round here. Good birthday?”

“It was. Thank you for the note you sent. Was the surgery…”

“Quick and relatively painless. The only pain to it is no reading and no telly for a day and sitting ‘round while your mum works herself into a dither looking after me. I tell her not to but does she listen?”

“Not likely.”

“Exactly,” he chuckled. “We’re looking forward to seeing all of you again in the spring. Your mum’s beside herself looking up pretty little dresses for the girls to wear. Told her Lyarra might throw a fit over being trussed up all day but Minisa will probably like it. Says she’s going to start sending Sansa clippings…or emailing her about them, I suppose.”

Jon grinned and had to agree about the girls although he was looking forward to seeing them in something special for the wedding.
“Now, I’ll ask your pardon for sticking my nose in and you can tell me to mind my business if you wish but your mum’s kind of anxious about one thing with the wedding so I’ll spit it out since she’s been hesitant to ask. Are you planning on inviting Rhaegar?”

“Uh…I hadn’t thought too much about it.” He had but he also hadn’t. His father had called unexpectedly on his birthday and invited him to lunch for tomorrow. He’d accepted but hadn’t wanted to think too much about that either. It’ll just remind me of all the birthdays he ignored. “If Mum would prefer I didn’t, that’d be fine with…”

“Oh, she’ll go along with whatever you want. It’s your and Sansa’s day. I think she’d just prefer to be warned ahead of time if he’s going to be there.”

“Christ, I wouldn’t spring it on her, David. She should know that. I mean, Rhæ’s asked me about it but understands if I don’t.”

“I guess she’d like him there.”

“Not exactly. I think she just still hopes someday we can all get along or something but he’s...”

“He is what he is,” David said. It was the closest Jon had ever heard his step-father come to speaking ill of another human being.

“Yeah.”

“Alright then, she was just wondering. She knows you’ve been seeing him on and off lately.”

Jon closed his eyes and felt a stab of guilt for keeping that from her. Between Sansa, Rhæ and the girls, his mother was in touch enough to know pretty much anything going on. And, he couldn’t help but feel a little paranoid over the fact his mother’s ESP still seemed to be working just fine even with an ocean between them.

Does she already know where we agreed to meet for lunch? Can she tell me what I’m ordering?

“We’ve only met a couple of times; once for dinner and I took Lyarra for a visit once. We’re not close or anything. I’m not...”

“You don’t have to make excuses, Jon. He’s your father. You can see him as much or as little as you please.”

“He may be my father but he’s been shit for a dad.”

David did not disagree with him.

Jon hung up a few minutes later after talking with his mother some more. It was time to head to the lunch room to hopefully see the girls and give the teachers a break.

And to monitor the behavior of one Parker Stevens.

Mina’s classmate had broke her heart the other day by declaring girls with freckles were ugly. Mrs. Flint had asked him to come out to the playground when recess was over as Mina refused to climb down from the monkey bars where she’d taken refuge. And Miss Manderly said Lyarra had tried out a couple of the swear jar words when she’d learned he’d made Mina cry. Jon couldn’t say he was all
that upset with Lyarra for that.

Parker had apologized to Mina and Lyarra had apologized to Parker but it didn’t hurt to drop by and keep an eye on things, right?

Just as he was leaving his office, Brienne’s door opened as well. He heard quiet laughter and saw Jaime Lannister had apparently come for a visit. Lannister gave him that cat-like smirk of his and headed on out.

“I’m heading down to the cafeteria. Did you want me to bring you back a milk?” he asked Brienne.

Brienne was still standing in her doorway and giving him a funny look. “No… but could you come in here a minute, Jon?”

“Sure.”

He followed her inside and she bade him to close the door. For one insane second, he wondered if he was about to be canned like Harry. He sat down in her visitor’s chair as Brienne made a production of putting some papers away. She smoothed back her hair and then smiled nervously. She looked decidedly flustered which did nothing to ease his own nerves.

“Am I in trouble or something?” he asked in a joking manner. Even though I’m not joking at all.

“No, of course not,” Brienne laughed. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to think of how to say this.”

Jon didn’t get flashes of intuition every day but he thought he might know what this was about. “Well, if it’s about you and Jaime, I would be the last to say anything against dating a colleague or even a…” He trailed off as Brienne’s lips became a thin line and her eyebrows climbed higher and higher. “Uh… you know what? I’m going to shut up now and let you tell me what this is all about.”

“Wise plan, Snow. No, actually this is about Noye retiring and what that might mean for us next year.”

“Well, I talked it over with Sansa and I’ve decided not to apply for the position so…”

“Who said anything about you?”

“Oh, but… OH! Shit! I feel like an idiot. Of course, you’d be awesome at it, Brienne! I can’t think of anyone who’d be… but wait. What about Chelsea?”

“That is a very good question, isn’t it, Mr. Snow?” Brienne asked with a grin.

“Urgh! I’m so late! How dare you make me take a nap?!”

“How does me neglecting to make the bed equal making you take a nap? I can’t force you to take a nap when I’m here and you’re there. You’re not two.”

“Stop being so insufferably logical.”
“And it’s highly unfair that I’m stuck here when I want to be curled up next to you in our bed. But this is NOT the point right now!”

“You’d be wonderful of course, Jon. That goes without saying!”

“Really?” he asked in that sweet boyish tone she sometimes heard when he was craving some validation.

“Really, really. I think Principal Snow has a lovely ring to it. We’ll talk about it tonight, okay?”

“Okay. Enjoy your lunch. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Sansa tossed her phone back in her purse and sprinted into the restaurant to greet her mom and sister with renewed apologies for being late even though she’d texted them both already.

“Sansa, calm down. We ordered you water but they have a lovely Chardonnay if you prefer.”

“Or a Valium,” Arya added as she watched her frantically scanning the extensive menu as if the server might take her head if she wasn’t prepared when he returned.

“Arya!”

“I’m kidding, Mom! We’re not in a hurry, are we?”

“No, not really. Well, I told Harry I’d meet him to talk but I have to be back at the school at 3.”

“Send him a text and ask to do it tomorrow. As many times as he’s rescheduled on you, I don’t think he’ll argue.”

“But Jon’s got lunch plans tomorrow so I…”

“Oh, and you think I’d object to keeping my granddaughters for a little while on a Saturday?” her mother tsked.

“No but…okay.” She grab her phone and Harry immediately responded saying it was no trouble at all. She sighed and they were both staring at her concernedly. “It’s stupid. I just thought I’d accomplish so much today and all I did was nap.”

Her mother looked at her sympathetically and patted her hand but Arya said, “Napping is an accomplishment in my book.”

“To be honest, your sister’s not wrong. When you and Robb were little, I ran myself ragged cleaning the house or some such nonsense while you both napped. It wasn’t till Arya came along that I finally caught on to that old saying ‘sleep when the baby sleeps.’ But by then Robb was past naps for the most part and you wouldn’t always go down when she did. Thus, I learned to love ‘Sesame Street’ and Elmo as I knew it’d buy me twenty minutes for a cat nap on the sofa.”

“But Mina’s not little and I’ve got…” Sansa stammered. “Oh, who am I kidding? It was awesome and I wish I could nap every day!”

“To naps!” Arya sang out, lifting her water glass as the server appeared. “Give us another five, dude.”

He retreated again and the three of them settled in for a long and languorous lunch to discuss
wedding plans among other things.

Ned Stark cracked open a Natty Light and took a seat on his back deck, enjoying the sight of the girls playing soccer in the yard with his youngest son and their pack of dogs. He waved when the girls shouted something at him. His hearing wasn’t a good as it had once been but they sounded merry.

He laughed as Rickon was tackled to the ground by the girls and three dogs before taking a sip of his beer. His kids apparently found some secret amusement over his favorite beer but whatever. Robb and Bran could drink their pale ales and craft beers while Arya touted the virtues of hard liquor and Sansa sipped her wine. Benjen was on his side anyway.

Rickon had left his phone and speaker contraption thingy laying on the patio table where the girls had been listening to music on it earlier. Ned touched the screen and music immediately started playing. He chuckled to himself at the song, knowing Rickon would call it retro cool. Ned just considered it damn fine music that was actually worth listening to.

‘It's not time to make a change,

Just relax, take it easy

You're still young, that's your fault,

There's so much you have to know…’

“Ned?” Cat called from the back door. “Don’t you think the girls need their jackets?”

“Nah, it’s not that cold.”

He smiled to himself as his beloved girl ducked back inside with an exaggerated shiver by way of disagreement.

‘Find a girl, settle down,

If you want you can marry

Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy…’

He might not be the best judge of temperature. He’d always preferred cooler weather and the autumn sunshine was hiding behind the clouds at present. But it was not yet winter and no one seemed all that bothered by the nip in the air.

The back door opened again and Ned looked over his shoulder, half expecting Cat had come to bring the girls their jackets anyway.

But it was Jon.

“Hey, Jon. How was lunch?”
“Short. Figured I’d come take the girls off your hands,” he said smoothly.

Ned was no fool. Something was off. Jon’s brow was furrowed and he looked decidedly miserable.

*Lunch with dear, old dad didn’t go so well, eh?*

He didn’t want to push. As he’d learned over the years, men, young men in particular (young to Ned’s eyes anyway), weren’t always quick to share their troubles. But he couldn’t very well ignore the pain he saw in Jon’s eyes.

‘I was once like you are now, and I know that it’s not easy,
To be calm when you’ve found something going on…’

“Well, they’re welcome here anytime. They seem pretty happy at the moment. I know Cat’s planning to bake some cookies with them in a bit. Wanna beer?”

“Uh, sure. Thanks.”

‘But take your time, think a lot,
Why, think of everything you’ve got
For you will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not’

Ned went to fetch one and returned to find his future son-in-law with his hands over his face before he accepted the can and returned to staring absently at the children playing.

“So, wanna tell me about it?”

“Oh, it was…” Ned raised his eyebrows meaningfully and whatever bullshit Jon had considered offering died on his tongue. “Awkward as fuck, like always.”

“Sorry. Hey, Jon?”

“Yeah?”

“You do know it’s not your fault it’s awkward as fuck, right?”

“I know,” he said mulishly as he played with the pop top. “He just…he’s spent 90% of my life pretending I don’t exist but every now and then he decides he’s going to father me or something. I didn’t think he could get to me like when I was a kid but we wound up arguing.”

“About what? Is he pestering you about the wedding?”

“Not the event itself. He, uh…he gave me his attorney’s number. I asked him what I needed an attorney for. He said the guy could draw up a good prenup.”

“Son of a bitch,” Ned growled, shocked by the audacity of the man. Jon’s head whipped towards him and a half smile flickered across his face. “Sorry, I guess I shouldn’t say that about your father.”

“No, it’s fine. You’re right.” Jon took a sip of his beer and turned back to watch the girls. “He had an opinion about Sansa adopting Lyarra, too. I may have gotten more than a little vocal and rude before I finally walked out of the restaurant. I think the staff might have been tempted to throw me out. If the girls were there, I’d be in debt to the swear jar for the next six months, I’m afraid.”
Ned could well imagine. In fact, he was picturing what he might like to say to Rhaegar Targaryen if
he was going to besmirch his daughter on top of all the shit he’d pulled with Jon and his mother.

“The weird thing is, I think he genuinely likes Sansa but he’s…well, Rhae said he’s kind of paranoid
when it comes to money and control of…”


“Yeah. I spent a lot of time thinking about how I’d protect Lyarra if he wanted a relationship with
her, you know? How I couldn’t let him hurt her or let her down like he did me as a kid. I guess I
forgot that…I didn’t realize he could still hurt me, too.”

Jon started to blink rapidly and quickly took another swig of his beer. Ned’s heart ached for him. He
was a good man. He’d deserved a better father but life doesn’t always give us what we deserve.

Jon was not his biological son but he was marrying his daughter so he was close enough in Ned’s
eyes. He could’ve said something about how his father’s failures as a parent were not his failures. He
could’ve complimented him on his own parenting in contrast to his father’s. But the right words did
not always come so easily, even for a man Ned’s age. So instead, he laid a hand on Jon’s shoulder
giving it a gentle squeeze as they watched the children play and finished their beers.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from ’Father and Son’ by Cat Stevens.
Sibling Strife & the Information Superhighway

Chapter Summary

October has arrived and the girls are thinking about Halloween costumes while Jon and Sansa make honeymoon plans.

Chapter Notes

God, I'm sorry if this is too sappy but it just happened that way! This chapter is fairly girl-centric with a decent dose of Jonsa. I thought they were due for some attention since there'd been more focus on the adults lately. As the chapter title suggests, there's going to be some sibling discord. It's not going to be an ongoing issue in the story but I felt it should be addressed again here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October had arrived and the weather had turned blustery and rainy. Lyarra and Mina were busy working on their homework at the kitchen table while Jon cleaned up dinner. Mommy was at her class tonight.

“Dad? How do you spell ‘impossible’?”


Lyarra scowled at her paper. “There’s no way that starts with a D.”

Mina giggled but then looked it up in the student dictionary lying next to her and pointed it out to Lyarra. “Thanks,” Lyarra whispered under her breath. “I wish we could’ve had practice tonight instead.”

“I do too but at least this way we didn’t have to rush to do homework earlier and we’ve still got time to watch some TV before bed.”

Once they were finished, Mina decided to broach a very important topic…Halloween. It was still three weeks away but it was high time she started on a costume. Normally, she and Mommy would work on making one together but with Mommy so busy with her school work and her regular work and planning the wedding, Mina was afraid of being a bother. She was eight now. Grandma Cat had bought her a starter sewing machine for her birthday and she was getting better at using it. Surely, she could come up with something and save Mommy all that work. She was certain Mommy would be very impressed with her.

She pulled out a piece of paper to write down some ideas of something she could create. Unfortunately, she was drawing a big, fat blank. Usually, when her mom was going to make something like a costume, she’d look for ideas online. Mina could do that, too.
“Jon? Can I look at your laptop for Halloween costume ideas?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah, Dad! I want to look, too!”

“Okay, girls. Hang on.”

Jon retrieved his laptop and turned it on. He was pecking in his password as Lyarra suggested he go to Party City’s page. Mommy usually browsed Pinterest but since Jon didn’t know anything about sewing, Mina supposed most of Lyarra’s past costumes had come from there.

“Oooh, that one! I want to be that, Dad!”

“You’re scared of zombies.”

“Nuh-uh. I was when I was little but...”

“You’re still scared of zombies and you’re not going as a zombie, Lyarra. Let’s narrow down our search a bit.”

Both girls wrinkled up their noses when the screen changed. “Dad, there is no way I’m going as the Little Pumpkin Fairy.”

Mina had to agree. These costumes were way too babyish.

“Okay…maybe I narrowed too much. You could just go as Alex Morgan again.”

“I can’t be the same thing two years in a row, Dad.”

“Of course not,” he chuckled.

Jon clicked some more and Mina saw something she liked…but so did Lyarra.

“Oh, the Incredibles! Elastigirl! I like her…or maybe I could be Violet.”

“That sounds good. What about you, Mina?”

“I’m not sure. Can I look for a bit?”

“Yeah, okay.”

There were a ton of things to choose from but she couldn’t seem to decide on anything. Plus, Lyarra had kind of taken the one thing she wanted to be. I’d like to be Elastigirl. Elastigirl has red hair. Maybe Lyarra would be willing to be Violet. Her hair wasn’t sleek and shiny but it was black like Violet’s. We’d be a Mom and Daughter combo even though we’re sisters. For some reason, that really made Mina want to laugh but she liked it, too.

Jon’s phone started ringing. “Hey, it’s Ms. Tarth calling and I need to talk to her for a bit, girls. I’ll be back.” He closed the lid to his laptop, effectively ending their search, before leaving the kitchen.

Mina huffed. She couldn’t look at costumes now. She’d have to wait for Jon to come back.

“I know his password,” Lyarra whispered.

“You do?”

“Yeah, I watched him enter it. It’s ManU4ever.”
“But…we’re not supposed to look online without one of them in the room. That’s one of the rules.”

But I also really want to.

“I know but we’re just looking at Halloween costumes. What could be so bad about that?”

Mina couldn’t think of any harm in looking at the costume website. She shrugged and said, “Okay.”

The girls were in bed and the adults were working. Sansa had finished her marketing assignment and was browsing on her laptop while Jon scowled at his own.

“Alright,” he said at last. “Do you mind looking it over again?”

“Of course not.” Sansa chewed at her bottom lip and read through his gibberish once more. He wanted to bury his head in his hands and surrender. This was hopeless. “It’s good.”

“Really?!”

“Yes, Jon…really. It’s a cover letter, not the Great American Novel. You’re already an employee of the school system. You’re just applying for a different position. You made your introduction and addressed your objective. You were cordial and there weren’t any typos. Mission accomplished.”

Feeling some much needed validation, he happily took this laptop back as she returned to her browsing. “Did you find a dress?” he asked a few minutes later.

“Maybe.” Her lips curled up into a smile and she studiously avoided his eyes. She’d definitely found a dress.

He cast his laptop aside on the couch. Brienne had urged him to go ahead and submit his résumé online for the principal’s position but some things took precedence.

“And? What did you find, Future Mrs. Jon Snow?” He moved closer but frowned when he saw the website she was looking at had large ships and blue seas and contained not one single picture of a wedding dress.

“And…the Future Mrs. Sansa Stark Snow is keeping her lips sealed and Mr. Jon Snow will just have to be surprised.” He grinned and accepted that response. He loved envisioning her in a beautiful gown but he could wait till she was marching down the aisle to see it. “Would you want to take a cruise for the honeymoon?”

“Whatever you prefer, love,” he shrugged.

“Jon…”

“Can I be honest?”

“Please.”

“I’m not excited by the prospect. I prefer dry land but I’ll happily take you on a cruise if you want.”
“I’m not sure it’s really that appealing to me either. Small cabins and people everywhere and…”

“Flight cancellations, Norovirus, food poisoning, sinking ships, tropical storms, the Bermuda Triangle, wrecking on a deserted island and being forced to eat the other passengers to stay alive…”

“You’re just a little ray of sunshine, aren’t you?”

“Hi, I’m Jon Snow. Have we met?”

“Okay…so maybe not a cruise,” she snickered. She clicked a bit more and then put her computer aside with a sigh. “Can I be honest?”

“Please.”

“I want to travel and I also kind of don’t. It’s exciting but it’s also stressful.”

“Agreed.”

“And I hate being away from the girls for too many days after the wedding. I know it’s our time together and I want that but I also think…this is us coming together, all four of us.”

“It is. I don’t want to be too far away or for too many days either.”

“Okay, in that case, I was thinking…and you may hate this but what if I checked with my uncle and, if it’s alright with him, we stayed at his cabin in the mountains again?”

“The cabin where I proposed to you? The cabin where we spent a weekend having hours of fantastic sex without a care in the world? Why on Earth would I hate that?”

“Because this is our honeymoon and Uncle Benjen walked in on us having sex there last time.”

“Are you planning on inviting him up for an encore performance?”

“No,” she laughed.

“Then, I love it.”

“And could we maybe have most of the week there alone but then have the girls join us for a couple of days? It’s their spring break and I know your mother and mine are looking forward to spending time with them but…”

“Sansa…” he said, taking her hands, “I would love to have our girls with us, too.” He could practically feel her sigh of relief and they pressed their foreheads together.

“A cabin and kids versus an all-inclusive resort on some beach. It’s probably not for everyone.”

“Screw everyone. It’s the perfect honeymoon for us. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He leaned in to kiss her but didn’t quite get his lips to hers when he heard a shriek followed by crying and one of the dog’s barking. They both leapt to their feet to see which girl needed them.
Sansa rubbed her tired eyes and decided she needed some more light. Black fabric and black thread were not easy to look at for too long but Halloween was drawing nearer. Mina had sweetly offered to make costumes for herself and Lyarra the other night but Sansa knew her daughter’s sewing skills were a long way from being up to this task.

“You can help me like always, baby. Maybe you and Lyarra can sew on the ‘Incredibles’ emblem.”

Both girls had liked that and they’d been so sweet when they’d gone shopping at the fabric store last weekend. When they’d brought home their materials, Jon had asked why they didn’t just buy costumes. She had patiently explained that the all man-made materials of the store-bought suits would not only be hot and uncomfortable but might cause a reaction with Mina’s sensitive skin.

But more importantly to Sansa, she wanted to continue this tradition with Mina and make Lyarra a part of it, too. There would only be so many Halloweens to enjoy with them as children going trick-or-treating after all.

Jon came back into the kitchen where she was still bent over her machine as she worked at the table. “Could you bring the OTT light over here, please?” she asked, gesturing at the counter. He brought it over, giving her strained eyes a little relief and sat down across from her, dropping his head onto his folded arms. “You okay?”

“Just sleepy. You staying up late?”

She’d considered it but he wouldn’t go to bed until she did. He was sweetly stubborn that way. “Not planning to.” She finished the hem she was working on and decided to call it a night. They were both tired and she could get more done this weekend. “You get her settled again?”

“Which one?”

“Oh! Did Mina wake up, too?”

“Yep. I got Lyarra back to sleep but then heard Mina when I passed her door. I don’t know how many lullabies I’ve sang over the past week. A lot more than I recall singing when Lyarra was little honestly.”

“She likes your singing.”

“Should we get her hearing tested? Yours is much nicer.”

She stifled her laughter as she put her materials and machine away.

This whole week had been odd. Both girls were having a rash of nightmares. Actually, it was more than that. They couldn’t seem to get to sleep unless one adult or the other was sitting on the edge of their bed. They didn’t want to be left alone in any section of the house. Mina had even got to the point she wouldn’t enter a room by herself if the lights weren’t turned on. But, when they asked the girls if something was troubling them or something had happened, they said they were fine.

Jon was worried it was something at school but they were in different classes and their teachers hadn’t noticed any changes except them both being extra tired. Sansa fretted that maybe they were having worries about the wedding and maybe other unvoiced fears regarding all of it.

Meanwhile, the adults were suffering a distinct lack of sleep…as well as a distinct lack of sex.
“Did Harry have any thoughts when you mentioned it?”

“No. He said Mina was fine when she spent the weekend before last with him. What do you think could be the cause?” she asked for the umpteenth time in the past week.

“I’m not sure. Lyarra’s always been prone to nightmares but it feels like something’s off.”

“It does. Do you think they’ve watched something they shouldn’t have or maybe the kids at school have been saying something? It is October. Seems like the perfect time of year for kids to be talking about spooky things. And, there seems to be a glut of horror movie commercials whenever I turn on the TV lately.”

“We’re careful about what they watch. Probably some kid at school talking. That Parker Stevens maybe.”

“Jon…”

“He has older siblings.”

“So?! I’m sure lots of their classmates have older siblings.”

“Are you telling me Robb didn’t enjoy terrifying you when you were smaller?”

“He did enjoy it a little too much at times. Bran and Arya were always asking him for scary stories when Mom and Dad weren’t around and he’d happily oblige.”

“Were they scary?”

“I don’t know. I’d leave the room or stick my fingers in my ears so I didn’t have to hear it.” He started laughing and she couldn’t help but laugh, too. “Come on. I can work on these some more this weekend. Let’s go to bed.”

“And sleep while we can.”

“What if I wanted to do more than sleep?”

“Oh, I like the way you’re talking now,” he said as she walked around the table closer to him. He grasped her waist and pulled her to stand between his legs. Sliding his hands under her top, Sansa enjoyed the feel of his hot fingertips on her bare skin. She ran her fingers through his hair and clenched her legs together when he eased one hand under her bra to tease a nipple.

“We need to move this discussion to the bedroom,” she said.

“We do.”

“DAD!! DAD!!”

They both dropped their heads in frustration and let go of each other. Sex would have to wait.

“That was Mina,” she said as he rose to go.

“I know.”

“She called you dad again.”

“I know,” he said with a soft smile that melted her heart almost as much as her daughter calling him
dad did.

“I’ll go with you. Maybe we should ask a few questions once she’s calm again.” They clasped hands and went down the hallway to check on her daughter. *Our daughter.*

“Then what happened?” Abby asked at lunch the next day.

“I told them the truth.”

“Were they mad?”

“Yes…well, kind of. They didn’t yell exactly but they weren’t happy.”

*They grounded us from TV and video games.* She didn’t want to admit that to her friends though. She didn’t want Parker to hear her and say something mean either.

Mina looked down at her sandwich and swallowed hard. She didn’t know if she could eat anymore. She glanced over her shoulder to where Miss Manderly’s class was sitting. Lyarra wouldn’t even look at her. She’d been so mad this morning at breakfast when Jon and Mommy had confronted her about the computer and what they’d done. She’d cried and called Mina a tattletale.

*It wasn’t my fault. You typed in the password. I told you we weren’t supposed to look online without him in the room.*

But, no matter how much she tried to justify herself, it also was her fault. Lyarra had the password and typed it in but Mina was the one who decided to go from Party City to Google to answer their questions.

Some of the costumes were so creepy and strange. Uncle Rickon still dressed up for Halloween sometimes. He would wear some of those sorts of costumes but Mommy always fussed at him not to scare her. She didn’t know why. He was Uncle Rickon no matter what he was wearing. She was just curious.

“What’s Slender Man?”

“I don’t know. Who’s Pennywise?”

Mina wished she’d never typed those words in and clicked the search button.

“Those guys are scary.”

Mina turned in surprise when she realized it was Parker speaking. Was this a trick? Was he hoping she’d agree so he could tell her she was a big baby?

“What makes you say that?” she asked carefully.

She’d liked him. She’d thought he was really cute and funny back when school had started. He reminded her of Tom from her old school a bit. But Tom was her friend. He’d given her a pretty necklace for her birthday and never said anything mean about girls with red hair or freckles.
“My older sister loves that stuff. She’s in high school. She’s got all these weird posters on her wall. It’s spooky. She thought it was funny one time to trick me into watching a Slender Man video on YouTube. She said it was a Lego video but it wasn’t. The music was super creepy and then he kind of popped out at you.” Mina shuddered. She’d seen something like that, too. “I had bad dreams for a while after that.”

“That wasn’t nice of her.”

“No, it wasn’t. I’m sorry about what I said before. Your hair’s nice.”

He’d changed the subject so quick it took her a minute to catch up. “Oh, um…thanks. It’s okay. You said sorry.”

“Your sister still gives me mean looks in the hall and at recess.”

She started to laugh but also wanted to cry. Would Lyarra still give Parker mean looks for making her cry after she’d got them both in trouble? Would Lyarra still want to be called her sister?

Mina didn’t say anything else. She laid her sandwich down and listened to the other kids talking instead. She hadn’t eaten her brownie yet. Mommy had made them the other night. Lyarra had said they were the best brownies ever. She wondered if she asked Mrs. Flint if she’d let her go over and offer it to Lyarra. She wondered if Lyarra would accept it.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she heard him say from behind her. “Having a good lunch?”

His voice was always so reassuring. He was always there when she needed him lately. He was looking at Parker who was suddenly interested in staring at his empty lunch box. Maybe she should tell Jon that Parker wasn’t all bad.

Her nose started twitching as she nodded at him. Why’d she want to cry again?

“Are we having practice tonight, Coach Snow?” Abby asked.

“We should be. Got to get ready for our game tomorrow morning after all this rain, right?”

“Yeah. Well, I hope so. My parents said we might go visit my grandma tomorrow.”

“Oh…okay.”

He knelt next to where she was sitting and she felt his hand on her back. She glanced over at Lyarra. She was watching them now and didn’t look happy.

“Will you see if Lyarra wants this?” she asked, passing him the brownie.

“Are you sure, sweetheart? It’s your treat.”

She nodded and he gave her a quick hug before walking over to Lyarra’s table. She watched them anxiously. She wanted to make up and wanted Lyarra to forgive her for getting them in trouble. She felt her tummy coil up in a knot and then thought she might throw up when Lyarra shook her head at Jon. She could tell Jon was trying to talk to her but she wasn’t listening. She picked up her tray to dump her trash and ignored her dad and Mina both. She lined up with the rest of Miss Manderly’s class and didn’t look her way once.

She hated the big fat tears rolling down her cheeks as she sat at the table after that. She hated Jon trying to come back over and coddle her because that was just going to make her cry harder. She
hated that her friends were staring at her even if they weren’t saying anything. She hated when Mrs. Flint said it was time to head back to class. She hated the internet. And she hated Lyarra.

Lyarra tried to pick Ghost up and put him in her bed but he was getting too heavy for her to lift him. “Come on…please?”

The dog finally jumped up and laid down on top of the covers. She curled up next to him. “I need you to keep me safe, okay?”

She would not call for them tonight. She would go to bed like an eight-year-old and not be afraid. Dad was still upset with her about lunch today when she’d refused Mina’s brownie. The rest of the day had been tense and uncomfortable with her trying to ignore Mina and Mina ignoring her and Dad getting frustrated. Sansa had tried to get them all to talk but it hadn’t gone well. She probably blamed her. Lyarra blamed herself, too. She worried Sansa might hate her for making everyone upset. Mina already did.

Her eyes filled with tears that soon spilled down the sides of her face and onto her pillow. Her nose stopped up as she laid in the darkened bedroom and tried to pretend she didn’t care…just like she’d tried to pretend she didn’t care about those awful things they’d seen on Dad’s computer last week.

*It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s just make-believe. Scary make-believe stuff that’s stupid.*

She would never look at clowns the same again.

She heard Mina crying in her room and guilt twisted her insides up. She shouldn’t have been so mean to Mina but if she hadn’t looked up those names then Lyarra wouldn’t be afraid and if she hadn’t tattled than they wouldn’t be in trouble. Getting in trouble was no fun.

Then, she heard Sansa talking to Mina in the next room. She started singing. Sansa sang so pretty. Sansa was always going to be Mina’s mom first. She’d never have what Mina had. Dad was still mad at her. Lyarra wanted someone to come to her but she couldn’t call for them because she was rotten and they all hated her now.

“Except you, Ghost. You still love me, don’t you?” she whispered in the dark.

She stroked his soft white fur until she fell asleep.

When she woke up the next morning, Ghost wasn’t beside her anymore. Just her stuffed pal Ghost and her dog had left. He must’ve been tired of being with her, too.

“Hey, sweetie. It’s time to get up. You’ve got an early game this morning.”

Sansa was standing in the doorway, looking all pretty and sweet. She was smiling at her. Lyarra wanted to smile back but she couldn’t. She felt all sick and awful. Her face crumpled up but she pulled her covers over them before Sansa could see.

She felt her bed dip and soon the covers were pulled back. Sansa didn’t say anything but held her in
her arms and kissed the top of her head. “It really hurts when we fight with the people we love, doesn’t it?”

Lyarra couldn’t answer. She just cried.

Jon looked down at his line up in the early morning drizzle and shook his head. Ten players on the team but only six had shown up, not even enough to field a side in their 7v7 match. None of the four missing girls’ parents had said a word about them not making the game either.

_Fair weather fans...sunshine patriots…_

The grass was wet but playable. They’d all be covered with mud and bits of grass by the end of the game though. It was also quite chilly out. Frankly, it was the sort of weather he’d loved playing in but probably not when he was eight. Jon wondered if Cat might show up with hot cocoa again like she did last season when they’d played on a rainy day.

The bigger issue though was the two girls who meant the most to him weren’t really in much condition to play. Sansa had faith that the girls would heal this breach with a little time and a lot of patience but it was killing him. He’d not grown up with siblings like she had. And he hated seeing either of them cry.

_“Sisters fight, Jon. You should’ve seen some of the ugly rows Arya and I had growing up.”_

But at the moment, he had a team to coach. Naturally, they’d be playing his arch-nemesis’s granddaughter’s team.

_Arch-nemesis? What are you a comic book character?_

Still, he didn’t care for Alliser Thorne and the feeling was decidedly mutual. The first assistant principal he’d worked under had lived up to his surname when it came to Jon, on and off the pitch.

“How’re we looking today?”

He glanced up from his damp clipboard to find Ned heading his way. “Uh…not so great. I’m short some players. The girls aren’t speaking to each other either.”

“Yes, Sansa told Cat about it and she told me. Do you think I could speak with the girls for a minute?”

“Yes, sure.”

What did they have to lose? Maybe Ned had some grandfatherly wisdom to impart.

He watched him walking over to the pair of them. They were sitting several feet apart and pretending the other didn’t exist but neither of them refused Ned when he called them to him.

“How you got enough players, Snow, or should we go ahead and call a forfeit?” Coach Thorne asked with that sour expression plastered on his face like always.
“We’re…I’m…”

“Coach Snow! I’m sorry I’m late!” Abby was sprinting across the field towards him and he’d never been so relieved to see her. She might not be his strongest player but she was here. “My mom and dad said I could play my game before we headed to my grandma’s,” she puffed as she came to a stop right in front of him.

“That’s okay, Abby. I’m really glad you made it. Why don’t you do some stretches? Almost time to kick off.” He turned back towards Thorne. “Looks like we’re good to go, Alliser.”

“No subs though. Hope they don’t tire out too much.” Thorne was giving him a smug look and sounded irrationally pleased at the prospect.

They’re children. This isn’t a battle, asshole. Even if you beat us, I just want them to get to play and enjoy the sport.

He turned away from Thorne to get his team ready and when he did, he saw the most amazingly wonderful thing. His girls were talking…and hugging each other.

Ned nodded at him before striding off towards where Sansa, the Starks and Harry were sitting. Cat had indeed brought her 5-gallon thermos and he’d bet $100 there was hot cocoa in it.

“Are we ready?” he asked the seven assembled girls. He caught Mina and Lyarra exchanging a look and a smile before they threw an arm around each other’s shoulders.

“We’re ready!” the seven voices chimed in unison.

“Okay,” he said, holding out his hand and waiting for them all to pile theirs on top.

“Team cheer on three. One…two…three!”

“Crazy Poptarts!”

“What did you do, Dad?” Sansa asked her father as the game started.

“What makes you think I did anything?”

“Dad…”

“You remember that stuff I used to tell you and Arya when you were kids about us being a pack and all that?”

“Yes. We still fought though.”

“They will, too. But, it was the first time they’d heard my little speech and I’d like to think I’m getting better at peace-making in my old age.”

She hugged her father, very grateful for his efforts. She hated to admit it to Jon but she’d been upset by the quarreling and hurt feelings, too. It had brought back some bitter memories from childhood.
and she hated for either girl to be feeling as wretched as fighting with Arya had often made her feel.

“I see Mom brought cocoa.”

“She did. It was our Plan B. If a talk didn’t help, we figured cocoa could fix it.”

“You’re quite a team.”

“That we are.”

“Cocoa can fix lots of things.”

“That it can.”

The field was a mess by half-time and Sansa was already wondering if her stain remover would be capable of removing the grass and mud stains on their uniforms. Jon looked extremely tense on the sideline but she knew how playing against Coach Thorne’s team got him worked up. She could help him decompress later regardless of the result. They were both overdue for some decompression.

At least the girls were happy. Sansa hated that they’d stumbled across disturbing content online and that they’d been dishonest about it but she wasn’t angry with them. All she wanted was for their girls to work past the bad dreams and fears the internet had dredged up and be carefree, happy girls once more.

The game was tied and nearly over. Lyarra and Mina had both scored and even sweet little Abby had managed to score her first goal ever. Sansa would happily take a tie. They could take their girls home for a shower and then she could keep work on their Halloween costumes some more with them.

But in the final minute, a player from the other team fouled Lyarra in the penalty box…hard. Robb, Arya and Rickon were already on their feet screaming like crazy people…or sports fans. Sansa could see Jon standing uncertainly on the sidelines as the referee called play to a halt, one hand clenching and unclenching into a fist. He was further away and waiting for the referee to give him permission to come onto the field.

Sansa didn’t care about permission. Lyarra was on the ground, clearly writhing in pain. Mina was kneeling beside her and patting her shoulder. Lyarra was one tough little girl and Jon had warned Sansa that she didn’t like it if he made a big to-do when she was injured. But she was also a little girl. My little girl.

She ran down towards where Lyarra was. “Ma’am? I need you to…” the ref started to say.

Sansa gave him a withering glare. “That’s my daughter.”

The man raised his hands in surrender and turned to issue his call. The other coach, Coach Thorne, exploded when he heard it but Sansa didn’t care.

Jon had already joined them when she asked, “Where’s it hurt, sweetie?”

“My ankle. It really hurts.”

It was already looking a bit swollen when she pulled down Lyarra’s sock. “I’ll bet it does.”

“Does it feel broken, baby?”

“No, Dad…but it hurts a lot.”
The ref came back over and told Jon his team would get a penalty kick. Sansa couldn’t care less about the game at this point but she knew that others did.

Jon started to pick her up and Lyarra shook her head at him. She was being stubborn but Sansa couldn’t help but admire her tenacity.

“Think you can stand with help then?” Jon asked Lyarra.

“I think so.” Lyarra held onto them both as they helped her back to the players’ sideline as the players and spectators clapped for her.

“I can go back over there if you like.”

“No, I want you here. Will you stay with me...Mom?”

“Of course, I will,” she said, feeling terribly emotional now.

“Mina, I need you to take the penalty kick,” Jon said.

“Me?!”

“Yeah, you,” he grinned.

“I’ve never taken one before!”

“Just line up and give it your best shot.”

When Mina scored the winning goal, Sansa couldn’t help but whoop as loud as her crazy family and do a fist pump with Lyarra on the sideline.

And she couldn’t help but cry a little when she heard Lyarra shouting, “That’s my sister! My sister won the game!” to anyone who’d listen before the girls embraced on the sideline.

Chapter End Notes

Fic note-Sorry to have the girls fight but I hope I did the rollercoaster emotions of 8-year-olds when they’re sad/angry/feeling guilty some justice there.

Personal note-Okay, so I’m getting this out of my system. Horror is not my favorite genre by a long shot but I’ve certainly enjoyed some of it over the years I was obsessed with Stephen King’s novels in my teens. For cerebral suspense/horror, I still adore ‘The Silence of the Lambs’ and Tim Burton’s campy but bloody ‘Sleepy Hollow’ is a Halloween staple of mine when the kiddos are off to bed.

BUT, as a mom, there are times I really hate the whole genre. I remember my much older cousins talking me into watching ‘Halloween’ in their basement with them when I was around 8 and my mom going ballistic when she found out. At the time, I was embarrassed at her ranting...while I also suffered nightmares and became afraid of dark rooms in my own home. When my daughter was four, she was watching My Little Pony videos on YouTube while I made dinner one night. For some reason that maybe
only YouTube can explain, the video that started automatically after the innocuous one she'd watched was called Fluttershy Meets Slender Man. It didn't take me long to catch on that something was very off by the music and I quickly shut it off. She still talks about it though...two years later.

So, yeah...it's fine for people who love it but I'm not a big fan :P
Decisions, Decisions

Chapter Summary

Harry makes an unexpected offer which leaves Sansa with more questions than anything. The girls are excited for History Day...or at least, Mina is. Jon springs a little work day romance on Sansa who in turn surprises him with a decision of her own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Halloween was yesterday and the first day of November was unseasonably warm. But the winds were howling again by that Thursday night and Sansa was glad she’d remembered to throw her warm coat in the car this morning. She’d gone from work to meeting Margaery at the baby superstore to her class to Harry’s house. He’d said he had something he was eager to discuss with her so she’d come even though she’d really just wanted to go home.

Harry stood up and started fiddling with the blinds as Sansa carefully read through the paperwork. She rubbed at her eyes that were beginning to cross. He picked up a mini-basketball and started taking shots on the goal hanging on the back of his coat closet. She shot him a glare and he sat back down. He was fidgeting. He’d never been all that great at sitting still and waiting and she wondered why it hadn’t seemed so maddening when Mina was a baby and they were attempting to live together.

Obviously, I was just trying to get by in my haze of sleep-deprivation.

It was half past ten on a school night. She’d not seen Jon or the girls since three o’clock. She’d already missed the girls’ bedtime but she knew Jon would be waiting up for her.

“Are you really serious about this?” she asked at last as she laid the papers back down.

He rubbed his hands along his thighs. “What if I am?”

“What if...you’re not remotely concerned that we might kill each other?” She’d said it dryly, hoping to make him smile. His grimace told her she’d misjudged how nervous he was about asking her this. “Harry, I’m joking. I won’t pretend the thought’s not crossed my mind a time or two but…”

He laughed then, finally able to see her attempted humor for what it was. “Sansa, I’m excited about this but I won’t lie. I’m scared.”

“I won’t be offended if you withdraw your offer.”

“No, no, no. That’s not what I meant. I’m nervous about tackling something like this. This isn’t just any commission sales job. He built this company from the ground up and he’s putting his faith in me. I’m nervous about screwing it up. I’m not nervous about asking you to come work with me.”

“But why are you asking me?”
“I thought this might be a good opportunity to do something for you…after all the ways I’ve let you down over the years.”

She'd not expected that and wasn’t quite sure how she felt about it. “Okay. And what else?”

“Mina and you…I don’t deserve either of you. But you’re still letting me be part of her life. Jon’s a good guy. I don’t have a lot of people in my life I can turn to other than my mom and you guys, not that I can really count on. I could use your...steadying presence. You’d keep me level-headed. So, what do you think?”

“I think your great-uncle is offering you a tremendous opportunity and I have faith you could be a success at it if anyone could.”

Self-confidence had been a factor since he’d lost his job six weeks ago. Sansa wanted to see him regain some of it. She just wasn’t sure about her role in that.

Harry had been asked to take over Arryn Industries’ sales department. His great uncle wanted to do something by way of the great-nephew he’d never met until recently years after his estrangement from his niece, Harry’s birth mother.

And, Harry wanted Sansa to apply her Marketing degree, the degree she was just a little over a month away from obtaining, to helping him revitalize the department by being part of his new team. It was tempting in some ways. It was also a potential nightmare scenario in others.

“I’m not saying it’s anything grand…”

“They’re a huge regional plastics manufacturer.”

“And they’re still stuck in the 70s when it comes to sales and marketing but it’d get your foot in the door in the field you’ve been studying for…”

“For years now,” she grumbled. He winced and she regretted how it came out like an accusation. Maybe she couldn’t help the tone. She’d spent so much time being angry with Harry over so many things and she wasn’t entirely sure she’d ever be 100% able to let go of that. “I want to talk this over with Jon.”

“Of course. No pressure, no rush.”

Harry walked her outside where they discussed the girls’ Halloween and Mina’s upcoming dental appointment before he bid her a hasty goodnight to escape the chill. From the car, she called Jon to ask about his night and tell him she needed to talk about something when she got there.

“I’m sorry if it’ll make it a late night for you.”

“I’m familiar with late nights, love. I’ll gladly stay up for you. You drive safely.”

“You sound sleepy.”

“I may have nodded off on the couch. I promise I’ll be awake to talk.”

“Thank you,” she sighed.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”
On the drive home, she kept turning the offer over in her mind. It’d be good money, much more than she’d ever earned. It would also be a lot of responsibility to take on.

And, it would mean leaving the position at the school.

She’d told herself that was likely a temporary thing back when she’d applied for it but so much had changed since then. Sure, she’d told Jon a couple of months ago she didn’t necessarily want to answer someone else’s phone the rest of her life but did she want to give it up right now? The girls would be there another two and half years. And Jon would hopefully continue to be there. She liked having time off when the girls were out of school, too.

*And you want to have a baby…*

The age-old dilemma presented itself: Mom with a career, struggling to climb the ladder of success but still make it home for bath time or Mom with just a job or no job even who watches the professional world march on without her?

It was enough to give her a headache.

She’d had little choice but to work when she’d had Mina unless she’d wanted to be completely dependent on her parents which she’d adamantly refused to do. It was nice to think she might have a choice of working or not working now.

However, opportunity knocks but once as the old proverb says. Would it be a mistake to let this one slip by?

It would be a chance to see what she could do, to perhaps shine in the career she’d hoped to take by storm when she’d been younger, back in her college days. Even as a single mom worrying over the light bill and the cost of diapers, she’d daydreamed about the day she could earn her diploma and really be somebody.

But wasn’t she already somebody?

And much as she wished to have a cordial relationship with Harry, much as she might like for him to succeed career-wise and know that he was coping well, going to an office and facing him everyday didn’t seem like the way to do it. The stress and strain of sales and office politics on top of their already complicated past might be like lighting a match while sitting on a powder keg.

*If we knew how complicated adulthood was as kids, none of us would ever want to grow up.*

Mentally exhausted from a long day and too much over-analyzing, she flipped on the radio and wound up singing along with David Bowie.

“*Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes*

*Turn and face the strange*

*Ch-ch-changes*

*Don’t want to be a richer man*

*Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes*

*Turn and face the strange*

*Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes*
There's gonna have to be a different man

Time may change me

But I can't trace time…”

And by the time she'd made it home, Sansa wondered why she was sitting in her car with tears rolling down her face.

Jon came out to greet her. His face morphed into one of deep concern as he opened her car door. “Sansa? What’s…”

“I lied, I'm not okay,” she sobbed.

Mina walked into her bedroom as Lyarra frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She adjusted the scarf Sansa had found her.

“I still don’t see why I couldn’t just go as Mia Hamm. I look ridiculous.”

“You do not!” Mina cried. “You look just like Amelia Earhart. And Mia Hamm is still alive. That’s not historical enough!”

“My hair’s not short enough and it’s the wrong color.”

“But your outfit is perfect.”

Lyarra decided not to argue. Mina seemed excited about today.

It wasn’t that Amelia Earhart wasn’t a cool idea. She’d been a pioneer, a hero and left a legacy along with a mystery. But, Dad’s old leather jacket swallowed her whole and the goggles were clearly swimming goggles, not aviator ones. At least, she wasn’t wearing a long dress like poor Mina.

"Are you sure you wanna wear that, Mina?”

“Of course, I do. Mommy made it special for today.”

“Yeah and Mom, uh… I mean, your mom is great at sewing and stuff but… it’s all day. What will you do at recess?”

“Maybe I’ll play hoops or marbles just like Laura Ingalls Wilder might’ve,” she answered wistfully.

Wearing clothes from five hundred years ago and playing weird games with marbles, sticks and circles was not something Lyarra could imagine getting jazzed about but Mina was apparently not faking her enthusiasm.

If it was Science Day, maybe I’d be excited, too.

Lyarra clenched her jaw and decided to say something nice to her sister… as soon as she could think of something.
“I like your braids. You look, uh…neat.”

“Thank you,” Mina replied all happy.

“Who’s ready for 3rd Grade History Day?” Dad asked as he came to find them. He froze in the doorway and had the dopiest expression when he saw their completed costumes. “Look at you two! Let me take a picture. My old jacket looks good on you, baby. Hey, Sansa!” he called down the hallway. “Mina’s dress is so pretty! You look adorable, sweetheart.”

Mina beamed at him and Lyarra tried not to roll her eyes. It was a pretty blue with little daisies all over it but who’d ever want to wear that to school? The worst part was the matching bonnet though. Lyarra shuddered. She was glad they’d got to be something cool for Halloween at least.

“Why aren’t you dressed up, Jon?”

“Yeah, Dad. Ms. Tarth said she was dressing up.”

“Oh, normally I would…” he said in a tone that made Lyarra wonder if he had his fingers crossed behind his back. “…but, I’ve got an important meeting later so I had to wear this.” He fingered his nice black suit and adjusted his tie. He was dressed nicer than normal. “Maybe we could say I’m a former president.”

“Which president?” Mina asked with narrowed eyes.

“I’m not sure. Maybe John Kennedy?”

“You don’t look like him. He didn’t have a beard or dark hair.”

“Right.”

Lyarra decided to rescue Dad from Mina’s presidential quiz and asked a question of her own. “Is Sansa feeling better, Dad?”

“Better?”

“Yeah. I got up to pee around one o’clock and heard her moaning through your door. Did she have a tummy ache?”

Mina forgot all about History Day. “Mommy was sick? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I knew Dad would take care of her. I went back to bed,” Lyarra shrugged.

“Hey, Sansa!” Dad called again. He sounded sort of funny now, almost nervous. “Are you ready to go yet, love!?”

Maybe he wasn’t feeling good either.

“Is this alright?”
“It’s perfect.”

She was pleased and that pleased him. He smiled and unfurled the tablecloth, laying it across one of the empty tables.

Ordinarily, Jon pitched in for lunch duty but today was sort of a big day and nothing said he couldn’t relish twenty minutes alone with his fiancée even if they were right outside a school cafeteria filled with noisy kids.

He’d spent all morning helping with History Day after all and he had an interview downtown at 2:30. This was a good chance to have a few minutes to talk after she’d come home crying last night.

“So you want me to fetch your coat?”

“No, your jacket’s fine.” She contentedly sank deeper in his suit jacket as if to emphasize the point. It made his heart beat a little quicker.

It was cool out but the sun was shining. *Ideal day for a picnic really.*

Sansa set out the carrot sticks and hummus as he assembled their sandwiches, chuckling under his breath at what Lyarra would probably say about the swiss cheese, turkey and tart apples on the whole grain bread, not to mention the carrots and hummus on the side.

“Why are you ruining perfectly good cheese that way, Dad?”

He’d brought a thermos of tea for her and opened a bottled water for himself.

“I can’t believe you packed all this without me catching you.”

“I have my moments,” he said as he produced a final surprise, a pack of lemonheads for her and a Reese cup for him.

“You stole their candy?”

“One teensy little box and one Reese which they’ll never miss.” She started laughing. “Are you telling me you’ve never ‘helped’ Mina with her Halloween candy?”

“No.”

“Wow…but that’s one of the best parts of being a parent at Halloween! Theon and I both looked forward to Lyarra’s trick-or-treat haul every year.”

“I guess I need to get with the program. This is really lovely, Jon.”

“You’re lovely and I thought you deserved a little romance today.”

“Romance in the middle of a work day? Be still my heart, Mr. Snow.”

She squeezed his hand and then took her sandwich as they both set about the task of filling their bellies.

Once he’d demolished his sandwich and she was at least half way through hers, he spoke again. “So, how are you feeling about Harry’s proposal after sleeping on it?”

“I didn’t get all that much sleep,” she said with a blush.
“Me, either,” he smirked. He cleared his throat and glanced around. Of course, they were completely alone but it never hurt to be certain. “I’ll forgo sleep if you’ll allow me to take your mind off things like that every night. But…I’m afraid Lyarra heard us. Or maybe I should say, she heard you.”

“She did?” Sansa blanched.

He nodded and her blush deepened which was a bonus as far as Jon was concerned. She was glowing and he was in love.

“She thought you were sick. At least, she didn’t think it was a ghost.”

Sansa batted at his arm but laughed as well. “Is that why Mina kept trying to feel my forehead earlier?”

“Probably.”

Past midnight, they’d talked about Harry’s job offer and Sansa’s career aspirations and hopes and dreams in general. But when she’d tired of talking, they’d started kissing and kissing had led to other things as he attempted to take her mind off her concerns. He’d been quite successful at it.

“Back to your question…” she said but then paused to organize her thoughts. “I wanted a better life for Mina and myself. I wanted to earn my degree and be able to say I’m a college graduate.”

“And you will be able to say that. I’m very proud of how hard you’ve worked to reach that goal.”

He’d already been talking with Cat about them hosting a graduation party together for Sansa in December. But that was a secret.

“Thank you. But now…my life has changed. I’m happy. We’ve got a lot to be grateful for. We’ve got plans that I simply couldn’t see being on the horizon a year ago.”

“Like?”

“Home with our girls. Marriage. A baby,” she added with a shy, sweet smile. He loved hearing her say that. She knew it. He knew she knew it. She knew he knew she knew it. “I can’t say I’ll always want to be here but I’m satisfied with my job for now. Perhaps it sounds unambitious or old-fashioned of me but a job is just a job. It’s my family that matters most to me. And, I love seeing all these smiling faces every morning at the school. I love hearing you and Brienne bicker and tease each other. I’ll miss that when she’s gone next year.”

“Me, too.”

“I like working with Randa, Megga and Shae, too.”

“You do?” he asked sardonically.

“You know I do.”

“Yeah, I do.”

The field of marketing wasn’t going anywhere. It’d taken her a long time to finish school after becoming a mom at nineteen. She should relish that success but he didn’t want her to feel rushed to find some big job if she wasn’t eager to. And perhaps a very small and purely selfish part of him that enjoyed having her here didn’t want her to leave Chelsea either.

“I’ll support whatever you want to do, Sansa. You know that.”
“I do.”

“And Harry said no pressure, no rush.”

“He did. I also expect to hear from him no later than tomorrow.”

“That patient, huh?”

“A salesman, through and through. He knows his ABCs…always be closing.” They started picking up their trash. It was almost time to go back inside. “Are you doing alright? I know it’s a big day for you and I’ve dominated our conversation with my great big maybe.”

“You’ve not dominated anything. We’re talking things through. As for me, I’m nervous but also feeling pretty good. I’ve always got along well with Selmy and Brienne and Donal Noye have been very generous with their praise.”

“It’s well earned.”

“I guess. I can only do my best not to screw it up too badly from here, right?”

She crossed her fingers for him and kissed his cheek. “You’re going to be great.”

History Day had been really cool. Ms. Tarth had dressed up as Eleanor Roosevelt and all the third grade teachers had dressed up as some historical figure, too.

Mina had felt sorry for Jon though. When all the third graders had assembled in the gym, Ms. Tarth had asked him in front of everyone which historical figure he was dressed as. She seemed to be grinning a lot as she asked.

“A young Abe Lincoln,” Jon had replied smoothly.

“Then, where’s your stovepipe hat, Mr. Snow?” Parker had asked.

“Uh…”

“Abraham Lincoln had a beard but no mustache, Mr. Snow,” another student said.

“Well, he…”

“He was over six feet tall, much taller than you.”

“Right.”

Poor Jon. He needed to work on his historical accuracy…and fibbing.

“He did wear black suits a lot though,” Mina had piped up. She would do what she could for him.

But now they’d reached the best part of the day…recess.

Oh, Mina loved reading and journal time. She also loved art and music. She liked it when Mrs. Flint
would have them sit in a semi-circle after lunch and she’d read a book to them, too. It was so peaceful and relaxing. But recess was clearly the most fun part of the day.

However, her dress was not ideal for climbing the monkey bars. Abby had gasped that she thought she could see Mina’s panties when she was climbing up behind her. Abby might have been exaggerating but Parker has been standing nearby and Mina’s face had got all hot in embarrassment.

Then, she’d gone to the swings. But when she tried to swing really high and jump off, the material of her rather full skirt had snagged and almost ripped. She decided maybe it’d be safer to stay on the ground.

**What did those poor girls on the prairie do?**

The hoops and marbles she’d mentioned to Lyarra this morning had been a joke. Plus, she didn’t actually have either of those things with her. She could run around and play tag but the bonnet was making her hot in the afternoon sunshine.

Deciding that a good book was as entertaining as the playground equipment, Mina found a spot by the teacher’s tree and pulled out the copy of ‘Little House in the Big Woods’ Mommy had found at the book fair a while back.

She watched Lyarra arguing with Logan and Amanda about who could jump the farthest or the highest or who could do the best landing.

Mina sighed. She wished Lyarra wouldn’t let those two rile her up.

Logan climbed to the top of the monkey bars and jumped. It was very high. “Come on, Amelia Bedelia, let’s see how high you can fly!” he taunted as he stood.

*She’s not Amelia Bedelia. She’s Amelia Earhart, you dummy.*

Lyarra was getting that mad and stubborn look on her face she sometimes got. Mina recognized it from soccer when things weren’t going their way. She looked around for Miss Manderly because she had a bad feeling that Lyarra jumping from so high up after her ankle had been hurt last month during soccer would not end well.

But Lyarra didn’t follow Logan. She came and sat next to Mina instead.

“Hey. You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Mina said, marking her place in her book and pleased Lyarra had come to be with her.

“But it’s recess and…you’re sitting here *reading*.”

Mina giggled. Lyarra would consider reading when one could be playing a clear sign that something was wrong. “I like reading.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” Lyarra said as she started giggling, too. “I thought you wanted to play marbles like Laura Ingalls.”

“I don’t have any marbles with me.”

“Well, I do.” She reached into the deep pocket of Jon’s old leather jacket and pulled out seven marbles. They were blue with red streaks in them. They were pretty. It was so sweet of Lyarra to bring them. “I grabbed them this morning before we left. So…what would Laura Ingalls do with
“Are you sure, love?”

“Uh huh. We’re celebrating. No more condoms.”

“Fuck…fuck…fuck,” he chanted as he entered her. “Unnn…oh,fuck.”

“Do you have a tummy ache, Jon?”

He stopped thrusting and burst out laughing. She could feel his laughter all through her. It was marvelous.

He pulled her closer and kissed her with such sweet reverence, making her heart flutter with happiness and longing.

“I love you, Sansa.”

“I love you, too.”

Jon’s interview had gone well. History Day had been a success and the girls had been quite proud showing off their made-up game of Marble Soccer after dinner.

She’d called Harry and declined, explaining some of the reasons a full time marketing job just wasn’t something she wanted to take on at this period in her life. Harry, being Harry, had immediately countered with an offer for her to do a little freelance marketing from time to time instead.

“You know…just if you wanted to get your feet wet.”

That was tempting.

“You are one determined salesman,” she’d laughed.

“That’s me,” he’d agreed.

And now that the girls were tucked in, Jon and Sansa had retired to the privacy of their bedroom where they’d discussed another matter.

“I know we said Christmas but it’s practically the Holiday Season already.”

“Ugh…don’t say that. I heard that god-awful ‘Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer’ at the gas station this afternoon.”

“I’m just saying, it might take a month or it might take a year. But if you’re ready to try…”

She’d trailed off uncertainly. She had kind of sprung this on him.

But, his eyes had been filled with tender adoration when he’d cupped the back of her head and
pressed his forehead to hers.

“God, yes. I am so ready to knock you up, woman.”

“Well, that’s romantic,” she’d scoffed.

“I have my moments.”

“Be still my heart, Mr. Snow.”

Chapter End Notes

To all of you continuing to follow this little family, thank you so much!!

Lyrics from 'Changes' by David Bowie.
Chapter Summary

The girls are away and Jon wants morning action but gets a phone call from his mother. Sansa's graduation day arrives and Mina wants it to be perfect. Sansa just wants to lie down but she couldn't possibly do that.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the delay on this update. I wanted to finish a couple of other WIPs but I also ran into a bit of a block with this. I hope you guys are still enjoying this story and willing to stick with me :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh, Lyanna…I love it,” Sansa squealed into his phone as she held up her own to show him the picture his mum had sent her.

“Aw, fuck that. I look like a dork,” he grumbled under his breath before tugging at her hand to try and get her to lie back down.

Jon didn’t think about his looks often but he figured he looked alright and Sansa said he was handsome. But 18-year-old Jon Snow? A bad haircut, skinny as a rail with chunky plastic frame glasses while wearing his cap and gown, his high school graduation picture did not scream heartthrob by a long shot. *No wonder I didn’t get laid till college.*

“You were adorable.”

He rolled his eyes but wouldn’t argue with her. “Tell her we’ll call her back.” He started lifting the hem of her pajama top. She smacked his hand away and he sunk back on his pillow with a groan.

The girls had spent the night with Robb and Margaery. They’d said they wanted a final chance to spoil them and send them back home to their parents before they became parents themselves.

“*Just remember…payback’s a bitch, Stark,*” he’d quietly told Robb when they’d dropped the girls off.

Sansa had suggested they do some Christmas shopping today but right now it was 7AM on a Saturday and he wanted to fuck his fiancée in a house that only contained themselves and the dogs for a change. Actually, he wanted to see if he could get her to scream again like last night. He wondered how mortified she’d be if the neighbors complained. He sure as hell wouldn’t mind.

So naturally, his mother would call just as they’d both started to stir. He knew she was just pleased for Sansa’s upcoming graduation next week. So was he. But did she really have to send pictures of
him looking like the president of the chess club?

“Awww…look at Lyarra,” Sansa cried when his mother sent the next picture.

Okay, that was different. He was hardly going to complain about that photo. He was pale and exhausted looking the morning he’d received his Master’s in Education. His mother had snapped the photo right after the ceremony but he had his baby girl in his arms. Fat cheeks and lots of black curls. She was an angel. She was also pouting at her grandmother as his mum made silly faces trying to get her to smile for the picture. He still remembered the sticky grape jelly she’d managed to get on his tie right before they’d ran out the door so he wouldn’t be late.

“Yeah,” he sighed.

“She wants to talk to you,” Sansa said, passing his phone back. She smiled softly at him and climbed out of bed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he mouthed but she pointed at the phone and headed into the bathroom. “Morning, Mum.”

“Morning.”

“Mum?”

“I’m here,” she sniffled.

“Mum, are you crying?”

“Don’t laugh at me,” she replied testily before she did indeed sob.

Oh, fuck! “Mum, what’s wrong?” he asked, sitting up. His mind was already running from a horrible misunderstanding between her and David to some awful illness striking him or her or both of them.

“Sometimes, I just want to move back home,” she whined pitifully.

“Home? You mean America?”

England was her native country. She’d been born and raised there. But she’d lived in the States from the time she was a teen till she’d moved back to the UK after she married David a few years ago.

“Yes. Is that so hard to believe?”

“Well, no…”

“I mean, I loathe that fool in the White House and I’d miss Manchester and watching matches with the lads at the pub but…Jon, I want to see you and Sansa and the girls. Not just in photographs but in person, on a regular basis. I want to be part of your lives, not an ocean away. I want…I want to hold another grandchild and not wait a year or more to get to hold him or her again.”

Ugh, my heart. He hated for his mother to cry. Partly because it made him want to cry too but mostly because he loved her so much and hated for her to hurt.

“Have you said any of this to David?”

“Why on Earth would I?”

He laughed despite himself. “Um, because he’s your husband and he might want to know if his
wife’s thinking of emigrating.”

“I’m not leaving my husband. I love him, Jon.”

“I know that. I love him, too. I’m very glad he makes you happy.”

“He’s got his job,” she said resignedly. “He’s only 56. Even if he’d be willing to return after he retires… the girls will be nearly grown by then.”

“There are other jobs.”

“True. Speaking of which, did you hear anything yet?”

“No. They’d said they’d give an answer before school is out for the break though.”

“They’d be fools not to give it to you.”

“There were other excellent applicants for the position, Mum.”

“And none of them as good as you. I will also acknowledge I’m completely biased in this matter but I’m sticking by my statement.”

“Thank you,” he laughed and was pleased when she did as well. “Are you feeling any better?”

“A touch. I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you, Mum.”

“Call me tomorrow?”

“I’ll call you tonight around seven.”

“But that’s midnight here.”

“Yes, I thought I might wake you up and give you a taste of your own medicine.”

“Don’t get cheeky with me, Jonathan.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He ended the call and laid back on the bed as Sansa came out of the bathroom. He opened his arms and she snuggled up close.

He kissed her. “You brushed your teeth.”

“I thought you might prefer fresh breath.”

“I’ll go brush mine.”

“Just lie here with me first. Is she alright?”

“She wants to move back here.”

“I thought as much.” She caressed his chest, making gooseflesh appear. “I told her we were trying to get pregnant when we chatted the other day. I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t mean to make her upset.”
He kissed her lightly on the forehead. “I don’t mind you telling her that and I don’t think you should feel bad but I could see where it might’ve got her thinking. Do me a favor though and don’t share how often I’m trying to impregnate you.” She laughed and shook her head at him. “Moving back was hard for her. She felt like she was abandoning me and Lyarra although I assured her we could manage. I have missed her being here. I know Lyarra has, too. She’s not told David how she feels.”

“She should.”

“I know. It might not change things but he should know.” His hand glided up and down her back, savoring the feel of her in his arms with no little girls bounding in to ask about pancakes or who was playing in the first match today. “Should we get up?” he asked. Please, say not yet.

“Not yet. None of the stores we’re going to open till 9 at the earliest and Marg said not to come get them before noon. Let’s stay here for now.” Her hand slid down his chest, gliding over his stomach towards his boxers. She tilted her head back and batted those blue eyes at him, her lips curling into a familiar smirk. “Jon?”

“Fuck, yes,” he growled before rolling her swiftly to her back and kissing her like his life depended on it.

Today was a big day for Mommy and Mina wanted everything to be perfect. They were all going to the college’s basketball arena for the graduation ceremony.

Lyarra had said it’d probably be a lot of boring grown-ups talking but Mina hoped she was wrong. She sort of remembered Uncle Rickon’s high school graduation. That had been fun. Of course, she’d been six, not eight. Uncle Bran and Aunt Arya had taken turns taking her outside to play in the May sunshine for a good portion of it but she was sure the she’d enjoyed most of it…even if she really only remembered Uncle Rickon and his classmates screaming and tossing all their square hats in the air at the end. That had been funny.

Regardless, there was going to be a big party at Grandma and Grandpa’s house afterwards and all the family would be there along with some of Mommy’s friends and the office ladies from school. Principal Tarth was even planning to stop by. But all that was a secret.

Mommy had shown Mina the pretty dark floral dress she was planning to wear last night and Jon was wearing a suit this morning. Mina had picked out her blue corduroy dress with the cream-colored flowers embroidered on the front and sleeves. She finished brushing her auburn hair and slipped on her black flats. She thought she looked quite sophisticated for Mommy’s commencement ceremony.

She ran into Lyarra in the hall. She was wearing black leggings and the Man United jersey they’d bought in England which was huge on her.

Mina stamped her foot. “You can’t wear that! You have to dress nice for this!”

“This is nice! It’s my favorite one!”

“You’re not going to a soccer game! It’s Mommy’s big day!”
“I know that! Who iced the cupcakes for her party, huh?!”

Mina’s eyes widened in horror. What if Mommy heard? “Quiet! She might hear you!” she hissed.

“Girls, no fighting!” Jon said, coming down the hall from the kitchen. “Lyarra, this is a special occasion. Dressing up shows our respect for the graduates and their accomplishment. Wear something else. Your purple skirt or that dress Grams sent you maybe?”

“But it’s at the basketball arena. It’s not at a church or something like that,” Lyarra grumbled. Jon’s eyes narrowed and his mouth got all scrunchy and angry-looking. They both knew that look. “I’m changing!” And, she quickly darted back into her room.

“Mina, take the dogs outside one last time before we go.”

Mina scowled. She’d been planning on adding more glitter to her graduation card for Mommy but she supposed Ghost and Lady probably needed to do their thing more than the card needed extra glitter.

“Yes, Dad.” She may have sounded a touch sulky there. She glanced at his face to see if she was in trouble, too.

But she wasn’t in trouble. Jon came over and hugged her, kissing the top of her head. “Mina…I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said, her heart feeling happy and light with no worries at all.

Then, it occurred to her she’d called him Dad again. She knew he didn’t mind. Mostly, she called him Jon but sometimes he was Dad. It was a bit confusing as to why Jon felt right at times and Dad seemed to fit better at others but he loved her all the time, no matter what she called him.

Lyarra had started calling Mommy Mom all the time. Mina supposed that was okay. She’d asked Grandma about it the other day and Grandma had smiled and said they were a family and Mommy was Lyarra’s mommy, too. She still worried what Daddy might think if he heard her call Jon Dad though. She’d have to be very careful not to mess up and hurt her daddy.

“Your mom’s going to be leaving ahead of us since she’s got to be there early. I was thinking we might swing by the florist shop and pick up some roses to surprise her. Do you think she’d like that? You could help me pick some out.”

Roses for Mommy? That was absolutely perfect. Weren’t men supposed to give the ladies they loved flowers on special occasions? She loved it when Jon did sweet things for Mommy like that, especially if she got to take some of the credit.

“Yes!” she nodded excitedly.

Just then, Lyarra came back out of her room wearing the pretty red velvet dress Grams had sent her from England. She’d sent Mina a green one that matched it. It was sort of Christmas-y looking but it was December so Mina approved.

“Oh!” she exclaimed.

“Is this okay, Dad?”

“My girls look beautiful.”

He hugged them both and Lyarra offered to help her with the dogs. It was going to be a lovely day for Mommy to graduate.
She’d stared at the stick for five minutes. The result had not changed. One line, not two.

“Are you almost ready, love?” Jon called through the bathroom door.

“Almost.”

Sansa quickly flushed and wrapped the test in some toilet paper before tossing it in the waste basket. She knew it was silly not to tell him but her emotions were already running haywire this morning. Telling him might lead to crying and spoil the mood of the day.

It had been a whim to go buy the damned thing at the dollar store yesterday afternoon anyway with her breasts already feeling heavy and sore like they typically did before her period started. She was two days late but with so much was going on it was no surprise that her cycle was off.

She washed her hands and looked at herself in the mirror. *Just means we get to keep trying. No complaints there. And maybe your dress won’t need altering before the wedding.*

Those were pluses and she needed to remember them. But right now, she couldn’t help feeling a bit low.

*What’d you expect? One month and boom…pregnant?*

Obviously, it was possible but the chances of *not* being pregnant from only one month of trying were higher. But, she’d become pregnant with Mina unexpectedly and in a fairly short span of time. Just one time too many of ‘I forgot to grab a condom. I’ll pull out’ from Harry had done it.

So, yeah…maybe part of her had expected a repeat except this time it would be planned.

She felt a little shaky and raised a hand to her forehead. She didn’t feel hot but she’d been achy and tired since she got up this morning. Her body was probably just asking for more rest but that couldn’t happen right now. The flu was already making its rounds at school but it couldn’t possibly be that. She’d had her flu shot and there was far too much to do for her to be sick.

“Love?” Jon called again. “It’s almost ten.”

“I’m coming.”

Her stomach felt queasy (another thing that had made her hopeful for two lines) but it was likely just nerves for her big day. She had to walk across a stage and pray she didn’t trip in front of hundreds of people, including her fellow graduates (most of whom were five or six years younger than her). The whole family was coming to watch. Her mother and Jon were planning to surprise her with a big party afterwards, too.

She knew, of course.

The girls had begged to go help Grandma clean her house yesterday after school. Why would eight-year-olds want to do that? Jon had been a ball of stress all morning. She didn’t think the ceremony had him this worked up. And, Rickon was horrible at keeping secrets and may have bitched about how he didn’t think two dozen balloons would fit in his old Pathfinder in his big sister’s presence
when she’d stopped by to pick the girls up last night.

She’d play along and feign her surprise to please them though. It was very sweet of them all. But her throat felt scratchy, her body ached and a dull heavy headache was threatening. *Maybe a cold coming on.*

More than a party, she was looking forward to slipping into her PJs, having a bowl of ice cream and lying on the sofa this evening.

*But first…*

She grabbed a couple of tampons from under the sink and stuck them in her bag and took two Tylenol. She didn’t have time for aches and pains. It was time to graduate.

Catelyn watched her daughter moving through the house, greeting everyone with ease and politely thanking them all for coming to the party being thrown in her honor. She was good at it, maybe even better than Cat was.

But something seemed off, in Cat’s opinion. Sansa’s smile seemed forced and at times she was losing the thread of conversations she was a part of.

It had been a very big day. The hustle and bustle of the ceremony with people everywhere. Then, the party with all the guests chattering. And, the girls…

Her son-in-law-to-be had been eager for everything to be just so for Sansa’s big day. Cat thought it was very sweet of him and appreciated his respect for how much this meant to her daughter. Cat may have volunteered to host the party at her house because it was larger but Jon had done almost all the legwork and made all the arrangements.

“*Is it too much?*” he’d asked her concernedly. “*I just thought…I want it to be perfect. I want to show her how wonderful I think she is and celebrate her achievement and…*”

She’d reached over and took his hand. “*It’s lovely, Jon. And, not a day goes by that I’m not grateful you were assigned to be Mina’s soccer coach.*”

Perfection, however, is a tall order at any time and nearly impossible to achieve with so many factors in play.

Shaggy had knocked Mina into the punchbowl in his enthusiasm to greet her in the kitchen before the party, soiling her pretty dress, and making a huge mess. Rickon had taken the dog outside and Ned had mopped the floor while Cat had attended to a crying Mina.

But then, Lyarra had been upset that Mina got to change into some comfortable clothes that Cat had on hand for when she stayed over unexpectedly.

“*It’s not fair! I’m in this dress!*”

“*It’s a beautiful dress, Lyarra.*”
“The graduation’s over! I want to change, too!”

And, there’d reportedly been a mini-meltdown at the florist shop earlier. They’d been picked completely bare of roses that morning by an impromptu wedding. Jon had opted for a mixed bouquet of amaryllis, orchids and greenery but Mina had apparently pouted over the roses which weren’t to be had. They’d arrived late for the ceremony though they’d not missed anything. Ned had placed a girl on either side of him to give Jon a breather.

Both girls had been bored silly throughout the speeches of course. Thankfully, Bran and Rickon had (only somewhat reluctantly) surrendered their phones for their nieces’ amusement. Thank God for technology.

They had both liked it when Sansa had crossed the stage and cheered loudly along with the rest of the family. Sansa’s cheeks had flushed scarlet at their boisterous display. She’d been grinning at them anyway but Cat thought she looked maybe a bit too flushed.

“I beg your pardon but could you help me with something for a moment, darling?” she asked Sansa when she had a chance. She was pulling her away from their elderly neighbor Nan, who had babysat all five of Cat’s children when they were little upon occasion, but Nan was nearly deaf now and just smiled at them both.

Cat took her into the hallway and felt her forehead. “Sansa…you’re burning up.”

“I think it’s just stuffy in here, Mom.”

“You’re sick, darling.”

“I’m fine. The party’s still…”

“Jon!”

“No, Mom…please, don’t say anything. You both went to all this trouble.”

Cat grimaced at her daughter’s stubbornness. Surely, she got that from Ned. Before she had to hear any more protests, Jon was by their side.

“What’s wrong, love?”

“I’m fine. Just a little tired and…”

“She’s running a fever and looks dead on her feet. Please, take her upstairs to lie down and I’ll handle the guests.”

Sansa opened her mouth to argue and Cat gave her the same look she’d given all of her children when they were being disobedient or foolish growing up. It seemed to work on Jon as well for he literally lifted Sansa into his arms and carried her up the stairs.

“Mom?” Lyarra croaked from beside her.
Sansa put a hand on her forehead. Her fever was back and the Motrin had worn off. “Hang on, sweetie.”

Wednesday morning in mid-December and Sansa was home with two sick girls after they’d succumbed to the flu as well. Gratefully, no one else from the party had reported in sick. She shuddered to think she might’ve exposed poor old Nan by being in denial or Margaery.

Jon had managed to avoid it so far. He’d gone in to work after staying home the last two days. He’d said he could stay another day but she’d told him to go. Her fever had broken and even though she still felt crappy, she could manage this anyway.

“Mommy? Can we have soup for lunch?” Mina asked after Sansa had given them both a dose of medicine.

“Sounds good, baby.”

The three of them had commandeered the king-sized bed in her and Jon’s bedroom. Jon had been sleeping in Lyarra’s bed since Saturday night.

She hated being sick and hated that the girls were sick even more but there was something rather therapeutic about being forced to rest. Her exams and graduation, work and the house, Christmas breathing down their necks and the wedding a little over three months away…there was a lot going on.

“Knock, knock,” she heard a voice call down the hall and smiled. Jon had sent reinforcements as she knew he would.

“Rhae, you didn’t have to come.”

“When my little brother begs for things, he’s awfully hard to resist.”

“This is true. I’m surprised my mother didn’t beat you here.”

“Oh, he’s lined her up for tomorrow. She complained but he argued that I was off today.”

“Aunt Rhae, I fell yucky.”

“I know, kiddo.”

An hour later, the two women were sitting in the kitchen having tea while the girls watched cartoons in bed. The Motrin had kicked in and she could hear giggles coming down the hallway. Lady and Ghost had gone to investigate.

“So, how are things with Theon? Sorry to be nosy but lying in bed for four days tends to get boring, even with two little girls keeping you company.”

Rhae brushed her long, black hair back over her shoulder. There was a hint of a blush on her olive-toned cheeks. “They’re good. Better than I would’ve expected honestly. I…don’t tell Jon this but I’d told myself not to get too attached. I figured we’d have some fun and he’d be ready to move on. He’s had a, uh…history of serial dating and casual flings.”

Sansa nodded. Jon had confided as much when he’d voiced his concerns over them dating. “But he’s not showing signs of being ready to move on?”

“No. Quite the opposite actually.”
“That’s good, Rhae. You’re happy?”

“Yeah. We’re taking it slow. Well, maybe not physically but…”

“I understand.”

“The thing I guess I’m still working through is being a bit older.”

“Four years is not so…”

“I know. I told my mom we were dating. She was supportive.”

“And you’re dad?”

“Haven’t told him. I’ve not talked to him lately.” Sansa raised her eyebrows. “Not since him and Jon argued a couple of months ago.”

“Oh, Rhae.”

“He was an asshole, Sansa, an overbearing asshole who has no right to stick his nose into Jon’s life. I will talk to him eventually but I need some space. I feel bad for pushing Jon to see him.”

“He’s not angry with you.”

“I know. He’s a good brother. And my dad…sometimes I don’t understand him at all. I guess I never will.”

*Neither will I.* “I’m sorry, Rhae.”

“It’s alright. Families can be complicated, right? I’ve got a difficult father. Could be better, could be worse.”

“That’s true.”

“It’s something Theon and I have in common anyway,” she snorted. “If we’re ever at a loss for conversation topics, we can always bash on our dear old dads.”

“I’ve not met Theon’s family but Jon’s told me stories.”

“God, he’s awful. If we ever get married…and I’m not saying we will…we’re eloping.”

They were still laughing as the dogs started barking. Sansa heard the garage door opening. It could only be Jon coming home. It was 11:15. If he was coming home, she’d bet good money she knew why.

“Oh, no…”

Rhae opened the door for him as he was fumbling with the keys. He walked in looking deathly pale with a fine sheen of sweat on his brow. “Hey, Rhae. Hello, love,” he said as he sat his messenger bag on the counter. “Girls okay?”

“They’re alright. Are you sick, honey?” she asked, pressing her hand to his forehead.

“Yeah, Brienne kicked me out when I said I felt feverish after my meeting this morning.”

“Don’t give it to me,” Rhae said and made the sign of the cross to keep him away.
“Meeting?”

“You’re looking at a guy who feels like complete shit at the moment...”

“Oh, Jon...”

“...which is a shame really because I’d love to take you out dancing tonight if we both felt better.”

“He’s obviously delusional with his fever, Sansa.”

Jon rolled his eyes at Rhae. “I’d take you out to celebrate since you’re also looking at the next head principal of Chelsea Elementary.”

“Oh, Jon! Really?!”

He nodded and Sansa jumped to her feet to hug him. Rhae offered her congratulations and decided to risk a hug as well. She left to give them a minute alone and said she’d check on the girls. Sansa kissed his forehead and asked if he’d taken anything for fever yet.

“Not yet. Does this mean I get to sleep in my bed again?” She laughed and nodded. “And I get my sleeping partner back?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what do you know? There is something positive about having the flu, I suppose.”

The next day, her mother reluctantly agreed to stand down from duty on the condition that she could bring them dinner. The girls were feeling well enough to hang out in the living room together and busy themselves with drawing and books in Mina’s case and reruns of soccer matches and dribbling her ball (until Sansa bade her to stop) in Lyarra’s.

As the first afflicted, Sansa was feeling more and more like herself now. She checked on the dogs and then brought Jon some tea with honey in bed.

“Nurse Sansa returns,” he smirked from where he was bundled up under the covers. “This reminds me of the day I came home from the hospital after the accident.”

She grinned despite herself and closed the bedroom door. “Yes and just like then, Mr. Snow will be behaving so he can rest for now.”

“I know,” he said glumly.

She’d started her period that morning at last. Jon hadn’t really commented but she knew he’d noticed. There would be plenty of times to keep trying anyway.

“The girls are busy and happy. I thought I might take a nap with my patient.”

“Oh, well that is a wonderful idea.”

He pulled her up close and they both sighed contentedly. There was definitely something to be said for having a good excuse to lie in bed as much as one wanted.

“What do you want for Christmas, love?” he murmured.

She blinked and gazed up at him. “I don’t know. Everything I want is already here under this roof. What about you?”
“You stole my answer.”

She snickered and laid her head back down, listening to the steady thumping of his heart, as her eyes got heavy. They were still asleep when the girls crept into the room and asked for lunch.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like Murphy's Law was in play here—when you're trying to get pregnant, you won't (at least not right away) and the flu always seems to strike at the worst possible time!

Next chapter will have our little family celebrating the holidays together for the first time as well as some other developments.
The chapter title immediately makes me hear the Vince Guaraldi Trio playing.

And Theon gets the longest POV for him I think I've ever written in anything! *shrugs*

Also, if you don't know the truth about Santa Claus...then what the hell are you doing reading a story with smut in it???

Oh! And if you've not seen it, @dena-1984 made me a lovely pic set which I put at the start of the first chapter! Thanks again, honey!

Theon scanned his apartment. He’d spiffed it up quite a bit over the past 6 months. It might still clearly belong to a bachelor but he had a serious girlfriend now. He couldn’t live like a slob forever, right?

Well, I could.

Sure, he could but Rhae probably wouldn’t want to hang out at his place if it was a pigsty. And, Rhae wasn’t just some casual thing for him. He had fallen for her...hard. He thought maybe she might’ve fallen for him, too. So, he wanted to show her and everyone else starting with Jon and Sansa that he could entertain guests like any other adult.

Now if I can just watch the language and not wind up paying for a new Playstation or something.

Man U was playing at Liverpool today and Jon, Sansa and the girls were coming over to watch the match with Rhae and him. Actually, they’d already played it but Theon had recorded it and him and Jon had sworn not to check for updates so they could watch it together unspoiled. He glanced around again.

Beer, soda, chips and pretzels-check.

Snickers, Twizzlers and Lemonheads-check.

The girls would want candy. Uncle Theon had to come through. It was almost Christmastime after all.

Rhae arrived before everyone else, having swung by to pick up a couple of pizzas. He wasn’t sure why she thought she had to do that. He’d bought chips and candy. Jon said Sansa usually made big breakfasts on the weekend so they probably weren’t hungry anyway.

“There she is,” he said, taking the pizzas from Rhae and giving her a kiss.

“You say that like you’ve not already seen me today.”
'Well, that was at your place and much earlier. Now that I’ve got you here…” He walked her back towards his sofa which was quite comfy as they’d discovered a good while ago.

“And my brother’s on his way.” She still let him pull her down beside him though.

“He’s not here yet,” he smirked, leaning in for another kiss.

“Yes, I am and this is not the kind of action I came to see!”

“Jon!” Sansa screeched.

They were both standing in the doorway along with the girls who were holding covered dishes and apparently a bit baffled by Jon’s outburst.

*Note to self-close the door next time. Lock it, too.*

Rhæ hopped up and went to give hugs, taking the dishes from the girls and dispelling any awkwardness…for them at least. Jon was giving him the stink eye. Actually, it was the I’m-going-to-kick-your-ass face. Sansa rolled her eyes at Jon and followed Rhæ and the girls into the kitchen with the bottle of wine she’d brought.

“I bought chips and candy,” Theon said to their retreating forms. “You didn’t have to bring…”

“It’s just best not to argue,” Jon told him.

“Right.”

An hour later, Jon was nursing a beer in the kitchen and hiding out to avoid getting into any further trouble with Sansa or deeper in debt to the swear jar. Theon did his best not to look too smug.

“Well, it’s a bit of a shootout…for Liverpool at least.” Okay, he’d totally chased Jon down to be a smug prick.

“Fuck off,” Jon growled, low and menacing.

He wasn’t the biggest guy but he was admittedly intimidating when he was pissed. However, Theon had known him since they were eighteen and, even with the rival football clubs, Theon thought the day Jon had found him feeling up his sister in his garage was the closest he’d ever come to actually hitting him.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa…is this how elementary school principal’s talk these days? I pity our poor children.”

“I did not use that word in front of the girls.”

“No, you said damn and…”

“Would you please shut up?”

Theon snickered and opened his own beer. “You’d better watch that potty mouth or we won’t invite you guys to Rhæ’s New Year’s Eve party.”

“My sister already invited us to her party. I’m not sure if we can make it or not. Ned and Cat host a big family thing on New Year’s and we promised to go since we declined spending Christmas Eve there.”
“Didn’t want to spend the evening with the future in-laws and outlaws?”

“No, it’s not that. We’ll go over Christmas Day to visit but we just thought it might be nice to stay home on Christmas Eve. Maybe start our own traditions…as a family.”

As a family. That had a nice ring to it. Theon’s father lived in town, not that he wanted to see him, but his mother and sister had moved back to Seattle several years ago. Some years he’d buy a ticket and fly out to visit them but some years he couldn’t go. This was one of the ‘can’t go’ years. In the past, he’d wound up at Jon’s or Lyanna’s when she’d still lived here. Rhae usually visited her folks but they’d not really talked about plans. As far as he knew, Rhae still wasn’t speaking to her father.

_Maybe a solitary frozen hot wings and beer kind of Christmas, Charlie Brown._

“Theon…if you don’t have any plans, I hope you know you’re always welcome to come over.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to intrude. It’s your first Christmas together. I’ll…”

“I’m serious.”

Theon wouldn’t come out and say it too often but Jon really was the best friend he could ever ask for.

“Thanks. So, what’d you get Sansa?”

“Well, she thinks I’m just setting up a space in the home office for her to do her sewing and such. I am but I’m also getting her jewelry.”

“You already bought her a rock.”

“So? I overheard her chatting about some sapphire earrings with Margaery that she said would look great with her wedding dress but then saying they were too much. I called Margaery up the next day to get the scoop.”

“Not bad, Snow.”

“Yeah, they’re technically over the budget we agreed on for each other’s gifts.”

“And by technically, you mean way over, right?”

“Possibly.” He scrubbed at the back of his neck, a clear sign that they were way over. “Look, she’s not had a man to pamper or indulge her any, you know? I want to do that for her. She’s been focused on giving everything she can to Mina and denied herself for long enough. I want to change that. Speaking of women who deserve the best, what’d you get my sister?”

“Jewelry.”

Jon’s eyes boggled. “I’m not prepared to call you my brother anytime soon.”

“Ouch. And no, not that. Just a pearl bracelet.”

“Just a pearl bracelet? How nice of a pearl bracelet?”

“Nosy bastard.”

“I’m testing your level of commitment to my sister. So where on a scale of Wal-mart to Tiffany’s are we talking about when you say pearl bracelet?”
“A good ways off from anything you’d find at Sam Walton’s stores. Is Mina going to be with her dad some?”

“Way to change the subject, Greyjoy. And, yes, the three days after Christmas she’ll be at Harry’s.”

“She’ll miss the Boxing Day matches.”

“I may forget to watch the Boxing Day matches if we can’t play any better than this. At least I’ll owe less money to the swear jar that way,” he grumbled.

“Gotta rein in that passion, son. Save it for your lady.”

“Seriously…shut up.”

“Wouldn’t want the Fat Man to bring you a lump of coal…if he was real.”

“If who was real, Uncle Theon?” Mina asked from the doorway. *Kids really should wear bells or something.*

“Yeah, who?” Lyarra said.

Jon’s eyes were narrowed when he turned his way. He was back to giving him the I’m-going-to-kick-your-ass face again.

“Shit,” Theon gulped and quickly pretended to have a coughing fit.

“Swear jar, Uncle Theon!”

“You’re a liar!” Lyarra shouted since no one else would.

There were angry tears forming in her eyes. She wasn’t going to cry in front of them. Mina looked at Logan as if he’d just said 2+2=7. Parker was looking between his feet and Mina with his hands shoved into his pockets. Abby was crying. Poor Abby cried at everything.

Logan just stared back at Lyarra like he felt sorry for her or something. She clenched her fists. She’d really like to hit him but that’d land her on the Naughty List in no time.

“I’m not lying. I found the stuff I asked Santa Claus for in my dad’s work shed. I asked my older brother about it. He bet me ten bucks that it would ‘magically’ appear under the Christmas tree Christmas morning. I don’t have ten bucks but even if I did I don’t think I’d take the bet.”

“You have to figure it’s impossible for him to make all those stops in one night,” Rashad added. He sounded so logical. Lyarra hated logical right now.

“Sorry, Lyarra, but I think Logan’s right,” Sarah said. “We don’t celebrate Christmas but my older brother and sister told me about how Santa’s a myth last year.”

“That’s not true,” Mina said with an arm thrown around Abby’s shoulders. “He is real. You just have to believe in him.”
“My older sister teased me for believing just last week. I’m not sure what to think,” Parker added with another troubled look at Mina.

“Your older brothers and sisters are awful! I hate older brothers and sisters!” she screamed.

“Lyarra, keep your voice down. Miss Manderly is coming over here,” Mina whispered.

Lyarra didn’t want to talk to anyone. She didn’t want her teacher asking what was wrong because then she definitely would cry. She didn’t want to hear any of this at all.

She whirled around and ran, past Mina and the others, past Miss Manderly and where the other teachers were huddled together on the playground the last day of school before Winter Break, back into the school and down the hallway towards the office.

Christmastime was supposed to be magical. Even things that seemed impossible could happen, couldn’t they?

Or were Logan and the others right? Was it all a big fraud to get kids to act good? Had she been duped all these years…by her own dad?

Before she could reach the office to confront him, she chickened out. Dad would be angry with her for running off from recess and embarrassed by her behavior. Mina had said that they should set a good example because her dad was going to be the principal next year. "And if the principal’s kids don’t behave, no one else will."

“Lyarra?”

She turned around and saw Mom. She had a stack of blue colored leaflets in her arms. She was wearing her pretty green Christmas sweater and her hair was down today, all shiny and soft. Her and Mina were wearing the same sweater. Dad had liked that and called them all his little elves on the way to school. *Elves aren’t real.*

They’d picked them out and ordered them together Thanksgiving night and been wearing them as much as possible this month. They had reindeers frolicking on them.

*Maybe Reindeers aren’t even real. Or are they?*

She set the leaflets on the ground and cupped her face, her pretty blue eyes all worried looking. She was real. She’d asked Santa for a mother once when she was five and Dad had looked really sad. But now she had one. That wasn’t make-believe even if Santa might be.

“Lyarra, are you hurt, sweetie?” Mom asked.

Yes, she was, very hurt and very confused. But, at least she had a mom now.

“Did something happen at recess?”

She shook her head…before stumbling into Mom’s arms and bawling her eyes out.
“‘Every Who down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot…but the Grinch who lived just north of Who-ville did not!’”

Christmas Eve had arrived and Jon was reading to the girls in his recliner. Lyarra had claimed it was a tradition that her father had to read ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas’ to her every Christmas Eve. She’d balked for just a moment when Jon had asked Mina to join them but she’d quickly gotten over sharing his lap. Now, they were both giggling over Jon’s animated rendition of the tale.

“Will you help me clear the table?” Sansa asked Theon who was eagerly waiting for ‘A Charlie Brown Christmas’ to be started after the book. That was a Christmas Eve tradition that her and Mina had shared the past few years after they’d returned from her parents’ house and one Lyarra had happily agreed to.

“Sure thing, Sansa.”

Rhæ had agreed to Christmas Eve dinner with her parents but her and Theon had decided that their first dinner as a couple with them might be better if it wasn’t also the first time she was speaking to her father in months or included the added pressure of the holiday.

After Rhæ had shared that, Sansa had wasted no time in inviting him over for dinner. She knew Jon had given him an open invitation but she figured it wouldn’t hurt for him to know he’d be welcomed by her, too.

“Thanks for dinner, Sansa,” Theon said as they started loading the dishwasher. “You really pulled out all the stops.”

“I bought a rotisserie chicken and made a few side dishes. It was nothing.” What would he think of the spread at her mother’s?

“Well, your nothing was helluva lot better than the Chinese take-out I was contemplating.”

“I like Chinese take-out.”

“Me, too. But this was better.”

She smiled and passed him a towel. “You’re spending the day with Rhæ tomorrow, yes?”

“Yes. Uh…actually, I’m heading over there tonight after we watch Snoopy. I figured I might surprise her with some candles and music. I picked up a cheesecake and a bottle of Riesling, too.”

“That sounds lovely, Theon.”

“I hope she thinks so.”

“I hope she thinks so.”

“I’m sure she will.”

“‘Santy Claus, why? Why are you taking our Christmas tree? Why?’” they could hear Jon saying in the highest voice he could manage for Little Cindy-Lou Who.

They both snickered and peeked out at the three of them. The girls’ eyes were big and their faces wore the sweetest expressions of delight and contentment. Sansa’s heart wasn’t two sizes too small but she felt it growing all the same.

“He’s really great with them,” Theon said.

“He is.”
“How did the Santa thing go over?”

Sansa sighed. There were days she wished she could just keep them little. But, once the cat was out of the bag, rarely would it go back in.

After Lyarra had calmed down enough to tell her what had upset her that day, Sansa had taken her to the office to find Jon and the three of them had had a little talk. They didn’t wish to lie but they hated for her to lose that magical age of make-believe.

In the end, Lyarra had said she wanted to believe and Logan’s older brother just sounded mean. They’d both felt as though they’d dodged a bullet but they couldn’t kid themselves. That brand of innocence would be coming to an end before long. Since then, Lyarra had been observing every department store Santa with shrewd little eyes.

Mina, on the other hand, was still steadfastly insisting there’d been some misunderstanding. Sansa recalled having a similar reaction when she was nine and Robb had said too much.

“IT went as well as we could hope, I guess,” she told Theon.

Theon nodded. “What’d you get Jon for Christmas?”

“Oh, I made him a sweater and bought him some new shoes to replace a pair the dogs destroyed. Beyond that…nothing much. What with taking care of the girls and all the expenses coming up with the wedding and other things, we agreed not to go too overboard.”

“It sucks not being a kid at Christmas right?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she replied as she tried to hide her smirk. “Looks like it’s time to start our show.”

Jon’s other gift was nothing much…as in there wasn’t a whole lot to it but she had a feeling it would go over very well when she revealed it later.

"Those are pretty."

Jon turned and then gasped, “O holy night!” as Sansa emerged from the bathroom that night after the girls were tucked in.

He’d just finished stringing up fairy lights along the headboard of their bed as a surprise for her but he liked this surprise even better.

“Think this might help us pass the time until it’s time to play Santa?”

He nodded at least two dozen times and could tell she was pleased by that response.

Sexy lingerie wasn’t something he’d spent much time thinking about before Sansa came into his life. Sure, he might catch himself gawking at the Victoria Secret window display for a second or two at the mall but without a woman of his own to wear it for him, that’d been about the extent of it. He had a feeling Sansa hadn’t exactly treated herself to that much sexy lingerie the past several years until
they’d got together. But now, every time she wore something special just for him, he thought (and hoped) that she enjoyed wearing it for him almost as much as he loved seeing her in it.

“So, do you like your present?” she asked in a sultry tone as she gave him a twirl.

A red mesh babydoll with fluffy black trim and her hair hanging loose around her shoulders, she turned just enough as she leaned over and adjusted the lacy black stockings with little red bows she’d worn with her heels for him to catch a glimpse of the red thong that came with it.

He gulped and flexed his hands where he was sitting on the edge of the bed. “Do I get to unwrap it now?”

“You get to do whatever you want tonight.”

They still had to be Santa but wanted to make sure the girls were fast asleep. He’d volunteered to set up the game system they’d asked for which should be simple enough and Sansa had said she’d fix up their stockings. He had no idea how she was planning to fit all the trinkets, goodies and doo-dads into them and was just glad he didn’t have to do it.

“You’re absolutely gorgeous, love. Come here,” he said, patting the bed.

She sashayed towards him, a huge smile on her face. Once she was standing between his legs, he started rubbing his hands up and down her thighs. Without warning, he snapped the elastic of her garter belt, earning a surprised gasp and a faux scowl. He gave her a mischievous grin and squeezed her ass.

Parting the opening of the babydoll, he pressed a kiss to her naval and started working his way upward. She speared her fingers through his hair as he exposed one pink nipple.

“Sweet sugarplum,” he murmured before drawing it into his mouth.

“Jon…”

He held her firmly by the waist when she started to writhe from his attentions as he moved from one breast to the other. Tugging her down to straddle his lap, he ran his hands all over the soft material of her outfit and the even softer silk of her skin.

She started pulling off his sweater. It was way too damn hot for the thing anyway and he took over, yanking it over his head and tossing it in the floor to be followed by his undershirt. Her nails lightly raked along his shoulders, causing goosebumps to appear.

He still had on his pants and he was hard as a rock with Sansa straddling him. He could feel the heat of her through the clothes that separated them. He cupped the back of her head and molded his mouth to hers. Her hands were around his waist now and she started rocking against his erection. He let his hand slip between them and under the nearly non-existent wisp of fabric that covered her pussy.

“My sexy little elf is all wet.”

“She sure is.”

He kissed her again before twisting them around to where Sansa was lying back on the bed under him. He stood and quickly shed his pants and boxers, his cock springing forward eagerly as Sansa scooted back to the center of the bed.
“Should I take all this off?”

“No,” he said, his voice low and husky with want. “Leave every bit of it on, the heels, too.”

“I thought you wanted to unwrap your present,” she smirked.

“You went to all the trouble to wrap it for me. I’ve decided I want to work around that for now.” He climbed back on top of her, edged the thong to the side and sank into the warm, welcoming heat of Sansa. “Fuck…”

“Yes, that please,” she moaned as he started thrusting. Her hands were busy now, roaming from his ass, up to his hair and back again.

He untied the babydoll to expose more of her breasts. “I’m going to fuck you in this,” he said, lowering his head to start suckling on her breasts. “Then, I’m going to take every bit of this off you and fuck you again,” he promised.

“It’s like a gift to us both then,” she smiled.

“It is…and one that just keeps giving.”

Meera stirred as he realized he was not dreaming the cursed noise. He grabbed his phone off the nightstand and stared at it stupidly for a few seconds before answering.

“Sansa? Is something…”

“Bran? Bran, I’m so sorry.”

“Sansa?” He sat up and threw on his glasses and turned on the bedside lamp. “What’s wrong? Are you…”

“There’s something funky with the girls’ gaming system and Jon can’t get it to work.”

“It’s…shit, it’s 3AM.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Could you talk him through a few steps maybe? Please, Bran. You know all about this stuff and…”

“Yeah, yeah…of course, I can.” He’d do anything for his sister and his nieces.

Jon came on the line sounding both frustrated and sheepish. “I’m really sorry to disturb you, Bran.”

“No, it’s no problem. How long have you been working on it?”

“About an hour. I’m seeing double and probably just doing something stupid. Sansa’s already got the stockings fixed up but she’s refusing to go to bed until I can.”

“Yeah, okay. Wow, you guys got kind of a late start. Did the girls have trouble falling asleep?”

“Uh, no. We wanted to give a little time to make sure they were fast asleep. We got a bit distracted
and then we, um…fell asleep, too.”

Bran rolled his eyes and decided maybe he didn’t want to know any more about their distraction. He liked Jon but Sansa was his sister. And, he was going to be forced to see them over his mom’s honey-baked ham tomorrow and didn’t need to think about how they’d spent their Christmas Eve.

“Okay,” he said, “Let’s start with step one.”

Mina awoke in the quiet morning and blinked up at the fairy lights above her bed. She’d begged for them to be left on all night and promised she’d go to sleep. Why was that? There was something special about today…

With a gasp, she sat up, clutching her stuffed pal Lady. She looked at her beside clock. 5:55AM. It was early but today was Christmas. There was no way she’d sleep anymore this morning.

She jumped out of bed and started down the hall towards Mommy and Jon’s room but then decided to go to Lyarra first. They could be a united front this way so maybe they wouldn’t be told it was too early. She crept into her sister’s room. It was dark and Lyarra was snoring softly. Ghost and Lady had heard her stirring though and came to join her.

“Did he come? Did you see him?” she asked the two dogs.

They wagged their tails. She decided that meant yes.

Mina didn’t worry too much about what Logan and the others said at school. Grandpa had said that Christmas was all about miracles so why couldn’t those miracles include a jolly old elf and his sled full of toys?

And this was their first Christmas together as a family. Her mommy was in love and Mina had a sister and another dad. She was happier than she’d ever thought she could be.

“Lyarra?”

“Ugh…” she groaned.

“Wake up, wake up,” she said, lifting a dark curl from her face.

“It’s too early.”

“It’s Christmas.”

Lyarra sat up as quick as she had and grinned. “Let’s go.”

“Should we wake them first?”

“Probably.”

They headed to their parents’ bedroom and opened the door. Jon was snoring…much louder than Lyarra had been. Mommy was actually snoring, too. There were fairy lights in their room that had
never been there before. It was magical. She turned on them on and leaned over to give her mother a kiss on the cheek. Mommy’s eyes opened and she smiled at them both.

“Good morning, girls. Merry Christmas,” she said in her early morning voice as she stretched. “Jon…” she added, nudging him.

“Mmmph?” he mumbled.

“Merry Christmas,” they both sang out, loud and clear.

Jon groaned and started rubbing his eyes. He was squinting at the lights but soon he was smiling, too. “Shall we go see if there’s anything under the tree for these two good girls?” he asked Mommy.

She nodded. Mina and Lyarra both shrieked and ran off down the hall to the living room.

She turned on the lights of the Christmas tree and mantle, letting their glow alone light the room. It was even more magical than the fairy lights in the bedrooms.

“Stockings first!” Lyarra cried and the bubbling excitement couldn’t be contained any longer as they raced to see what goodies awaited them.

“Look, he gave Lady and Ghost something, too,” Mina squealed, pulling out the large bones with a red ribbons tied around them.

Lyarra was already sucking on a peppermint stick but she patted the dogs before diving back into her loot.

And when Jon and Mommy shuffled in to join them in their robes, both yawning but smiling at them, Mina was busy discovering all the wonderful things Santa Claus had brought as well.

Chapter End Notes

Story time for any of you who wish to play—if your family celebrated Christmas with Santa, when did you discover The Truth? I think I was 8 1/2. My older cousins told me (the same ones who had me watching 'Halloween' too young). I refused to believe them for an entire year!

We’ll pick up on the rest of the holiday season (including New Year's which might bring some unexpected fireworks of sorts) next chapter.

Thank you everyone who is reading this fic :)
**Holding Fast and Letting Go**

Chapter Summary

Jon experiences a fun, old-fashioned Stark family Christmas much to Sansa's delight. Later, Rhaegar reaches out leaving Jon with a choice.

Chapter Notes

I feel like I should prep you guys for this chapter. The first half is light-hearted and meant to celebrate the joy (and humor) of the season. But, things get heavier in the second half though hopefully it's ultimately cathartic. It's a huge chapter (Merry Christmas!) but I felt the theme of family and how we come to terms with certain elements of it worked well as a single unit. Tis the season for family fun and dysfunction, I guess.

I've indulged myself with quotes and references from some pop culture staples of the season so credits to A Christmas Story, National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, Seinfeld and lyrics are from 'Toyland' by Doris Day.

Huge thank you to Natalie for flipping that switch for me on this one :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Thank you, honey,” Sansa said, stifling a yawn as Jon handed her a cup of coffee. Her mother’s feast had left her somnolent on top of her late night and early morning so she figured a boost of caffeine mid-afternoon might keep her from snoring too loudly in the midst of family time.rickon had a YouTube channel and was not above embarrassing the hell out of his older siblings.

“Sure thing, love. Hey, uh…Marg? You took my seat.”

Marg cracked one eye open with her head still resting on Sansa’s shoulder. “Are you really going to make the miserable pregnant woman move?”

“Oh, well, I…I didn’t mean…” Jon looked around helplessly and Sansa started giggling.

“You said he was a sweet man, Sansa.”

“He is a sweet man, very sweet.”

“There’s a free space on the floor next to your girls, sweet man,” Marg said, closing her eye again.

“Sorry,” she mouthed to him. She should’ve warned him that the loveseat in her parents’ family room was sort of her and Marg’s spot. It was where they’d spent many a Christmas afternoon gossiping and bickering with the family while digesting honey-baked ham and all the fixings.
Jon rolled his eyes but he was chuckling as he joined the girls in the floor by the tree. They were both busy diving into the giftbags Uncle Benjen had brought.

“Wow! Pink camouflage! Awesome!” Lyarra shouted, holding up the most god-awful hoodie Sansa had ever seen.

“Thanks, Great Uncle Benjen. They’re…great,” Mina said politely, giving him a hug and looking about as thrilled with her matching one as Sansa was.

“You’re welcome, girls. Found those at Bass Pro Shop. I wasn’t sure what else you girls would like so I just stocked you up on chocolates.”

He wasn’t lying. There must’ve been five pounds of chocolate in each gift bag.

*Oh, goody. More sugar,* Sansa thought with a grimace.


Her father sat down in his recliner. “I have the power,” he intoned solemnly as he picked up the remote control with a covetous gleam in his eyes before he started channel surfing with a maniacal speed the human eye couldn’t possibly keep up with.

“Wait, Dad! Go back!” Bran shouted.

*Well, most humans couldn’t keep up with it.*

Her father groaned as he jumped back a dozen channels to what had caught her brother’s attention.

“No way,” Robb huffed from the sofa. “We are not watching that movie again! We watch it every single Christmas! We’d rather watch Philly versus the Celtics. Right, Jon?”

“Oh, I don’t really care for basketball so whatever you guys…” He trailed off as he caught the desperate plea her father was shooting his way. “I mean…” Then, he saw Bran staring at him, Bran who had saved Christmas for them at 3 AM. “Oh, look at the cool matching gloves Benjen got you girls to go with your hoodies!”

“Come on, guys. Basketball sucks,” Bran whined. “This is a Stark Family tradition, Jon. Like Festivus with the Airing of the Grievances, we must quoth the movie.”

“Quoth?”

“Caw, caw. It’s all part and parcel of a fun, old-fashioned family Christmas.”

“Oy vey, I need a drink for this,” Meera groaned, rising from Bran’s side to fetch one.

“Where do you think you’re going? Nobody’s leaving. Nobody’s walking out on this fun, old-fashioned family Christmas. No, no. We’re all in this together. We’re gonna have the hap, hap, happiest Christmas since Bing Crosby tap danced with Danny…”

“Wrong movie, Brandon.”

“I know that, Robbert!”

“I don’t know why we even have to watch television. Ned, maybe you could turn it back off and we could all sit around and talk. Oooh, I know! We could play cards or charades.”
“But it’s almost tip-off, dear,” her father said pitiably.

“This is a Christmas classic, Robb.”

“Duh. I had it memorized before you could even walk!”

“Awww…doesn’t that make you the specialist snowflake?”

“Shut your…”

“Boys, no fighting. It’s Christmas.”

“Boys? I’m thirty, Mom.”

“Well, I’m twenty-three!”

“So you both know how old you are. How nice. Now, act like it. Ned, if we have to watch TV, I prefer this over all those grown men shoving each other while chasing that silly ball around.”

“Yes, dear,” came the resigned answer.

The marathon run of ‘A Christmas Story’ was playing and, despite his complaints, Robb was soon reciting the movie along with Bran. Rickon joined them.

“Bran, you can be Ralphie. Rickon can be Randy and I’ll be the Old Man,” Robb announced. “Dad, can you turn on the captions to be safe? Dad?”

However, the patriarch of House Stark had already given up on getting to watch what he wanted and had settled on a nap. He’d be snoring in no time but Rickon wasn’t foolhardy enough to record and post that.

“Why do I have to be Randy?! I’m always the baby brother!”

“Yeah, ‘cause you are the baby brother and also a big baby. Uncle Benjen, do you…”

“I’m going to stop you right there, Robb, and say nope.”

“Jon, will you take Grown-up Ralph?”

“Uh…okay,” Jon said, startled from his own attempt to take a winter’s nap on the floor.

She felt sorry for her fiancé and yet she also didn’t. She loved how her family had accepted him and Lyarra as part of them. So, if being asked to partake in the annual Stark Family Christmas tradition of quoting a thirty-plus year old movie was not something he’d expected, she figured he could handle it. As an added bonus, the girls were giggling themselves silly over the four men voicing the movie. Her and Marg were, too.

“Christmas had come…officially. We plunged into the cornucopia quivering with desire and the ecstasy of unbridled avarice,” Jon quoted in his most serious voice.

“Sweet Jesus. You’ve got him doing it, too?” Arya said when her and Friend Gendry joined them after finishing kitchen clean-up. Their hair was mussed and their lips were kiss-swollen. Sansa was kicking herself for not volunteering her and Jon for kitchen clean-up first.

“We saved you a spot, Little Sis,” Marg said, patting the loveseat.
“Not sure I’d fit now.”

“Are you calling me fat, Stark?”

“I’m calling you pregnant, Tyrell, but mostly I’m referring to myself after that big as—uh, big meal.”

Gendry found his own spot in the floor and Arya flopped down beside him. The other adults sat and chatted as the girls finished opening presents, the adults who weren’t busy reciting the movie word for word that is.

As the afternoon crept along, Sansa smiled to see the girls playing together. Having grown up with four siblings, her Christmas memories were filled with shouting, laughter, occasional tears and arguments but tons of love over all. She wondered what Jon’s childhood memories of Christmas were like with just himself and his mother. Much quieter but no less special, she decided.

Mina had been the lone grandchild/niece all this time. Now, she had someone her age with whom to share Christmas. She glanced at Margaery’s belly and realized this time next year there’d a new little one watching all the activity even if he wasn’t big enough to participate too much yet. It made her feel all fluttery and sentimental.

“It’s getting closer,” she whispered to Marg.

Her sister-in-law grinned even with her eyes still closed. “I know. I’m miserable and more than a little freaked out but also really excited. My grandmother bought him an outfit for next Christmas. Is that nuts or what?”

“Not nuts at all but she could’ve waited till everything was on clearance the day after.”

“You’ve met Olenna. Do you think she worries about clearance sales?”

“Right,” she laughed. She wrapped her arms around Marg and sighed. “Four weeks.”

“Three. I’m expecting him to arrive on your birthday."

“Oh, that’d be sweet but maybe he wouldn’t want to share his big day with Aunt Sansa.”

“Why wouldn’t he? Her and Aunt Arya will be the most amazing aunts ever. But since Arya is a summer child, I’ve discussed it with Peanut. He’s coming on your birthday.”

“You do realize you have no control over that, right? And you also realize he’ll spend plenty of time defying you, right?”

“Yes, Mom. Call me crazy but I just have a feeling.”

“Alright then.”

“What about you? Are you going to give my son a playmate before too long?”

Sansa flushed and glanced at Jon who was busy making a nest for himself in the floor with discarded wrapping paper. “We’re trying…a lot.”

Marg snorted. “I’ll bet.”

“We’ll see.” Obviously, the thought had crossed her mind more than once. She could picture it, the little cousins growing up close as siblings maybe with her and Jon’s girls getting to be the big kids like her and Robb had been. “What are you doing for your last New Year’s Eve as a free woman?”
“I’m past that, aren’t I? You were in our wedding.”

“Yeah, but next year there’ll be a baby.”

“True. Well, considering I can’t seem to stay awake past ten lately, except when I wake up with horrid heartburn at one a.m., I’m leaning towards staying in. You?”

“I don’t know. I figured we’d come over to Mom and Dad’s annual eggnog and appetizer smorgasbord but Rhae’s throwing a party. She said there’ll be dancing.”

“Dance, Dance Revolution?”

“I don’t think she meant that. I’ve never been to a New Year’s party like that since before I was of age to drink. We could ask my parents to keep the girls. Think he’d hate it?”

“I think that man would gladly take you anywhere you like. You should do it if Ned and Cat will agree. You two deserve a little freedom especially if you’re trying to add to your family.”

The movie ended only to start over again. But in the interim, Jon had completed his little pallet of crinkled up gift wrap and tissue paper and fallen asleep on the floor. Rickon got his phone out and the girls were keen to get in on his suggested pranks.

“Hey, girls…go up to Grandpa’s bathroom and get his shaving cream.”

“No, Rickon.”

“Aww, Mom.”

“Hey, the movie’s starting again. Gendry, can you take Grown-Up Ralph for Jon?” Robb asked.

“Uh, I’ve never seen the movie to be honest.”

“WHAT?” both Bran and Robb shouted in unison…and in horror.

“So what, guys?” Arya said. “That’s perfectly fine for him to have never seen it, you freaks!”

“Well, of course but…”

“You can watch it with us now,” Bran said.

“Yeah, Gendry. Watch with us. Be one of us. One of us…one of us…one of us,” Rickon chanted. Bran joined in. Then, Robb did. Her brothers really were the biggest dorks. Naturally, those who were still awake joined them. “We’ve got cookies for new members. You made more cookies, right, Mom?”

“You can’t seriously eat again, Rickon.”

“Can, too.”

“Alright, Gendry,” Robb said in that very serious this-is-war voice of his. “I’ll take both of Ralphie’s parts and you can just watch it this year. Next year though, there’ll be a test.”

“I apologize for subjecting you to these idiots from the bottom of my heart.”

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” Gendry laughed. “I don’t have much family. They’re kind of fun.”
“Sweetheart? Did he just call you sweetheart, Arya? Hey, Mom! Friend Gendry just called Arya sweetheart.”

“Shut up, Brandon.”

“Robb? Are you really going to quote the entire movie again?” Margaery asked as she nestled back down onto Sansa’s shoulder again.

“Yeah. It’s tradition, baby. Who am I to thumb my nose at family traditions?”

And stupid as it was, Sansa couldn’t have agreed more with her brother.

The thing about kids at Christmas—even when they’re exhausted from an early morning and active day, it takes time to wind down from all that excitement…and sugar. From past experience, Jon figured as soon as they got still though they’d pass out. They’d asked if Lyarra could have a ‘sleepover’ in Mina’s room under the fairy lights and got their wish. Sansa was tucking them in and Jon went to start a fire.

When he returned, he hovered in the doorway with what was sure to be a besotted, sappy grin. Sansa was singing to them. He watched as two sets of eyes grew heavy while their mother sang them to sleep.

‘Toyland, toyland,
Li-ittle girl and boy land
While you dwell within it
You are ever happy there…’

Both girls were fast asleep by the time Sansa finished the song. He cleared his throat and she glanced back at him.

“Are you crying, love?”

“I am not…even going to attempt to deny it. You’re marrying a very sentimental woman, I’m afraid.”

“And I love my sentimental woman. Come on.” He closed the bedroom door and took her by the hand, pulling her towards the living room. “I’ll pour us some wine and then my good girl might have something else to unwrap.”

Her eyes blazed with curiosity.

He’d decided to wait until the girls were tucked in to give Sansa the earrings he’d bought and he was glad of it now. Back home and blissfully alone after a busy day, the lights of the tree were lovely to go along with the fire burning in the hearth. They snuggled up together on the couch with a glass of wine apiece.

Romantic ambiance-check. Now, for the surprise...
Jon!” she gasped as she opened the hinged box. “Oh, Jon! You shouldn’t have!” She was already unfastening them to put them on. *I definitely should have.*

“Do you like them, love?”

“Like them? I love them! However did you…Margaery!”

“Yeah, Santa had a helper.”

She gave him a quick kiss, her eyes sparkling with her glee. “I think Santa blew the budget.”

“Couldn’t be helped. I’m a sentimental man at times.”

This was their first Christmas together. She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen and she was his. What man in his right mind wouldn’t give her everything he could?

Once she’d put them in, she swept her hair back to show them off.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured.

“They really are lovely.”

“I meant you. Will you wear them for me on our wedding day?”

She sighed and her adoring smile filled him with happiness. “Gladly. I could maybe even wear them on New Year’s.”

“Do you want to go to Rhæ’s party?”

“Yes. But if you don’t want to, we can…”

“No, it’s fine. I doubt we’ll know much anyone there besides Rhæ and Theon. She’s got some cousins that I may have met once or twice who’ll come but most everyone will be her friends from work.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Even if I grab a beer and hide out in the kitchen?”

“If the going gets tough, I’ll hide out with you. I just want a chance to dress up and get out together…and dance.”

“Dancing, huh?”

“Yeah, dancing. What’s that going to cost me, Mr. Snow?”

He smirked as she leaned in for another kiss. “It won’t cost you a thing.”

“So, you’ll dance with me at our wedding?”

“If you’re the one asking, I’ll dance with you all night long.” He wrapped his arms around her before she could pull back to claim another kiss, a deeper one…and then another. “I love you, Sansa.”

“I love you, too.” She covered a yawn and stretched before nestling against his chest, her hand drifting up to his shoulder. “I’m so sleepy but I don’t want to move from here.”

“Me, either.”
“At least you had a nap.”

“I assure you it was not all that comfortable on the floor…nor quiet.”

“I hope they didn’t get on your nerves.”

“Oh, no. I enjoyed the good old-fashioned Stark Family Christmas.”

“They all love you, you know.”

“I know. I love them, too.”

“What were your Christmases like as a child?”

“Much quieter.”

She snickered. “I figured.”

“They were alright. Some years we didn’t have all that much but I knew Mum gave me everything she could. We were happy. One year, her old car had to have lots of repairs and she wound up cutting off the cable before Thanksgiving. I was bored with nothing to watch and no place to go but it was unusually warm outside. So, she took me down to the courtyard of the apartment complex we were living in at the time and we started kicking a ball around. Half a dozen kids came out and joined us and we had an impromptu match. We spent two hours playing. My mother was the lead scorer. I was never prouder.”

“I could see that,” she laughed. “That’s really a nice memory, honey. I think I remember the Christmas you’re talking about. Everyone went outside to play touch football after dinner, everyone except me and Mom. We made cookies and brought out punch for everyone later. Rickon was a baby and after his nap, I took him outside and sat him in my lap telling him all about the game. I told him our dad was the greatest quarterback in the history of football and that Robb was the worst. I was mad at Robb that day. He’d threatened to use the chemistry set he got on my new Barbies.”

“I see,” he chuckled. “That’s nice that your dad played, too.”

“So did Uncle Benjen. Like your mom, I guess. Did your dad ever…”

“No, he was always absent at the holidays. A card and some cash was it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He would’ve only spoiled it.”

Jon squashed the flicker of guilt the response unwittingly raised. He had nothing to feel guilty over. He had the right to feel anger and resentment towards his father. It didn’t matter that Rhaegar had left him a message earlier this evening, asking if he’d give him another chance and wanting him to bring Lyarra over for a visit. Jon hadn’t answered the phone and he didn’t know if or when he’d return the call. Why did it make him feel guilty though? The gaping distance between them, wasn’t that his father’s fault? Hadn’t Rhaegar done it to himself through years of neglecting his son?

He wondered if Sansa would tell him to give him another chance when he told her. He wondered if Rhae would. He didn’t want to spoil their night thinking of that man honestly.

“What’s it been like sharing Mina with Harry at Christmas?”

“Not always easy but not as hard as it could be, I suppose. We’ve tried to be civil about it and keep
the focus on Mina.”

“Very wise.” She reminded him of his mother, her thoughts always centering on her child’s happiness.

“Well, in the past, that’s typically meant Harry’s been free to pop in when it suits him but she’s stayed with me.”

“Probably wisest but now?”

“Now, I think he really does mean to do better by her. I hope so.”

“Me, too.”

Did Rhaegar mean to do better? Was that what all this was about? Jon couldn’t say he believed that. Somehow, it still felt very much like this was about Rhaegar more than anyone else. And was it fair to compare Harry to Rhaegar? Harry had been a self-centered ass for certain but had Mina known the same level of complete indifference to her existence that he had?

*I don’t want to think about this,* he thought angrily and caught Sansa staring at him.

“Honey, are you okay?”

“Yes, love. Can I be a sap and propose a toast?” he asked holding up his glass.

“I love my sappy man,” she smiled.

“Sansa, you and the girls are my everything. I hope I never give you any reason to doubt it. So, here’s to us. To a new year and new beginnings for us all.” They clinked their glasses together and finished the wine. She smothered another yawn and he kissed her forehead. “Time for bed, I think.”

“Sounds good.” But when she started to stand, he pulled her into his lap. “Is this where I sit in Santa’s lap and you ask if I’ve been naughty or nice?” she giggled.

“Maybe.”

He drew her closer, raining soft, gentle kisses along her jaw, worshiping his beloved. When his lips met hers, that familiar fire was stirred. Her mouth was inviting as he slid his tongue into it, as warm and wet as he knew another part of her would be. She tasted like the wine but also peppermint sticks. Naughty thoughts danced in his head instead of visions of sugarplums. *Well, maybe her sugarplums.*

“I know we’re tired but I did have a nap…” he panted as they pulled apart to breathe for a moment. One hand was stroking her back and the other carded through her silky hair.

“But I didn’t.”

“Lyarra and I can take Mina over to Harry’s in the morning. You can sleep late.”

He shifted her in his lap while the hand on her back moved around front to cup a breast. She gasped when he teased her nipple and rocked against her ass with his burgeoning erection.

“That is tempting…”

“The offer to drive or this?” The hand in her hair moved down her arm, caressing downward till it rested between her legs.
“Both,” she whimpered.

Her lightweight pajama pants and no panties made it easy to slip his hand down them. “Face me, love.”

She spun in his lap, her eyes growing darker and her breath getting shallower. “Please, Jon…yes, yes, yes…” Her hands had been on his shoulders but now she was running her fingers through his hair. He sank a finger and then a second inside that promised heat. They kissed till they were breathless again as she became wetter and wetter for him. “Ahhh…oh, Jon!”

“That’s right, love. You’re all mine, aren’t you?” He pulled her pajama top up and started suckling on a nipple.

Her voice hitched. “I am. I’m…”

“And this is all mine?” he asked, curling his fingers just so as his thumb stroked her clit.

“It is. All yours. Oh, God…” she moaned as she started pulsing around his fingers.

Her face was flushed when he lowered her top back in place and pulled his hand back out of her pants. She whined in protest.

“Patience, love. I’m not anywhere near finished with you yet. I heard you and Marg talking this afternoon. I can’t slack off just because it’s Christmas. I am very determined to knock you up.”

“Tonight would be a good night to try,” she said, suddenly shy.

“Good. Maybe we can give each other something better than earrings or sweaters for next Christmas?”

“Maybe so. But for now…” She wore a sinful smirk as she brought his fingers up to her mouth and sucked her arousal off them.

“Holy fuck.”

“You like that?”

“Uh huh.”

“Time to take this to the bedroom then?”

“I’ll race you.”

Sansa was dressed in her dark blue velvet minidress with long sleeves and a V-neck. She knew she looked good but Jon’s expression when she’d come out of the bedroom to where he was waiting for her had only confirmed it. She’d pulled her hair back off her face with a barrette to show off the earrings but left most of it flowing down her back since she knew he liked it down.

They’d stopped at her parents’ house to drop off the girls before heading to Rhae’s. She’d wanted to go enjoy a ‘real’ grown-up New Year’s Eve party but as she’d looked at the familiar spread of sub sliders, sausage balls, queso dip and tortilla chips, mini-cheesecakes and a dozen other little hors
d’oeuvres, Sansa wondered if she wouldn’t rather have shared New Year’s with them again.

Her father had turned on a bowl game and the girls had been excitedly asking him about playing Yahtzee and Clue. Rickon was setting up Twister. He’d be going out to see a movie with his friends later but the girls were only staying up till 10:30…at least that was what Jon and Sansa had suggested as their bedtime for tonight. Bran and Meera had dropped by and Robb and Margaery were there along with some of her parents’ friends. Her mother had said Arya was going to swing by as well before her and Gendry went to a party downtown.

It had been her little tradition for so long, New Year’s Eve at Mom and Dad’s with Mina. And Jon had been salivating over the food.

*Well, there’s nothing wrong with trying something new, I guess.*

As she and Jon were heading up the walk to Rhae’s front door, she slyly whispered in his ear that she was wearing part of his Christmas present.

“I noticed the earrings.”

“No, I meant my gift to you…from Christmas Eve.”

“Time to go home,” he said, spinning her around and back towards the Pilot.

“Jon!” she laughed. “You promised!”

“Alright, alright.”

“An hour.”

“An hour?”

“Yeah, we’ll stay an hour and if one of us isn’t having a good time, we can go back to Mom and Dad’s and kick Rickon’s butt at Twister.”

“My knee hurts just thinking about that.”

“Or we can head home and you can see how loud you can get me to scream again.”

“Much better. And, this is seriously not making me want to stay.”

“We’re not even inside yet.”

They could hear the music thumping through the house and Sansa felt a giddy thrill. He’d taken her dancing a couple of times and they’d gone out back in September around his birthday but she was enjoying these chances to have time away together. Much as she loved their girls, she was still young and wanted to enjoy some freedom, too.

The door opened just as they arrived, one of Rhae’s cousins greeted Jon and he introduced her. They were making their way past the couples talking and drinking, kissing and dancing when she spied Theon coming towards them. He was dressed more dapper than Sansa had ever seen him. He also looked decidedly harried.

“Oh, good. You’re here. Now, leave.”

“What?”
“Theon, if this is some lame joke so you can keep feeling up my sister or…”

“Jon, I swear she didn’t invite him. I think it’d be best if you and Sansa go. He showed up a few minutes ago and he’s…”

“Who showed up?”

She got her answer before Theon could give it. Sansa’s jaw dropped as Rhaegar Targaryen appeared around the corner. He made a bee-line for them at once. His silver hair which had been sleeked back whenever she’d seen him previously was in disarray and his unusual eyes glittered in the low lighting.

“Hello, Sansa. Nice to see you again. Hello, son.”

Even standing three feet away, she could smell the alcohol on his breath. It was New Year’s but Sansa couldn’t help but think of Harry when he’d shown up at Mina’s soccer game and birthday party intoxicated. Nothing good could come of this.

Jon had told her about the phone call and his father asking for another chance the day after Christmas. She’d agreed he didn’t owe him anything. She’d agreed with his decision once he made it, too. Rhaegar had called a couple of more times but Jon hadn’t called him back. He’d texted that he needed more time before he could talk to him. Sansa couldn’t blame him. Despite the anger he held, there was so much raw pain underneath it. She knew he needed time to prepare for the inevitable confrontation but apparently Rhaegar wasn’t very keen to give him that space.

Rhae quickly joined them. “Jon, I’m so sorry. I was going to text you but it all happened so fast. Dad, I called Mom. Theon’s going to drive you home. This is not the time to…”

“I drove an hour to get here. It’s the perfect time,” he said batting his daughter’s hand away. “It’s New Year’s. Out with the old, in with the new. Time to make amends and celebrate times long past, right? Why didn’t you call me back? Is that how Lyanna raised you? To ignore your own father?”

“Ignore my…You’re upset that you were ignored?! Jon was choking with rage, the tension roiling off him like a physical entity of its own. “You never gave a flying fuck about ignoring me but God forbid I don’t answer your summons immediately!”

“Let’s go somewhere quieter, alright?” Theon suggested.

Other guests were staring as Rhae stood miserably between both men, trying to run interference as tempers rose. This wasn’t her fault. Rhaegar had forced this on them. Sansa didn’t want Jon to have to talk to him tonight but hashing this out in front of everyone probably wasn’t going to make things any easier.

In a flash of heartbreaking intuition, Sansa realized again how very toxic this entire relationship was for Jon and how it would likely continue to be so. She thought he’d made the right decision though she knew it would remain an open wound for him long after tonight.

*Now comes the part of telling Rhaegar…*

“Fine!” Rhaegar said in answer to Theon’s suggestion, storming off to his daughter’s kitchen.

“Jon, I’m…I never…” Rhae was in tears.

He put his hands on his sister’s shoulders. “This isn’t your fault but it’s overdue, Rhae. I’m sorry to spoil your party.”
“I don’t care about that. Do you want me to come in there?”

“No, you don’t need to hear this. He’s your dad and he’s married to your mother but after today, he’s not welcome in my life. I’ll play nice if we’re forced to be together in the same room but I will never willingly spend time with him. I’m sorry if that hurts you.”

“No, it’s…I understand, Jon.”

He glanced back at Sansa. “I need you. Will you stay with me, please?”

“Of course,” she said, gripping his hand.

“I’ll come with you too if you want,” Theon offered. “I’m drive him back as soon as I can get him out of here…if that’s alright with you,” he said, looking to Rhae.

She nodded and Jon agreed. The pair of them and Theon found Rhaegar pacing in his daughter’s kitchen.

“I don’t see why you’re being so unforgiving and stubborn. I apologized for what I said back in October. I had your best interests at heart but I suppose it did come off as pushy.”

Sansa bit her tongue, not wishing to say anything since the spark that had started the fight involved his objection to her adopting Lyarra and his suggestion that Jon get a prenup.

Jon shoved his hands in his pockets and bowed his head. “I’m not here to talk about the fight in October. That’s behind us and it doesn’t matter now. I wish you weren’t drunk. It’d be better if you could hear this sober but I guess this is how it’s going to be.”

“I’m not drunk. I had a few glasses of wine. Where’s my granddaughter?”

Sansa didn’t know where it came from but she couldn’t seem to stop herself from answering him. “She’s with her grandparents.”

“What grandparents? Lyanna and her husband are in England. Or do you mean your parents? They aren’t her grandparents,” he said contemptuously.

“They are her grandparents as far as I’m concerned,” Jon snarled. “They’re our family.”

“Once you let her adopt your daughter, I suppose you have a point,” he said with a casual shrug towards Sansa. “I gave an opinion on that but you blew it out of proportion. That’s fine though. She’s to be your wife and I’m sure she’ll make you a good one. I have no issues with Sansa but I still think you’ve rushed into things. You’ve not even been together a year and you’re ready to hand over parental rights to her?”

“I’m not handing over anything. My daughter is gaining a mother. And this is still none of your fucking business.”

“Fine. You know best. Here…for Lyarra’s Christmas since you wouldn’t let me see her.” He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and she knew what it held. Jon stared at it like it was poison.

“I don’t want your money. I’m not giving my daughter that.”

“Don’t be so stubborn. Take it. I know you’re not getting rich off the public school system. It’s just money.”

“Yes, money. It’s all you ever really had to give me, wasn’t it?”
Rhaegar huffed like he didn’t know what that meant. Sansa supposed he didn’t.

“I came here to talk to you, to try and make things right between us. Is your pride so important to you?”

“You could’ve made things right between us for nearly thirty years. You could’ve been a parent to me!”

“I’m your father!”

“You were nothing more than a goddamn sperm donor and a child support check!” he roared.

Theon shifted as if he thought things might turn physical. She supposed it could but hoped not. Jon drew a shaky breath, fighting for control. Watching this was awful but she would not leave his side.

He forced himself to speak more calmly again. “The only reason I’ve not walked out of here yet is because you drove all this way to confront me so I’m saying it now...I don’t want to talk to you and make things right. I don’t want you in my life anymore. You may be my father but from here on we’re done.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous. There’s too much anger on my end, too much pain. I can’t do this with you. You’re not worth it to me. I’ve got so much good in my life and you only bring me down. I’m sorry it’s this way but I’m tired of feeling like I’m to blame or I wasn’t good enough. We’re through.”

“You’re not even going to give me a chance? Over one little blow up?” Rhaegar said sounding much more broken than a minute ago. Jon closed his eyes. Manipulative guilt and playing the victim…she hoped Jon knew what he was doing. “Look, I acknowledge that I was a shitty dad to you. I caused my wife a lot of pain over your mother…”

“Don’t you dare blame either of them.”

“I don’t have a time machine to fix it, alright? If I could, I would. But, Elia wants grandkids and…”

“Ah,” Jon sighed. “There it is. I had wondered. Sansa and I are not providing grandkids for your entertainment or for your wife to dote upon. I’m sorry for Elia, mostly sorry she’s married to you but Rhae may give you grandchildren someday. Our girls are people all their own who deserve to be surrounded by adults who will love and cherish them and are focused on their well-being. And it wasn’t just the one blow up. There were a million moments of you letting me down and showing me where I stood with you that brought us here. You can’t throw money at it and make that go away. I’m done with you. Theon, I’d appreciate you seeing that he gets back home in one piece for Elia’s sake and Rhae’s.” He turned towards her, grasping her hand. Half a smile appeared. “Sansa, I’m not having a good time and would really like to leave.”

“We’re going,” she said, not sure if she wanted to smile back at him or cry for him more.
Jon sat on the loveseat in Ned and Cat’s family room, watching his girls in their pajamas thrashing Rickon at Yahtzee. Sansa joined him with a cup of eggnog.

“Do you want some?”

“I can’t stand that stuff. I’m sticking with this for now,” he said, holding up his bottle.

“How are you feeling?”

“Strange. Kind of surreal. It’s not really hit yet.”

“It will.”

“Yeah.”

He couldn’t say why he’d driven them straight back to Ned and Cat’s instead of taking them home. Depression, guilt and anger would return with a vengeance once he had a chance to process things though ultimately he hoped acceptance and peace with it would come in time. He was still pumped up with adrenaline right now though and he’d wanted to see the girls. He wished he could call his mother in a way but Sansa was the shoulder he wanted to cry on most…or would once the numbness wore off.

“Jon? I think you did what was best.”

“I think so, too. I wish I’d never wasted our time with…”

“Don’t do that. You tried one final time over the summer. Don’t question it now. You tried to give him a chance to be a father and grandfather.”

She was right of course. He could’ve said no to dinner months ago but he might’ve been left wondering if he was missing out on something worthwhile or if his girls and their future children were missing out. Now he knew the answer even if it wasn't a happy one.

“Dad? You want to play Clue with us?”

He stared at his girls looking up at him with those wide blue eyes and felt a dull ache. His father, or Elia at least, wanted a grandchild. Elia would love them, he did not doubt. But for his father, what would Lyarra be? A passing interest? Something to puff up his own self-esteem? And Mina…what would she mean to him? They’d been charmed by her at dinner but would he ever love her like a granddaughter? He knew the answer. His mother and David had immediately taken to Mina as a new grandchild just as Ned, Cat and the entire Stark family had treated Lyarra. He didn't think his father was made that way. If he’d needed an affirmation regarding his decision, there it was.

They were still staring up at him and he saw worry starting to cloud those little brows. They didn’t need to worry about him. They didn’t need to worry about any of this.

"Yeah, baby. Let's play.”

He sat down in the floor, distracted for twenty minutes or so by the girls and the game. But it wasn’t long till that dull ache began to grow as the numbness wore off and, when it did, he desperately wanted to leave. He felt guilty for wanting away from his girls. What was wrong with him?

But Sansa didn’t seem to think anything was wrong with him. "Come on," she whispered in his ear. "You need a little time."
She told the girls she’d be back to get them in the morning but they were tired and going to head home. He hugged them both, sucking in deep breaths as if being among other people might drown him now. Bran and Meera stepped in and offered a movie which had them excitedly chattering over which one as Sansa fetched her coat.

Ned and Cat knew enough of what had happened. He felt his nose twitching and his resolve to keep a straight face breaking when Cat hugged him and whispered that they loved him. He nodded jerkily and felt Ned's hand on this shoulder. He hurried out the door and gratefully gulped in the biting cold air.

He handed Sansa the keys and let her drive, staring out the window in the waning hours of the year before the new one began. The silence was welcome. He watched the lights pass by as if he was inside his own little cocoon again.

When they neared the house, that sense of urgent panic he'd experienced trying to leave Ned and Cat's had faded to nothing. He had tonight with just his love. Tomorrow, he could be Dad again. Tonight, he just needed to be Jon.

“To a new year and new beginning for us all,” Sansa said as she pulled into the driveway.

He smiled at wife-to-be. “Very philosophical of you.”

“I know it’s not easy to let go.”

“No but I’m glad you were with me tonight.”

“I’m going to be with you tonight and every night. When we get inside, we can talk as much as you like or not at all if you prefer. I can give you space or stay by your side. You can cry or rage or whatever you need to do. Whatever you need, I’ll be here for you…now and always.”

“I know, love,” he said, taking her hand. "That’s something I’m never letting go of.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will find our little family in January with school back in session and a new Stark ready to join the pack.

Happy Holidays and thank you so much for reading!
Chapter Summary

January brings some cleaning out in the Snow house and leads to unexpected concerns for Mina. Sansa celebrates her birthday with the family and a new Stark is born.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winter Break was over and, although Mina had missed her classmates and routine at school, she was glad it was the weekend again. Unfortunately, there was work to do on this drizzly, cold Sunday afternoon. Mommy had been on a cleaning out kick lately and had suggested over breakfast that they clean out the attic today in order to ‘make space.’ Whatever they were supposed to be making space for Mina wasn’t sure but Mommy seemed excited to get it done.

Jon had only made a frowny face for a second or two before he’d quickly agreed. Mina figured that he’d agree anyway since Jon rarely ever disagreed with something Mommy wanted but also because Mommy’s birthday was in a couple of days.

Initially, Lyarra had suggested they could just play video games while the grown-ups did the cleaning out but the grown-ups declared this was a ‘family chore’ and both girls found themselves in the attic a few hours later going through dozens of large plastic totes and boxes, looking to see what should be kept and what could be donated or tossed.

Mina thought attics were creepy but also sort of magical in a funny way. Grandma and Grandpa’s attic had all sorts of things in it collected over the many years of their marriage. Trunks and antique furniture, old fishing rods and sleds, Great-Grandma Minisa’s china dishes and clothes from decades ago and a hundred other items filled it from one side to the other. It sort of reminded her of that story about the children who passed through a wardrobe into another world. It was also very dark up there. One time, Uncle Rickon had started making spooky sounds when they’d been helping Grandma look for some old photo albums and Aunt Arya had kicked him when Mina had started to cry.

Jon’s attic on the other hand (which was theirs too now, she supposed) was much smaller than Grandma and Grandpa’s and not as dark but it was every bit as dusty from what Mina could tell.

Most everything Mina had discovered was stuff from when Lyarra was little; a crib, a stroller, a highchair, adorable little baby jammies, a playmat and some rattles and toys. Mina wondered what Mommy had done with the stuff she’d had for her. She also wondered if Jon might let her use some of those outfits or toys for her baby dolls if she asked sweetly.

“What about this baby swing, love?”

“We can keep that,” Mommy answered, giving Jon one of those soft smiles that she often shared with just him. Mina wasn’t sure what to make of them but they were nice smiles. They just made Mina feel like she was missing something.
“What about these, sweetie?” Mommy asked Lyarra next as she opened up a box full of Little Tikes Disney Princess toys.

“Eww, no!” Lyarra shuddered. “Those are baby toys. You can donate them or whatever you think, Mom.”

“Well…we’ll see,” Mommy said with another one of those smiles.

She set the box aside and Mina peeped inside. She’d had some of the same figures and remembered making up stories with Mommy and Grandma about the princesses all having a lovely party together. She thought they were still at Grandma’s house somewhere. She was far too big to play with such things now. Lyarra had a few other figures that Mina hadn’t had, too. She picked up the Ariel and Prince Eric figures, thinking how they reminded her of Mommy and Jon. The hair was right anyway. Mommy’s birthday was coming and she’d said for no one to buy her anything but that didn’t mean she couldn’t make her something besides a card, right? She tucked them into her pocket when no one was looking.

“What’s in these boxes, honey?” Mommy asked Jon. “You wrote ‘02-Keep’ on it.”

“I can’t remember.”

Mommy opened the flaps of the box and rolled her eyes. “Are you joking me?”

“What?”

“It’s issues of *Sports Illustrated* from 2002?”

“Oh! Right. That’s when I got my subscription and I saved them.”

“But this box is filled with dozens of issues, Jon.”

“That’s because I saved them.”

“The whole year of them?”

“Well, yeah. Oh, look. Here’s the cover with Clint Mathis on it.”

“Who?”

“He played for the US in the World Cup that year. He was…”

“There’s…” she said, cutting him off as she did a quick count. “There’s eleven more boxes labeled as ‘important-keep’ with a year on them. Am I going to find back issues in all of those as well?”

“Uh…”

Mommy put her hands on her hips. “Do we really need to store…over 600 issues of *Sports Illustrated* in the attic, Jon?”

“That was awfully quick math.” Mommy scowled. “No.”

“So, keep or toss?”

“Aw, come on, Sansa.”

After a brief discussion, Jon had agreed that he’d just keep one box full of some of his favorite issues.
and the clean out had continued. Well, mostly it continued for Mommy since Jon was busy sorting magazines and muttering something about King Solomon and a baby.

Once that was done, Mommy said for everyone to take a shower to wash the dust off and they’d order pizza for dinner.

“It really is a lot neater now. It’s sort of nice to feel like we accomplished something,” she said to Lyarra as they headed to their rooms.

“I guess. It wasn’t horrible anyway.” Lyarra had found some old issues of World Soccer in one of Jon’s boxes and was eager to read through them. “It does look much cleaner.” Mina started to nod, pleased that Lyarra had appreciated that as well when Lyarra continued. “Did you notice what they didn’t get rid of though?”

“Well, obviously the Christmas decorations and some of your dad’s old books and…”

“No, I’m talking about the baby stuff.”

“The baby stuff? Oh, I’d meant to ask if I could have some of those things for my dolls.”

“I don’t think they’re keeping it so you can play with it, Mina. The crib, the stroller…all that stuff was left up there and covered in plastic just like it has been for years now. Wonder why, huh?” Lyarra finished in a way that told Mina she didn’t really wonder at all.

“Oh.”

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I could almost smack him for turning my perfectly lovely lemon cake into a fire hazard, she thought with a grin as Jon proudly carried the cake blazing with candles to the dining table while everyone sang.

Her parents had come over, along with Arya, Rickon, Robb and a very pregnant Margaery who was still showing no signs of imminent delivery. The chorus had begun with Lyarra and Rickon trying to see who could be loudest as the dogs howled along. Sansa bit at her lip self-consciously to be the center of attention and lest she be tempted to start singing along as was her habit whenever she heard anyone singing ‘Happy Birthday’ anytime and anywhere at all.

Mina was glued to her side and she wrapped her arm around her, so happy to cap her day off like this with her loved ones. She was too old to think of birthdays as especially magical anymore but this had been a good one. Randa had made lemon poppyseed muffins in honor of the day for everyone that morning. Shae had bought her a lewd but hilarious card (which she’d promptly locked in her desk drawer so no children could mistakenly run across it) and sweet Megga had given her some rose-scented bath salts to enjoy.

The only sour point of the day had come over lunch. Jon had packed them a picnic lunch again but this time, since it was so cold out, he’d talked to Coach Leathers and arranged for a table and chairs to be placed off in the wing of the little stage of the gymnasium. It was like having their own little private rendezvous in the middle of the school.
“Our table awaits, my lady,” Jon had said courteously before he escorted her up the steps and pulled back her chair.

The grizzled old gym teacher had been snorting back his laughter but quickly disappeared into his office after a half-annoyed/half-pleading look from Jon. The children were all in class or at lunch and they were essentially alone to enjoy their thermos of homemade soup and the sandwiches Jon had prepared. Perhaps it wasn’t candlelight, wine and a five-star meal but Sansa hadn’t needed romantic ambience or alcohol to appreciate a gesture that came from the heart.

The sour part had come when Cersei Lannister had promptly invaded their lunch, having taken it upon herself to find Mr. Snow and discuss her son’s math grade since Brienne had had the ‘audacity’ to have her office door closed while she ate her own lunch, never mind that Tommen’s teacher had already attempted to schedule a conference with his parents a week earlier when the test had been returned.

“Well, isn’t this cozy? Should we expect you two lovebirds to have private lunches every day once you’re in charge, Jon? But didn’t you bring any wine or roses for your lady? How remiss of you. Oh, well. I suppose Sansa might let that slide. What’s planned for dessert, I wonder,” she’d said with a smirk.

Before either of them could speak though (and undoubtedly one or both of them would’ve lost their temper), Brienne had burst through the gymnasium doors having apparently been alerted by the office ladies of Cersei’s presence and by Coach Leathers of her whereabouts. And she was not alone. She’d brought the school security officer with her.

“You know, Cersei…there’s a pretty cut and dry policy about any adult who isn’t faculty or staff walking around the halls of our school without a visitor’s badge. I have the safety of the children to think of.”

“You door was closed and Shae was rude. I was just trying to…”

“There’s a time and place to discuss Tommen’s unsatisfactory math score and this isn’t it. Or did you expect to find a resolution by interrupting Jon and Sansa’s lunch? Come on back to the office with me. I’d hate to have to ask Goodwin to remove you from school property. That’d be terribly awkward to explain to your brother.”

Poor Officer Goodwin had gulped as his eyes darted between the two women. He was a head shorter than Brienne and getting on in years. If anyone could toss Cersei out on her ear, it was Brienne.

Despite their annoyance over Cersei, they had shared a good laugh at that as soon as the gym doors had closed behind the three of them and Leathers had returned to his office once more.

The rest of the day had been nothing short of ideal for a cold and dreary Tuesday in January. Only a snow day could’ve made it better, Sansa decided as the family finished singing.

“What’d you wish for, Mommy?” Mina asked no sooner than she’d managed to blow out all 28 candles.

“You can’t ask that,” Lyarra said. “It won’t come true if she says it out loud.”

She squeezed both girls to her as her mother and Jon started cutting up slices of cake. “Why don’t you girls fetch the ice cream and spoons?”

They went to do as she asked but she caught Mina looking back, her brow furrowed with worry. Uh
But it was just a birthday wish so Sansa couldn’t figure out how that might be troubling Mina. Honestly, she’d said a prayer for good health and good times with her family in the coming year without putting too much thought into it.

Once cake was served, Mina was busy chatting with her grandmother about her upcoming science project. Mrs. Flint had told the students to make a diorama of one of the Earth’s ecosystems. Mina had chosen to do a coral reef and she’d been collecting fabric swatches, pipe cleaners and buttons from Sansa’s sewing and craft materials the past couple of days so they could start working on it this weekend. Her mother was always so clever with ideas for this sort of project and Sansa listened to her suggestions of how they could make some tropical fish.

She noticed Jon slipping back out of the room just as Margaery sat down on her other side, licking icing off her fork and holding her back as she sat down with a groan. She knew that look on his face and understood his need for a little space at times lately. Tonight, they’d hold each other close in bed and talk about that if he wanted. For now, she’d check on her sister-in-law.

“All right, it’s my birthday and he’s not here but how are you feeling otherwise?”

“Horrible.” Sansa nodded in sympathy. “I thought I was miserable at Christmas but this is ridiculous. You see all these cute young women with their round little tummies in the mommy magazines wearing jaunty little outfits and looking so happy and you think, ‘Oh, that’s not so bad.’ I’ve decided it’s all part of the propaganda machine created by men to keep us women pregnant, the filthy liars.”

“I’m sure those models are probably around six to seven months at most…if they’re even truly pregnant at all. People don’t like to talk about how miserable the last month is.”

“No, they don’t but they should.”

Just wait till the baby actually comes. Then, you’ll see the other side of the Gerber baby image after you’ve been operating on two hours of sleep, had your boob in his face for what feels like twelve hours or more and changed his diaper twenty times. See if you don’t want to chuck the remote at the TV the next time you see a commercial of some well-rested mom and her sleeping baby.

She would not say it though because despite reality not matching up to the image, she knew that she personally would never trade a moment of being a mother and there was no need to depress Margaery.

“It’s bad enough feeling awful but I look awful, too.”

“You do not.”

“That glow business is a lie. Or at least it’s a lie for me this late in the game. You glowed throughout you’re pregnancy.”

“Aww, Marg. That’s very…”

“But you suck. Maybe this time you won’t glow so much.”

“Margaery!” she gasped.

“Sorry. I’m grumpy and awful and I look like a troll. I’m Hagatha.”

“You are not.”
“I’m the size of a house.”

“Wrong again.”

“I can barely get comfortable enough to sleep, I pee every five minutes, my feet are swollen up like Big Bird’s, not that I can see them properly anymore, and my back hurts.”

“Okay, that sounds very familiar.”

“I wanted him to come on your birthday, Sans!” Margaery whined.

“I know. He’ll be here soon. Did you guys settle on the name for certain?”

They’d talked of naming their son Eddard but there were still some other contenders in the running. Between Lyonel, Alester and Eddard, Sansa knew what her brother would choose but he’d never force his wife on it.

“We’re telling everyone we’re waiting to meet him to be sure since Granny likes the idea of me using a Tyrell family name but…” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “It’s going to be Eddard.”

“Oh, Margaery…that’s very sweet,” she said, wishing she could ignore that niggling little flicker of envy she felt from having it confirmed.

It’d be silly to have two little Eddards running around and that’s even assuming we might have a boy someday. Robb’s his son and I know it means a lot to Robb to name his son after Dad. Jon and I haven’t even discussed such things as names anyway. And, I’m not even pregnant. Or am I?

Her period was overdue. But you were late last month too, remember?

“Sans?”

She realized Marg was watching her closely and swallowed down a bite of cake to give herself a moment. “I’m, uh…”

Whatever she was going to say slipped her mind though when her mother grasped her arm. “Sansa, is something troubling Mina?”

It wasn’t Adventure Station but Jon hoped Sansa had had a good birthday so far. Barring Cersei’s interruption, he knew she’d been pleased with the surprise lunch. Sansa had laid down the ‘no purchased presents’ line and he’d adhered to it. He didn’t like it much but he’d adhered to it. Granted, he had gone overboard with the earrings at Christmas and he was as sensible as she was about the reality of their finances and all the upcoming expenses looming ahead.

His mother had called before everyone had come over to wish Sansa happy birthday and he’d wound up talking to her for a while after the two women had gushed over patent-leather shoes for the girls, bouquets and groom’s cakes a bit.

“You alright, Mum?” he’d asked in the same anxious tone he couldn’t quite hide lately when they talked.
“I’m fine, Jon. I miss you all and love you. I can’t wait for March but don’t worry about me, darling.”

His father had called her on New Year’s Day after their argument the previous night and become belligerent with her before David had intervened. Since then, Jon had been calling his mother a couple of times a week to check in, guilty that his decision to exclude Rhaegar from their lives had led to his mother becoming the target of his father’s ire.

Jon clenched his jaw at the memory and decided to put the ice cream back in the freezer while everyone was chatting to step away for a moment. He’d needed ‘a moment’ more than once the past two weeks, several times honestly. He didn’t want his family matters to intrude on their little party tonight.

Rhae was struggling with her own part in the dynamic, torn between her father and the half-brother she loved. As much as he liked giving Theon shit over his relationship with Rhae, he’d have to admit he was grateful for his friend and grateful he was there for Rhae to talk to because Jon just didn’t have it in him to give her the support she needed on top of his own anger or guilt just now. The pain was still too raw.

And he was incredibly grateful for Sansa whose patience and loving support meant more to him than she’d likely ever fully understand in this instance. It wasn’t his birthday and he’d had no right to make a wish so he’d said a prayer of gratitude instead in his mind as his beautiful fiancée had blown out her candles.

He’d had his moment alone which was enough to face their guests again and had just put up the ice cream when he saw Mina slipping down the hall out of the corner of his eye. He figured she was probably going to the bathroom but intuition decided to pay him a visit and he wound up finding her in her bedroom.

She was sitting at her desk with a shoebox turned on its side in front of her. She had some glue, sequins and scraps of lace lying beside it.

“Mina?”

She jumped and turned the box around. “You surprised me!”

“I’m sorry. What are you doing, sweetheart?”

“I’m…I hadn’t finished Mommy’s present. I wanted to finish it before bedtime.”

“Can I see it?” he asked, genuinely interested in what she had come up with.

She took a minute to reply. Actually, she just nodded and then slowly turned the box back around. She was making a diorama but this one wasn’t for her science project. The Little Mermaid figure was wrapped in bits of white fabric and her prince was standing next to her. There was a second red-headed Little Mermaid figure in a pink dress and Snow White which he supposed might be Lyarra. She’d made little pews out of popsicle sticks. Noah from Lyarra’s old Little Tikes Ark playset was standing at the front of the pews. She’d decorated the inside of the shoebox with some satiny fabric and been adding the sequins and lace. It was clearly meant to be a wedding.

Jon thought his heart might burst. “Mina, that’s..” fucking adorable and the sweetest damn thing I’ve ever seen “…really pretty.”

“There was a Nativity set of them in the attic, too. I didn’t think of it.”
“I’m…what?”

“The Baby Jesus figure would’ve worked for any baby, don’t you think?” She looked up at him, her eyes shiny as they narrowed. “Is Mommy going to have a baby?”

Jon wondered if he resembled a carp as he could feel his mouth opening and closing but he didn’t seem capable of stopping it.

They’d talked about having a baby a good deal and there had been some general remarks made when the four of them had talked as a family. Lyarra had expressed her worries privately to him as soon as he had started dating Sansa but he couldn’t recall Mina ever showing any concern over a potential new sibling. But children are individuals who have a variety of coping mechanisms for life’s curveballs, same as adults. Some fret in silence while others talk early and often. Some build mountains out of molehills while others ignore not only the forest but the trees as well until there’s no other alternative.

He wasn’t sure how to answer her.

Luckily for him, he didn’t have to.

“I might,” Sansa said from the doorway, catching them both off guard. “I might someday. How do you feel about it, baby?”

Mina jumped off her chair and bolted to her mother, wrapping her arms around her waist as Sansa soothed her with gentle hands and understanding words.

“I’d love for you to ask me questions or tell me your concerns. I’ll try and answer anything you’d like to know. But first, I have to say that’s the most beautiful diorama I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s for you, for your birthday. It’s just the four of us and the minister. There’s no baby in it.”

“That’s alright,” Sansa said, smoothing back Mina’s hair. “This is our family right now and I love it, don’t you?”

“Yes, so very much, Mommy.”

Oh, yeah. My heart has officially burst.

Jon left them to talk alone for a few minutes. He went to thank their guests for coming and to fetch Lyarra. Some family matters took precedence over birthday parties, he decided.

Lyarra raised her arms out to the side like an airplane as the ball rolled past the line in celebration of her goal. Mina shouted excitedly and raced over to give her a hug.

It was Saturday, the best day of the week in Lyarra’s opinion and she was doing one of the things she loved best, playing soccer. Even better, she’d scored.

Dad had put together an indoor team of some of their teammates from the fall with a few girls who were looking for a team to join. This was their third game. Their team was not great but everyone
tried their best and Dad said that was all he could ask of any of them.

Mina’s dad had brought Mina and he was cheering. Mina had been at his house last night and would be leaving with him again after the game. Lyarra liked him alright but she missed Mina when she was gone with Harry. He’d promised to take Mina ice skating later today, too. Lyarra hadn’t ever gone ice skating. Dad had said he’d probably break something. She told herself that was okay and maybe Mom could talk Dad into trying it sometime. They could all go.

The other night they’d talked about Mom having a baby someday.

“When?” she’d asked them.

“Well, it could be sometime later this year or maybe next year. It depends.”

“On what?”

“On how long it takes for me to, uh…get pregnant.” Mom and Dad had shared a look. Lyarra wasn’t sure what that was about. She’d opened her mouth to ask her next question, specifically how she would become pregnant, when Dad had spoken up.

“The main thing is that no matter what, your mother and I love you both very much and nothing will change that, okay?”

Mina had seemed much more excited by the idea after they’d all talked about it. She already loved playing with her dolls and liked the idea of taking care of a real baby. Lyarra on the other hand couldn’t say she liked dolls all that much. She loved taking care of her stuffed animals but babies seemed like they’d be a lot more work than that.

But they’ll love us, no matter what and nothing will change that, she would tell herself when the worries would start stirring.

Last night, she’d briefly wondered if Mom had a baby someday if the baby would go to Harry’s house every other weekend and do fun stuff without her too but then realized how silly that was. The baby wouldn’t be his baby. It would be Dad and Mom’s. She might have both a half-sister and a step-sister. The distinction was a little confusing at times but Lyarra had ultimately decided they’d all just be sisters…and play soccer.

Mom was supposed to be there watching their game today as well but she’d been gone this morning when Lyarra had woke up. Dad had said Aunt Margaery’s baby was coming today and she’d asked Mom to come to the hospital. Lyarra wondered how long the baby would take to come. It had been hours since breakfast and he’d said it will wasn’t here yet.

Dad gave her a high five as she passed by him in the coach’s box before she went to line up again. He sent Tanya in to sub Abby out. Lyarra had never played with Tanya in the past but she was even better than her though she didn’t want to admit it out loud. Maybe they’d manage to win the match today.

The other team kicked off and Tanya immediately stole the ball, ran down the field and scored. Mina raced over to hug her just like she had Lyarra but Tanya would never be her sister.

When the final whistle blew and their team had their first win of the season, Dad and Mina’s dad were busy talking as the girls drank their water and gathered their gear. Harry came over and talked to Mina for a few minutes after that and then left. Lyarra didn’t know what to think. Mina had said they were going ice skating later when she’d arrived for the game. She hoped Mina wasn’t sad that the plans had changed. His new job kept him busy but he’d promised.
“Are you okay?” she asked Mina while Dad was talking to Abby’s mom.

“Of course,” Mina grinned.

“But I thought you’d be sad about not going ice skating.”

“Daddy said we’d go tomorrow but it doesn’t matter right now. We’re going to see Aunt Marg’s baby!”

“Oh! Is she home already?”

“No, silly. She’s still at the hospital.”

“Oh.”

Lyarra stared out the window at the trees whizzing past as Dad drove them downtown where the hospital was. She wondered if Harry might’ve liked to take her ice skating today instead. Mina was chatting and excited and Dad was busy answering her questions. Lyarra was busy trying to ignore the churning feeling in her tummy.

She’d not been to the hospital since Dad’s accident. When she’d pictured seeing Robb and Margaery’s baby, she’d thought about seeing him at their house. She could still remember Aunt Rhæ wiping her eyes and promising Dad would be okay as they drove there that morning. She remembered that as much as she had wanted to believe her aunt, she’d had a hard time believing her all the same. Her mom had died in a car accident when Lyarra was almost as little as the new baby.

The emergency room had been full of strange people that day. Some were just sitting and waiting but there’d been crying people, angry people and sick people, too. She’d clung to her aunt and waited for someone to tell them where he was and if he was okay. Even when they’d been told he’d been moved to another part of the hospital, she’d not liked it there. People died at hospitals. She’d sat on the cold, plastic seat while Aunt Rhæ got loud and upset with the police officer and held on tight to her friend Ghost.

But then, Sansa and Mina had come. Mina had sat down and chatted with her. It had helped. Then, Sansa had made sure she got to see her dad. When she’d finally seen him, it had been the first time it hadn’t hurt to breathe since the scary sound of the crash and the phone going dead. Sansa had made that better.

*People die at hospitals but they can be born there, too,* she reminded herself as Dad parked the Pilot.

The automatic doors swished open and they immediately ran into Uncle Rickon. He had a cup of coffee and looked like he’d just woke up.

“I just woke up,” he confirmed. “Mom called and said everyone could come for a visit.”

“Sansa texted me during the game. Come on, girls. Let’s go meet the newest Stark.”

Lyarra followed them all to the elevators. It smelled funny in here. She remembered the smell from last time. The doors opened for another passenger to get off. She could hear someone coughing on that floor. She didn’t want anyone getting the baby sick.

“Dad? Does the baby have to stay here long?”

“No. Just a day or two, I’d guess.”
The doors closed again and the elevator kept going. When they opened again, she was greeted with pastel painted walls covered with baby animals. This definitely didn’t look like the part of the hospital where she’d seen her dad after his accident.

To the left of the elevator’s was a locked door. Dad pushed a button and a voice came from the speaker there to ask his name. The four of them were buzzed through. There was a long hallway with rooms down it but to the right was a great big window and on the other side of it were babies, six of them and all wrapped in blankets.

“Ohhh!” Mina cried. “Look at their teeny-tiny hands! They’re just like my newborn baby doll! Aren’t they adorable?”

Lyarra bit her lip and nodded noncommittally. They weren’t exactly what she’d describe as adorable. They didn’t look like those babies she’d seen in commercials anyway. They had scrunched up little faces. Some faces were really red and some were yellowish. One even looked orange. They sort of looked like angry little old men in a way, too. She bit her lip harder to keep from laughing at the idea.

And boy, were they wiggly. Well, some were just sleeping but even they kept twitching. Where did that saying ‘sleeping like a baby’ come from? These people didn’t seem to be resting at all. Maybe being squished up inside a lady’s tummy made them eager to move once they escaped.

One was definitely awake and kicking inside its blanket, reminding Lyarra vaguely of a burrito trying to escape its tortilla. She couldn’t help the giggle that came out then. “They’re, uh…cute.”

Dad put his arm around her and whispered in her ear. “You looked the same when you were born.”

“Did not,” she gasped.

“Did, too,” he chuckled. “Looks like Little Eddard Stark isn’t here. Let’s go find him, okay?”

Sansa sighed as she eased into the scented hot bath water which Jon had drawn her before he headed off to tuck the girls in. Megga’s gift smelled delightful and the candles lent just the right amount of soft, relaxing light. She’d had a very long day but a good one and this was one luxury she relished.

Nothing could be sweeter than her brand new nephew. Well, that’s not entirely true. A few things might compare. Her best friend’s relieved sob and her brother’s tears of joy were sweet moments as she’d listened to the lusty cries of the new little person who’d joined their family. And the girls… Mina’s rapture as she held him and Lyarra’s contagious giggles when the baby passed gas were memories she’d treasure from the day as well.

But another sweet thing was waiting for her to discover once she’d returned home an hour ago.

She’d waited eight days to take the test. She’d not wanted to get her hopes too high. Looking back, she wondered if some instinct had been prodding her to do all the cleaning out lately. She’d tell herself that was the case.

And she was glad now that the baby business had come up with the girls, too. She’d planned on sitting them down for a talk once she was actually pregnant but…
Well, I am pregnant.

They’d have several months to adjust to this new development at least.

“Hey, there,” Jon said with a sexy grin as he entered the bathroom.

“They asleep?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, waggling his eyebrows.

“That for me?” she asked next, eying they glass of wine he held.

“Sure is.”

“That’s very sweet of you.”

“I’m just hoping to get lucky tonight.”

She laughed as he sat down on the edge of the tub. “I’m not sure about that.”

“Well, if you don’t want to, I completely understand. I wasn’t trying to be…”

“No, I meant the wine, Jon. I’m not sure if I’ll be drinking it. In fact, I won’t.”

“Oh?”

“Look over there.” She pointed towards the vanity.

Jon rose and went to look where she’d left the test. His eyes widened. He flicked on the overhead light and ignored her groan of protest at the brightness. He kept looking back and forth between the test and her like he was watching a tennis match.

“I knocked you up.” The words might’ve sounded crass except for the gentle, dear way he said them.

“You sure did.”

“Holy shit.” He downed the glass of wine and sat back down on the edge of the tub.

“You okay, honey?”

“Are you kidding? I’m awesome,” he grinned. “Scratch that. You’re awesome.” He leaned over to kiss her, her gorgeous sexy fiancé. His position was a bit precarious.

“No. We’re awesome,” she declared right before she grasped his shirt by the collar and pulled him into the tub with her.

Chapter End Notes

Various people have asked how many chapters are left of this so I’ll say it here—I’m not entirely sure. I feel like maybe 6-7 tops but again, I can't promise. This fic has grown so
much from my original concept and I've been enjoying letting the story take me where it leads. I guess I'm more of a gardener than an architect when it comes to writing.

We'll have a wedding and honeymoon and then move towards a baby and epilogue. I do plan to skip ahead to the pre-wedding stuff next chapter so we're definitely in the home stretch. But please let me say, I truly appreciate all of you who are reading this story and an extra big thanks to those of you leaving me lovely, supportive comments. It's you guys who help my WIPs become completed works :)

And for those of you who read it, I do plan on updating Black Water very soon!


Chapter Summary

Mina is excited for Valentine's Day. Sansa and Jon meet Harry for dinner as Sansa battles early pregnancy issues. Theon and Rhae babysit the girls.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was not planned. I have an outline of sorts for the remainder of the story but Mina wanted a Valentine's chapter so here we are ;P

There's a minor Theon/Rhae scene in this one since I thought my minor couple might need to have a little talk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Valentine’s morning dawned soggy and grey but it did not dampen Mina’s spirits. She’d finished her Valentines and decorated her ‘mailbox’ for their class Valentine Exchange last night. One of Mommy’s old shoeboxes had been taped together and a mail slot had been cut into the top before it was wrapped in shiny red paper leftover from Christmas. Mina had made hearts, flowers and snowflakes out of construction paper to cover it.

Lyarra had used a brown paper take-out bag, stapled the top to make hers and then drawn cartoon characters all over it. It was okay, just not what Mina would’ve called pretty.

She looked forward to bringing her box home this afternoon hopefully stuffed full of cards and notes to share with Mommy like they did every year.

But first, Daddy would be picking her up from school today and taking her to get ice cream as a special Daddy/Daughter Valentine’s treat.

As Mina was braiding her hair, she wondered if Jon was going to do anything special for Lyarra. It would be sad if Lyarra didn’t get something special from her daddy today. Mina also felt a jealous little tingle at the thought that Jon might give Lyarra something special and not her.

She needn’t have worried. Sitting on the table waiting for her along with breakfast were flowers galore.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Jon said as she hugged him.

She knew the vase full of red roses was for Mommy but the two smaller vases with one pretty pink rose and baby’s breath in them could only be for her and Lyarra, right?

“Good morning! Thank you for my flower! I made you a card.”
She rushed back to her room to fetch it and enjoyed the happy smile on his face when he read it. He kissed the top of her head and asked if she was okay with waffles for breakfast. She knew they’d be the toaster variety but didn’t care. There wasn’t time on a school day for the fancy waffles Mommy sometimes made.

“Yes, please. Where’s everyone else?”

“The dogs are in the backyard and I’ll need to bring them into the garage and wipe them down before we leave later since it’s such a mess out there. Lyarra is slow getting moving as usual and your mother’s getting dressed.”

As she was sitting down to eat, Lyarra shuffled in. She was usually a grump in the mornings except when they were playing soccer or there was a game on she wanted to watch but her eyes lit up at the flowers and waffles and she had made Jon a card, too.

Mommy was last to come in which was unusual. She looked very tired but Mina loved the soft way she sighed and said ‘Oh, Jon’ when she saw the roses. They kissed a bunch by the kitchen sink until they realized both girls were watching them and Jon went to get the dogs.

When he returned, he admitted he’d been sneaky and gone out late last night when everyone else was in bed to get the flowers from the shed where he’d hid them after purchasing them when he ran to get milk after work yesterday. He said he’d had to wait for Mommy to fall asleep and made the dogs promise to leave their flowers alone all night.

“That would’ve been funny if they’d eaten them, Dad,” Lyarra snorted.

“No, it wouldn’t!” Mina cried. It would’ve been awful if Jon’s sweet surprise had been spoiled and if the dogs had barfed all over the kitchen.

When Mommy started to sit down, she took one look at the waffles Jon put on her plate and shook her head very slightly. “I’m going to just have a little coffee to start with, okay?”

“Oh, Jon” she sighed and said ‘Oh, Jon’ when she saw the roses. They kissed a bunch by the kitchen sink until they realized both girls were watching them and Jon went to get the dogs.

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“Yes, please. Where’s everyone else?”

“The dogs are in the backyard and I’ll need to bring them into the garage and wipe them down before we leave later since it’s such a mess out there. Lyarra is slow getting moving as usual and your mother’s getting dressed.”

As she was sitting down to eat, Lyarra shuffled in. She was usually a grump in the mornings except when they were playing soccer or there was a game on she wanted to watch but her eyes lit up at the flowers and waffles and she had made Jon a card, too.

Mommy was last to come in which was unusual. She looked very tired but Mina loved the soft way she sighed and said ‘Oh, Jon’ when she saw the roses. They kissed a bunch by the kitchen sink until they realized both girls were watching them and Jon went to get the dogs.

When he returned, he admitted he’d been sneaky and gone out late last night when everyone else was in bed to get the flowers from the shed where he’d hid them after purchasing them when he ran to get milk after work yesterday. He said he’d had to wait for Mommy to fall asleep and made the dogs promise to leave their flowers alone all night.

“Of course, love,” he said, kissing her cheek and removing the waffles from in front of her.

“Hey…if you don’t want them, I do,” Lyarra said.

Mina scowled at her sister. Mommy was going to be hungry if she didn’t eat. She might change her mind and eat them. But when Mommy mentioned fruit and cereal, Mina decided that waffles were waffles.

“I’ll split them with you, Lyarra!”

After lunch, the Valentine’s Exchange was in full swing and Mina was enjoying going around to every classmates’ mailbox to slip their special card inside. Most kids had chosen to give the little cards with popular characters on them or the ones that were basically a piece of candy with a place you could write to and from on. But Mina had decided to make everyone a cut-out snowflake with a message glued on it. She’d had Mommy help her look up patterns online because she wanted each one to be different just like real snowflakes.

Lyarra had watched her cutting and gluing long after she’d finished her soccer themed ones with a lollipop attached and asked if Valentine’s Day was her favorite holiday.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think it’s probably more exciting if you’ve got a boyfriend. I think I like
“Christmas best and then maybe Halloween...so long as there's nothing too scary. What about you?”

“Same. I like chocolate and the card exchange is fun but never thought much about it. Why snowflakes?”

“I just like them,” she’d blushed. It was true but also a bit of a fib. Last year, she’d made hearts which was simple enough but Mommy was marrying Jon Snow next month and for some reason that made snowflakes seem romantic to Mina.

“Hey, Mina.”

“Hi, Parker.”

“I’ve got your Valentine’s.”

“Oh...I’ve got yours too.”

They were technically just supposed to drop it in their classmates mailboxes but there wasn’t any harm in handing one to a friend, right?

“Wow! What a cool snowflake! Thanks, Mina!”

Goodness, that made her face all hot. One of the other boys in class had flipped it over and asked where the candy was.

Parker’s cheeks were turning as red as hers felt. “Do you like Snoopy?”

“Sure, I do.”

“Good. Here you go!” He thrust the little card in her hand hurriedly and said, “See you at recess!” before darting off again.

Mina pealed open the little red rose sticker he’d used to seal the card. It was one of the themed cards like most kids brought. But this one was from those Peanuts comics that Grandpa would sometimes read with her. Snoopy was her favorite but the beagle wasn’t on this card. Instead, it was Charlie Brown holding out a piece of paper with a heart drawn on it to the Little Red-Haired Girl.

Mina sighed dreamily. Oh, Parker.

February had blown in cold and snowy and then it’d been rainy the past week but this evening it was clear and the temperature was more moderate. Sansa had only needed a light jacket as she and Jon headed out to meet Harry for dinner.

They’d made an agreement to meet every other month for a meal, just the three of them, to talk about any concerns or issues regarding Mina. Partly, Jon and Sansa had viewed it as a way to check in with Harry and make sure he was still keeping the train on the rails. Thankfully, he appeared to be doing well with his new job and maintaining his sobriety.

Before Jon had come into her life, Sansa and Harry had met more often than that to talk about their
daughter (when Harry wasn’t rescheduling on her) but those talks had never been as productive or civil as they were now. She could almost say she looked forward to them…almost.

Valentine’s had just passed a couple of days ago and by the looks of the waiting area of tonight’s chosen restaurant, plenty of couples had decided to save their dinner date plans for the weekend.

As Jon went to the check-in podium to see if Harry had already arrived, Sansa simultaneously caught a whiff of some lady’s strong perfume and the restaurant’s signature deep-fried onion appetizer and nearly gagged. She’d not suffered any actual vomiting but a miserable round of nausea was never far away and it was mostly brought on by smells. Unfortunately, she never knew what smells would trigger it. She normally found Jon’s cologne a turn-on but the past week she’d been darting out of the bathroom the moment he started applying it till he’d caught on.

“I’ll get past this,” she’d protested when he’d tucked the bottle into the medicine cabinet.

“And, until you do, I’ll go without it. I’d rather my wife not feel ill when I try and hold her.”

“You’re wife?” she’d smiled, loving the sound of that.

“Yeah, my wife.” He’d kissed her forehead. “Thirty-eight days. Close enough.”

She’d had a preliminary OB visit yesterday which she and Jon had managed to sneak off from work for a couple of hours so they could go to together. Brienne was the only person who knew they weren’t actually meeting with the wedding photographer again. They hadn’t told anyone else, having agreed to wait until she made it through the first trimester at least, but Brienne was the soul of discretion and, if something did go wrong, she was their boss and it’d simplify matters.

Sansa did wonder if her mother already suspected. She’d been eyeing her rather closely at dinner the other night when the four of them had joined Robb, Margaery, Baby Ned and her parents for pot roast.

But Mina and Lyarra were eight and it would be wiser not to share the news too early. They deserved to be told around the same time as the others especially as it was their day to day lives that would be the most greatly impacted by it after hers and Jon’s. And despite their apparent acceptance of a hypothetical new sibling when it’d been discussed last month, Jon and Sansa both knew they’d have lots of questions and concerns and neither of them expected the girls to keep the news a secret. David and Lyanna would be arriving in about a month to spend the week with them before the wedding and Sansa had thought that might be a good time to spread their joy with the family.

But for now, outside of Brienne, it was their sweet secret.

She’d experienced so much anxiety those first few weeks after she’d learned she was pregnant with Mina. Would she keep it? Could she do this? Would she be able to stay in school? How was she going to feed herself and the baby? What if Harry broke up with her? What if her parents disowned her?

She’d feared telling Harry. Then, she’d feared telling their parents. Then, it had been her friends. Most had been supportive but not all. A few girls had even outright told her she was nuts to keep the baby. She was surprised she’d not gone grey by nineteen.

Things were very different this time around. Now, she wasn’t a frightened pregnant teenager. She was an adult and already a mother. And this time, the baby’s father was Jon.

He would lie beside her in the mornings before it was time to rise and shine, gently caressing her still flat tummy and whispering sweet little things that made her heart glow. Granted, sometimes he’d
proceed to move a hand to her breasts or squeeze her ass and ask if she was interested, not that she was complaining.

And yesterday, they’d heard their baby’s heartbeat during the OB visit and both been understandably elated and emotional over it. She was 9 weeks now and according to the book she was reading at night, their baby was currently the size of a green olive.

Ewww…olives.

She used to like olives.

*Let’s hope I don’t vomit in front of Harry tonight.*

She snickered at the thought. Harry probably wouldn’t suspect a damn thing even if she did. He’d been so floored when she’d told his she was pregnant with Mina as if it had never occurred to him that sex could lead to such a thing. *Well, we were both kids, I guess.*

“You alright, love?” Jon asked when he returned.

“Yes. Just a passing qualm. It’s gone now.”

He kissed her hand. “Harry’s not arrived yet but it’ll be about 20 minutes till we’re seated.”

“Okay.”

Harry arrived soon after like a man on a mission. They’d barely exchanged ‘hellos’ when he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket.

“Hey, Sans…who the hell is Parker Stevens?”

“He’s a boy in Mina’s class,” she frowned. There hadn’t been any problems between the children since earlier in the school year. She hoped he’d not started teasing Mina again.

“Well, take a look at this.”

Sansa accepted the notebook paper and recognized her daughter’s hand writing at once.

*Mina Stevens*

*Minisa Shella Stevens*

*Mrs. Minisa Stevens*

*Mr. and Mrs. Parker Stevens*

*Mina Hardyng Stevens*

There were at least a dozen different versions all accented with hearts and flowers…and snowflakes.

“Oooh,” Sansa sighed. “That’s so cute.”

“Cute?!“

“Cute? What the fuck?” Jon echoed when he saw it.

“Thank you!”
“Guys,” she said, rolling her eyes. “She’s got a crush is all.”

“She’s eight!”

“Harry, this isn’t her first crush. Remember Tom last year?”

“Oh, yeah. That kid who gave her the butterfly necklace. I remember him.”

His eyes were literally narrowed like Clint Eastwood’s in ‘Dirty Harry’ or something. So were Jon’s for that matter. *Men.*

“He was a perfectly sweet boy, Harry.”

“What can you tell me about this Parker kid, Jon?”

“Well, he’s…”

“Where’d you get this?” Sansa interrupted before the two of them could start putting together a dossier on poor Parker.

“She left it in my car by mistake when I picked her up Thursday for ice cream.”

“Uh huh.”

“Aren’t you even remotely concerned about this?!”

“No.”

“Jon?” Harry said, appealing to a kindred spirit for support.

But Jon was much too wise to view Mina’s crush as earth-shattering news. Or at least he had enough sense to see that freaking out about it wasn’t going to get him anywhere…and wouldn’t be appreciated by his fiancée either.

“Oh, look!” Jon said, holding up the coaster/pager thingy the hostess had given him which was now flashing. “Our table’s ready.”

Lyarra stretched out on Aunt Rhae’s sofa and patted her belly. McNuggets, two scoops of ice cream and then popcorn, a perfect meal. She glanced over at Mina who was still nibbling on her popcorn and wide-eyed as Harry flew Buckbeak over the grounds of Hogwarts. She couldn’t believe they were getting to watch it. Dad sometimes let her watch PG movies but she may have fibbed a little when she told Theon they’d already seen the movie.

Uncle Theon came back out of the kitchen where he and Aunt Rhae had been really slow cleaning up considering they’d not cooked anything. Unless popcorn counts.

“Whoa! Are we at this part already?” Theon asked as he reached into Mina’s bowl for some popcorn and sat down. “I meant to sit in here and watch with you girls. Anything scare you yet?”
“No!” they both yelped. The Dementor on the train had been scary but they didn’t want to admit it and have Theon turn the movie off.

Mina had kind of gasped when Hermoine grabbed Ron’s hand before Harry flew Buckbeak but there wasn’t anything scary about that. It was just odd.

Uncle Theon was always a lot of fun to hang out with so Lyarra thought it was neat that him and Aunt Rhae had both offered to watch them tonight while Mom and Dad had dinner with Mina’s dad. Of course, she’d caught them kissing a time or two and holding hands but she’d politely reframed from telling them it was gross or anything.

“Hey, Uncle Theon? Did you know Grams is coming to visit next month?”

“Sure do, Squirt. She wouldn’t miss your dad’s big day.”

“Her and David and going to stay with us while Mom and Dad are gone for the first part of their honeymoon.”

“I know, kiddo.”

“Uncle Theon?” Mina asked next, “When do you think you’re going to get married?”

Poor Uncle Theon’s eyes bulged and then he choked on a piece of popcorn. Lyarra stood up to start whacking him on the back.

“I’m, uh…not…sure,” he managed to gasp. “I’ve not…”

“But you’re dating Aunt Rhae. Don’t you think you’d like being married to her?”

“Uh…did you girls know I’m going to be your assistant coach this season?”

“What?!” This was brand new information! “For real?” Lyarra shouted.

“For real. I’ll be an official volunteer and everything. With the wedding and honeymoon, your dad was going to miss some practices and a game so he asked me if I would.”

“That’s awesome!”

“Yeah, that’s great, Uncle Theon,” Mina added.

And after that, Aunt Rhae walked in and frowned at the three of them.

“They can’t watch this one, Theon.”

“But they said they’d…” Lyarra sunk down in her corner of the couch as Uncle Theon gave her a mad look. “Somebody owes me a little restitution out of the Swear Jar for lying, I think.”

“Sorry,” she said meekly.

But Uncle Theon forgave her of course and Mina suggested they watch something romantic instead. Aunt Rhae put on ‘Cinderella,’ the live-action one with the dreamy-looking prince, and Mina didn’t ask any more questions about getting married and Lyarra had already forgotten about it.
Rhæ had her hands in his hair and her tongue was teasing his earlobe. It wasn’t easy to think straight when she was doing that. She was already down to her underwear and he had lost his shirt. They were in her bedroom and, after a night of entertaining eight-year-olds, Theon had to admit he was looking forward to some more adult activities.

But still…

“Hey, could we…” He moved her hands and gave her a quick peck on the lips to get her attention. “Can we stop for a sec and talk?”

“You want to talk now?” she smirked. She started to unhook her bra.

“Not really,” he gulped. But he did. “Actually, yes really. Can we?”

Rhæ’s brows knitted together and she sat down on the edge of the bed. “Sure,” she said hesitantly. Theon started pacing. This was not a talk he’d had with any woman before and he was afraid he’d fuck it up. “So, tonight was fun,” he started off with. *Yeah, that was lame.*

“It was.”

“Kids are a handful though, huh?”

“They can be.”

“I mean, the girls are great and I love them but…well, we get to send them back to Jon and Sansa, right?”

“Right.”

“But they’re good and…good.” *Holy shit, you’re an idiot.*

There was a look of trepidation in those dark eyes of her. Theon’s heart was fluttering like mad. And since when does your heart flutter, dumbass?

*Since her.*

“Rhæ…where do you see us in a year?” Her mouth fell open and she looked…well, he couldn’t interpret the look. It wasn’t a good look. “Theon, are you…didn’t we have the ‘what are we?’ conversation already?”

“Well, yeah but that was a few months ago. This is the ‘where are we going?’ conversation, I guess. Is that a thing? This is all kind of new to me.”

“As in long term?” He nodded and suddenly Rhæ’s face look relieved. “I started to worry that this was your weird way of breaking up with me.” And now, she looked like she might cry. *Shit. You suck, Greyjoy!* “What?! What made you think that?”

“I don’t know. You just…kind of sprung this on me and…I know that you were kind of a serial dater before.”
More like a serial one-night stander. Looking back, he couldn’t believe he’d ever bragged about that. Sex with someone you didn’t care about was just…sex. It wasn’t anything like what he had with Rhae.

He sat down beside her and cupped her face. “No, darling. That’s not it at all. It’s you and me just like we said and I don’t want anyone else, okay?” She nodded and let him kiss her. “But tonight, Mina asked me when I thought I might get married and it sort of got me thinking.”

“Mina asked?” she laughed. “Mina’s eight, Theon.”

“True but…it’s not the first time I’ve thought about it.”

“Oh? Do you mean it’s not the first time you’ve ever thought about getting married or not the first time since we’ve been dating?”

“The second one.”

She sighed and put her forehead against his. “That’s really sweet. I love you and I’m really happy being with you.”

“I love you, too.”

“But…I’m not ready to get married.”

“Okay, I get that. But maybe someday you might be?”

“Maybe someday.”

“And maybe someday you might even consider marrying me?”

“Maybe,” she grinned. He gave her his best wounded puppy look. “If I was going to marry anybody, it’d probably be you, Greyjoy.”

“I’ll accept that response!”

“Good. Now, take you pants off.”

It was late by the time they’d got the girls home from Rhae’s and Sansa was exhausted. The early weeks of pregnancy were taking their toll on her no matter how much she claimed otherwise. Jon urged her to go on to bed while the girls were brushing teeth and getting in their pajamas. They were both hyped up from being with Rhae and Theon and settling them would take a bit.

They’d all been invited to attend a fancy brunch the next day at Margaery’s grandmother’s house in honor of Little Ned since they were the nominal godparents of Olenna’s first great-grandchild. Jon wondered who’d be less enthused by the gourmet offerings, Lyarra or Sansa.

Well, there’ll probably be a waffle iron so Lyarra will be happy. And there might be salmon which could spell big trouble for Sansa.
Harry had ordered a seafood platter with crab cakes and a steamed lobster tail and, when the server had passed it under Sansa’s nose, she’d looked decidedly green about the gills and picked at her Cobb salad for the rest of the evening.

But, other than that and Harry’s revelation about Mina’s sudden interest in being Mrs. Minisa Stevens someday, the evening had gone well. There might always be a little lingering tension between them and Harry but at least they were doing their best to work together when it came to parenting Mina.

“He likes you,” Sansa had said on the way home.

“Harry?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry but I’m not interested,” he’d joked.

She’d laughed and batted his arm. “No, he…I’m glad he likes you, Jon. It makes things a lot smoother when you’re there. You’re like the glue.”

“Me?”

“Uh huh.”

“I’ve never been the glue before.”

“Well, you are when it comes to this.” He started chuckling. “Sorry, I don’t make the rules. That’s just your lot in life.”

“Considering that you’re so cordial…”

“Cordial?”

“Friendly and good at getting people to get along, I’ll accept being the glue in this instance with pride.”

“Good.”

Jon headed into Lyarra’s room first. His daughter was chatty for a solid five minutes over the news that there was snow in the forecast for next week and then was snoring before he’d finished reading even two full pages of ‘The Secret Garden.’

He went to Mina’s room next and she was propped up reading one of her American Girl books. She sometimes asked to be read to but more and more she preferred reading on her own. The teacher in him was happy she loved it so much.

“Time for lights out,” he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

She put her bookmark in place and he clicked off her lamp. The fairy lights would twinkle for her all night though and he was glad she enjoyed them. Typically, Mina asked for a song. Sansa had a beautiful voice and she was usually the designated singer but some nights it was Jon. He had nearly stopped cringing at himself when he sang for her.

“What song tonight?”

“Dad?”
She’d taken to calling him Dad when he tucked her in at night. Needless to say, he loved that. “Yeah, sweetheart?”

“When did you know you loved Mommy?”

He smiled, remembering the piece of notebook paper Harry had shown them tonight. “Maybe not our first date but not long afterwards.”

“Really? Is that how it usually goes?”

“Oh no, sweetheart. I don’t think you can say there’s anything usual about falling in love.” Her little brow furrowed. “Sometimes love can creep up on you over time and sometimes it hits you like a runaway train.”

“Oh. But how do you know if it’ll last?”

“You don’t. It’s a leap of faith but your mother and I love each other very much and I don’t believe for a second that anything is going to change that.”

“What if you’d met Mommy when you were eight though?”

“Oh, it never would’ve worked.”

“Why not?”

“I was afraid of girls when I was eight.”

She giggled. “Why?”

“Someone told me they had cooties.” She giggled harder. “Do you still want a song?”

“Yes, please.”

Once he crawled into bed, he put an arm around Sansa and snuggled close to hold his wife. Thirty-five days. Thirty-four if we go ahead and count from tomorrow.

“They asleep?” she murmured.

“They are. I love you.” He kissed her cheek and could feel her smile forming against his lips. “I love the future Mrs. Jon Snow.”

“Mrs. Sansa Stark Snow.”

“Sansa Minisa Snow.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Jon and Sansa Snow.”

“Music to my ears, love.”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you all for reading!
The girls stood with their heads together listening to the whooshing sounds coming from his phone yet again, their little faces scrunched up with scrutiny and skepticism.

“I think there’s something wrong with your phone, Dad. Maybe it needs another update.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my phone.”

“Are you sure you’re playing the right thing, Jon? That doesn’t sound like a heartbeat.”

Lyarra placed her head against his chest for a comparison. “Thump-thump, thump-thump. Yeah, that other thing doesn’t sound the same. Are you sure they had the thingy on the right part of Mom’s belly?”

Sansa was snickering behind him and, while he was getting mildly irritated at the little naysayers, he could find the humor in it as well. At least, they were taking this better than he’d expected.

“I assure you that’s the sound of the baby’s heart beating. It’s just beating much faster than mine.”

“Is that bad?” Lyarra asked worriedly.

“No, that’s normal for a fetus.”

“A what-us?”

“A baby that’s still in its mother’s womb, sweetie,” Sansa answered.

Eight days till the wedding and Sansa was twelve weeks and some odd days pregnant. His mother and David were flying in tomorrow and they’d decided it was time to share their news. And the first people they were sharing it with were their girls.

Since they’d figured such news might be more welcome if it was paired with something they liked, Sansa had picked up a late dinner after practice and the girls had been delighted with nuggets and milkshakes to guzzle down. Plus, they were planning to make a welcome sign for the airport so they had something they were looking forward to doing while they processed this development. Jon could live with glitter all over the kitchen table if it made them happy.

“When will the baby come?” Mina asked.

“September 20th is my due date but it could be a little before or a little after that,” Sansa said with her
hand resting low on her abdomen. He’d noticed her doing that on and off lately. He loved her doing that. Her diamond engagement ring winked at him under the kitchen light and soon there’d be a gold band to go with it. He couldn’t wait.

“Is it a boy or girl?”

“We won’t know till later.”

“I’m going to guess it’s a girl,” Lyarra announced.

“Oh, yes! A little sister!”

“Girls, it could be a boy,” Sansa cautioned.

Neither paid that any mind. “How big is she?”

“Well, according to my baby book, the baby is around the size of a lime this week.”

Both of them blinked in astonishment.

“A lime?!”

“That small?!”

“Yes.”

Both peered at her stomach as if they had x-ray vision. “Well, you’re still pretty skinny so I guess it would have to be little,” Lyarra said.

“Um…thank you?” Now, Jon was the one snickering as Sansa looked mildly vexed.

“Have you been feeling sick like Aunt Marg, Mommy?”

“No, baby. I’ve not been sick like Aunt Marg. I’m tired sometimes but it’s getting better.”

Indeed, it is, Jon thought with a smirk as he recalled last night. Sansa had a little unexpected burst of energy after her post-dinner nap once the girls were in bed. His knees were sore and the water bill would be high again but he could still hear her cries of pleasure echoing around the shower in his mind.

“See! You’ve not been sick like Aunt Marg and she had a boy! It’s a girl!”

“How’d the baby get in there anyway?” Mina asked, looking directly at him and wiping the smirk from Jon’s face.

“Uh…”

“Wait. If Aunt Marg was just pregnant, is it like something you can catch?” Lyarra asked next.

“I…”

Thankfully, Sansa was not easily thrown. And Margaery having been pregnant and given birth along with seeing their little cousin probably helped with some of the big questions but they knew there’d still be questions.

‘Ask, don’t tell’ is our motto. They’ll ask what they want to know and we’ll keep the answers simple
and age-appropriate but honest without bombarding them with too many details,” she’d told him the other night.

He’d nodded and quietly prayed she’d be with him when these questions came up. *Lucky me.*

“Those are some really good questions that we can discuss together,” Sansa said as she pulled out a couple of poster boards, markers, glitter and glue. “The simplest answer I can give is Jon and I love each other very much and we wanted to have a baby so we made one together which I get to carry in my womb until he or she is big enough to come out. As for Lyarra’s question—no, pregnancy is not contagious like a cold or the flu. It’s a very special thing though and we’re excited about it. Our family is growing just like when we adopted Lady and Ghost and you girls will be big sisters just like I am to Aunt Arya, Uncle Bran and Uncle Rickon and Aunt Rhae is to Dad.”

She said it positively and matter-of-factly. He was relieved to see the girls nodding happily with acceptance as they started selecting markers.

Sansa put her arms around the girls and gave them a conspiratorial wink. “But first, we’re going to tell Grams, David, Grandma and Grandpa Sunday night when we have them over to dinner but until then…this is top secret. Shall we come up with some special way to share the news with them?”

They both nodded excitedly and then followed it up with pinky swears.

*Yeah, they’re going to tell somebody as soon as possible.*

“In case of need, I’ve got a fresh handkerchief in my pocket, love,” David said as they disembarked.

“Why would I possibly need that?”

“No reason.” He was smirking. Damn him.

“You know how much I’ve looked forward to this. It’s a joyous occasion.”

“So’s a wedding and I packed extra for that.”

She pinched his arm, earning a chuckle. “Come on. Let’s get moving, old man.”

The airport was a nightmare just as they all were in Lyanna’s opinion. David usually moved fairly swiftly but his knees were stiff after the flight and he started lagging behind. The polite thing to do would be to wait for her husband. She couldn’t quite manage polite though because she spied two little girls racing towards them, holding a handmade poster covered in glitter and chattering excitedly before she could even hear them properly.

They were talking over one another, a veritable sea of words, as she scooped them into her arms, never wanting to let go. Lyarra had glitter on her nose and asked if she’d brought treats. Mina said they’d worked on the poster all last night and asked what color dress she was wearing to the wedding.

“Yes, I brought treats. What sort of Grams do you take me for? And, my dress is blue but a darker
blue than the ones you girls are wearing and not half as pretty. But, this is certainly the most perfect sign ever,” she declared as she wiped the glitter off Lyarra’s nose.

Then, she saw Jon standing back just a few paces and holding Sansa’s hand, smiling at her and melting her heart as he’d done a million times at least since the day he was born. The blasted tears were already forming.

“There they are then,” David said as he caught up. “The two loveliest young ladies anyone could hope to meet and they’re greeting this old man at the airport.”

The girls immediately started telling David all about the welcome poster they’d made as Lyanna went to embrace her son. Of course, he wasn’t a little boy anymore and it was him folding her up in his strong arms now.

“Hello, Mum.”

She couldn’t form a single coherent response so she gestured for Sansa to join them as those tears spilled down her cheeks.

Sansa was smiling at her and her own eyes were wet. They were clearly kindred spirits when it came to emotions. David could smirk all he pleased. She held them both close and would likely start sobbing if someone didn’t stop her.

“Grams? Dad’s not leaving or anything,” Lyarra said solemnly.

“Just wait till she gets ahold of you again,” Jon laughed.

“Yes, I’m going to spend the next two weeks clinging to the four of you.”

“That’ll be terribly awkward for the honeymoon, Mum.”

“Hush, you.” She finally relinquished her hold as David silently passed her the promised handkerchief and even held a second one out to Sansa. “I’ve missed you all so much.”

“We’ve missed you, too. Are you ready to get your luggage?”

“Yes. Let us pray it’s here and not on its way to Phoenix or something.”

The house had three bedrooms so her and David would be sharing Lyarra’s room and Lyarra would stay in Mina’s for the time being.

“I’m going to convert the office into a, um…spare bedroom eventually but haven’t yet,” he’d told her the other night on the phone.

“A spare bedroom? Oh, that sound nice,” she’d replied. “You never did use it, right?”

“Uh, no. It’s small and I mostly just let work stuff and my old computer sit in there. Sansa was using it for some of her crafting and such but…she’s, uh…she says she can do that elsewhere.”

A spare bedroom would come in handy and not because Lyanna had any plans to move in with her son. He had never been very good at concealing things from her but she’d let them share any news when they were ready. Be ready soon!

Jon carried Mina on his back and David had Lyarra on his as they exited the airport. Lyanna linked arms with Sansa as they chatted about the wedding and the bridal shower they were attending tomorrow. When she looked back over her shoulder, she saw Lyarra whispering in David’s ear and
him laughing heartily.

“What was so funny?” she asked her husband as they climbed into Jon’s SUV.

“Sorry, love. I cannot betray a confidence but I may have to nab one of those handkerchiefs from you when the trip is done.”

Her lemon chicken had gone over well which was a relief. Lyanna had been the perfect hostess in England and Sansa was anxious to not disappoint now that she and David were their guests. Tomorrow night, Jon was going to grill steaks when her parents came over and that would be when they shared the pregnancy news with them.

Sansa figured they’d all be happy about it but keeping the secret wasn’t easy. She felt like she was betraying Margaery in a way for not sharing with her early like she had with her. At least she could tell herself Margaery had her hands full with Little Ned.

Arya was her sister and always had her back. She was the most excellent aunt and she could definitely keep a secret but resisting the desire to share was easier considering Arya was busy with Friend Gendry (who was more than a friend) and they’d not been alone together the past month.

Even Bran who’d smirked at her the other night had her ready to spill thinking maybe he already knew somehow. He could be abnormally intuitive at times.

But her mother…that had been the hardest. She’d come so close to telling her the other day. She’d bet money her mother suspected. Of course, Jon wouldn’t have minded one bit if she had told but she’d said they’d tell the four of them together and she’d meant it.

Now, she was alone with her future mother-in-law.

*Just keep your lips sealed for another 24 hours.*

With the days growing longer, the girls were out back with the dogs after dinner as Sansa and Lyanna finished in the kitchen. Jon had set up a dart board in the garage since David was so partial to playing and she could hear them laughing occasionally through the door. It made her smile and Lyanna was smiling as well. She was glad Jon had a good relationship with his step-father considering what a disappointment his own father had been.

“Has he called back again?” she asked, passing a final pan to be dried and continuing their conversation.

“No, thank God.”

“I’m very sorry he bothered you.”

“I’m sorry for a lot of things when it comes to Rhaegar but you don’t need to be, my dear. And while David may come across as mild-mannered, he can be quite firm when it’s needed and I’m grateful for that.”

“I’m glad. I hope Rhaegar doesn’t…well, surely he won’t…”
“Crash your wedding?”

“Is that terrible of me to be fretting?”

“Not at all. It’s your special day and it would be shameful for anyone to purposely try and spoil it because of their own selfish reasons. After the way you told me he ambushed Jon at Rhae’s house, I can understand your concerns.” She finished her drying and laid down the towel before taking Sansa’s hand. “I don’t want you to worry. I’ve spoken to Rhae who talks to her mother quite regularly. I don’t think Elia will allow him out of the house next Saturday. And if Rhaegar thought David was ‘unhinged sounding’ over the phone, as he said, he’d better remember the times he’s been exposed to my wrath for I’ll make my husband seem like a dove in comparison if he so much as sets one foot in the vicinity of my son’s wedding.” Sansa laughed as Lyanna kissed her cheek. “You’re going to be a beautiful bride and Jon is going to have stars in his eyes when he sees you. I couldn’t be happier for you but I’ll likely bawl my eyes out. Don’t tell my husband I said as much.”

“I promise and I’ll struggle to stay dry-eyed as well. He makes me so happy, Lyanna. Thank you for raising such a lovely man.”

“Oh, dear…where’s those ruddy handkerchiefs again?”

And I want to shout out my news to you so much right now so we can have a proper happy cry!

Luckily, they were interrupted by Jon coming to fetch a couple of beers from the fridge.

“What are you two doing out there?” Lyanna asked, quickly wiping her eyes.

“Talking, playing darts.”

“We had a very long flight.”

“I’m not keeping him up against his will or anything. By the way, is David joking or does he truly press his socks?”

“Jon…”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that but I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone iron a pair of socks before.”

“That doesn’t surprise me considering I didn’t think you knew which end of one to use till you got your first teaching job.” She ruffled his hair and tsked. “Sansa, you said you’d see about him getting his haircut for the wedding.”

“I’m not five. I scheduled the appointment myself.”

“Did you now?”

“It’s Tuesday.” Jon answered his mother as he wrapped his arms around her. “I promised someone I wouldn’t get it cut too short,” he added with a salacious grin that had Sansa blushing.

She was rather fond of having those curls to grasp when he was busy making her come apart in the best possible way.

Sansa kissed him. It was chaste enough but she subtly nipped his bottom lip. “Don’t keep David waiting for his drink,” she chided as he eagerly leaned back in for another kiss. He groaned playfully before releasing her and heading back to the garage.
Lyanna was smirking at her when she turned back towards her and Sansa’s face was definitely on fire.

“So, about tomorrow…”

“Oh, yes. I’m looking forward to meeting some more of your family. And please, remind me again what your relationship is with the hostess of the shower.”

Sansa grimaced and wondered how best to describe Margaery’s grandmother.

Jon was peeling the label from his bottle, considering what David had shared. His step-father took another sip, seemingly content to watch the girls chasing the dogs through the backyard. They’d tired of darts and come out here a few minutes ago.

“I know Mum wants to move back here but do you?”

“Why not? I was transferred here fifteen years ago and wound up meeting your mother before I was transferred back. The pinnacle of my career if you ask me. My mum and dad are gone. I’ve got a sister but she’s got her own family. Your mum’s my girl and I want to make my girl happy, you know? Plus, I rather like being a grandfather and seems I’d get to do more of that here than there.”

That made him happy to hear, happy for his mother, happy for their kids and happy because he loved him. However, there was one part of it he wasn’t so sure about. “But, you’ve not told Mum about this?” David had always been such an open book. It just didn’t seem like him to keep something from his wife.

And who took forever to tell Sansa about the principal’s position in the fall?

Well, yeah but David’s older and wiser than me.

“It doesn’t feel right to be honest and I may wind up telling her. I may have to anyway since she’ll likely find it pretty odd me heading off on my own in a suit and tie while you two are on your honeymoon and the girls are still with us. But, you’ve got to put yourself in my shoes for a moment. I know how much your mum wants to move back but you also know how quick she gets her hopes up.”

“This is true.”

“I’d hate to disappoint her if it don’t go well. The day she spoke to Sansa for the very first time after your auto collision she said to me, ‘David, I think Jon’s met the one.’”

He couldn’t help grinning. “She was certainly right there.”

“She was telling people you’d get the principal’s position before you ever did, too.”

“Christ, tell me you’re joking.”

“She believes in you, Jon. She always has. A mother wants the best for her child and I understand
that. I’m proud of you as well. And, I love her positivity and confidence but for me…well, I’m 57, going to be 58 in a few months.”

“That shouldn’t matter.”

David chuckled with amusement, causing Jon to frown. “I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you. Maybe it shouldn’t matter but I’m not harboring any false hopes. There’ll be bright young minds vying for the position, bright young minds who don’t make as much or have as much to unlearn either. I was likely given the interview as a courtesy because I’ve been around so long but beyond that…” He shrugged.

“They’re going to the trouble to interview you knowing you’ve flown 4000 miles to be here. Surely, that’s something.”

“Maybe,” he said doubtfully. “Anyway, we’re comfortable but not rich. I could sell the house and move us back here but would we be feeling very pleased about it if six months from now I still don’t have a job? Your mother worked hard for many years. I’m old-fashioned enough to admit I like being the breadwinner and don’t want her to feel like she’s got to work again if she’d rather not.”

“I’m sure you’d find something even if this interview doesn’t pan out. And if you’re worried, I could talk to Sansa and maybe you could both…”

“Move into that nursery you’ll be needing in a few months?” David said slyly.

Jon’s jaw dropped before he started laughing. “Lyarra.”

“Don’t say anything. Poor girl was so upset when she realized she’d said too much.”

“I won’t. Did you tell Mum?”

“No, it’s your news to share. It won’t make leaving in two weeks any easier for her but she’s going to be ecstatic.”

He was sure of that as well. But now that he knew David was seriously considering moving them back to the States, he really wanted that to happen. He raised his bottle, encouraging David to do the same. “Here’s to your chances on the 26th then.”

David smiled as their bottles clinked together. “Here’s to you and Sansa and your children.”

David, Lyanna and the girls were already walking inside with her parents, Robb and Margaery. Jon had stopped though and was gazing up at the Tyrells’ enormous home.

“What is it?” she asked, tilting her head to the side and trying to interpret the look of reticence on his face. They’d been here for brunch a few weeks ago and he’d had the same look then.

“Just wondering how rich they are.”

“I don’t know. Rich.”
“It never bothered you?”

“That my best friend’s family is loaded? No. Does it bother you?”

“No, but…you know we didn’t have much when I was a kid.”

“I know.”

“Rhaegar’s got money but he didn’t when I was little. I can’t say it’s improved him any.”

“Money doesn’t buy happiness or make you a better person, that’s for certain.”

“Yes. It’s just that looking at a place like this makes me…I can never afford anything like this for you in my field, you know.”

“But, I don’t want this. Is this about David’s worries, honey?”

“Maybe a bit. I was just thinking about him calling her his girl and wanting to make her happy. You’re my girl. I want to give you everything.”

“You already do. Money is necessary but it has nothing to do with our love, Jon.” She stroked his beard and watched the corners of his mouth turn upward. “There’s that smile I adore. You and me, our girls, this baby…” She placed his hand over her belly. “This is all I could ever want.”

“I love you.”

He wrapped his other arm around her waist and pulled her close, making her breathless in a heartbeat with the searing look in his dark eyes. He leaned in and kissed her with that hungry passion that left her dizzy and clinging to him.

“Yikes! Has the honeymoon started?” a voice said from behind them.

“Rickon!”

“If I’m being forced to attend a wedding shower and dress up in a monkey suit next week, which is probably akin to purgatory for a young man my age in my opinion, can I at least be spared from watching you taste my sister’s tonsils until after you’ve said your ‘I do’s’ and I’ve had some cake, Jon?”

He was grinning of course and he had a large present tucked under his arm. She smoothed down her dress and ruffled her brother’s mop of auburn curls while Jon gave him the side-eye.

“Purgatory,” she laughed. “Let’s go in and put you out of your misery, you little shit.”

“Okay, but I’m steering clear of Margaery’s grandmother. She’s scary.”

“She is not scary…not too scary anyway.”

They entered the foyer where a dozen people were buzzing around. Obviously, they were all friends and family who were invited to the wedding but she was a bit overwhelmed to be greeted by so many at once. And if she was overwhelmed, she could tell Jon was by the way he tightened his grip on her hand. A majority of the guests were people she’d known for years which couldn’t be said for him. She drew a deep breath and put on her social smile.

Rickon deftly slipped away as their hostess came forward to greet them.
“Sansa, darling! Look at you! Why, you’re positively glowing!” She pulled her into a hug and didn’t quite manage to whisper when she asked, “Has he already put a bun in oven?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful if he has! Little Eddard needs a playmate and my grandsons are being terribly disappointing in regards to giving me more great-grandchildren. Plus, I’ve got a bet running with Margaery against some of the others and I like to win.”

“I’m…it’s, uh…” she stammered, too flummoxed to come up with a good reply. She’d known Olenna since she was twelve and nothing she said shocked her anymore but…well, she was a bit rattled. And, she was not sharing her news with Olenna Tyrell before her own mother.

“It’s good of you to host this for us, Olenna,” Jon said politely. “And I apologize for our delay in coming in but I was busy kissing my bride-to-be outside and I’ll flatter myself enough to say that maybe that’s the reason she’s glowing. Did you meet my mother and step-father yet?”

The diversion worked and Sansa smiled gratefully at Jon as Olenna started nattering about the caterers and such as she led them to her parlor.

Five more hours and my lips are still sealed.

Lyarra worried at the loose string on the hem of her jersey. It was good to be back in her comfy clothes after dressing up for that boring shower. Uncle Bran hadn’t been able to come and Uncle Robb was busy with the baby so it was a good thing Uncle Rickon, David and Grandpa Ned had been there to make it bearable.

“I thought showers were supposed to be a lady thing?” she’d whispered to them at one point.

“Exactly. Listen to the kid,” Uncle Rickon had whined which had made Grandpa Ned give him a look.

“Used to be, love, but it’s two people getting married after all and I’ll never say no to a slice of cake,” David had said with a wink. Grandpa Ned had laughed at that and they’d kept talking throughout the shower in their little corner which Lyarra had drifted back to as often as she could.

Dad did his best to be polite but she saw him yawning a time or two. She couldn’t understand how Mom could smile so much or thank each person so graciously over receiving yet another set of wine glasses, bookends, candles or tea towels. Not all the gifts were boring but most of them sure were. And we’ve already got a lot of this stuff! Couldn’t someone give us something useful…like a bigger goal for the backyard or movie passes?

Lyarra had wanted to please Mom so she did her best to smile at everyone…even the annoying grownups she didn’t know who wanted to pat her on the head or pinch her cheek. So weird.

According to Mina, it was all part of being a lady. She envied Mina a bit. She liked dressing up and seemed to have no problem with the pinching of cheeks. She’d even said all the candles smelled
‘delightful’ when Lyarra thought half of them stunk. *Ugh. Maybe I’ll never be like them.*

She didn’t know what her real mother had been like when it came to this stuff and she wasn’t sure how to ask Dad without it sounding like she was saying something bad about Mom. She’d never say anything bad about Sansa. She loved her too much.

But it turned out there’d been another lady present who wasn’t all that fond of candles and such. She’d realized Aunt Arya had caught her swiping a bit of Uncle Rickon’s icing when he wasn’t looking and wondered if she was in trouble. But Aunt Arya had snorted and then crooked her finger, beckoning her out of the room to join her in Mrs. Tyrell’s enormous kitchen where they’d proceeded to raid the leftover sweets trays. The caterers had encouraged them in it and Mina had come, too. She’d quickly agreed it was more fun than sniffing candles. So, all in all, the day hadn’t been that bad.

And apparently, being a lady could get tiring because Mom had been holding her head and mentioned wanting a nap to Dad by the time they’d finally left.

Dad had started up the grill and asked them to help Grams make the salad after they got home while Mom went to lie down. Grandpa and Grandma were coming over and Uncle Rickon had begged an invite when he’d heard there’d be steak.

Once the salad was made, the girls had headed to the bedroom to finish getting ready for their company. Lyarra was enjoying staying in Mina’s room. It was nice if she woke up from a bad dream and knew someone was there with her. But she sort of wanted to have a little break from talking about the baby so much. It was like Mina couldn’t stop talking about her when they were alone. Maybe that was her way of dealing with keeping the secret.

For herself, she wasn’t having any trouble. *Not after I blew it anyway.*

She hadn’t meant to tell David. It just sort of slipped out. He’d crossed his heart and promised not to tell when she realized what she’d done but she still felt awful after she’d pinky-sworn not to.

But she was really glad David and Grams were here. She’d missed them a ton. He was like her grandfather even if she called him David and, while he wasn’t Dad’s real father, she liked him better. She’d not seen Rhaegar in months now anyway and couldn’t say she missed him. She wondered if she was supposed to feel bad about it. She didn’t. Grandpa Ned and David were plenty enough grandpas for any girl.

“I can’t wait to tell them!” Mina squealed as she pulled out the poster they’d made the other night for the big announcement.

Lyarra grinned. She couldn’t wait to tell them either. She hoped they’d be excited. There were times she wasn’t completely sure how she felt about a new baby but overall she was happy. Plus, Dad had said she wouldn’t have to give up her room so it’d work out. She did like the idea of being a big sister. She wondered if baby showers were more exciting than wedding showers. *I mean, the big sisters should get a little something too, right?*

The doorbell rang and she raced down the hall to answer it, greeting the guests as Lady and Ghost barked excitedly. Grams was in the kitchen calling out that Mom was lying down for a minute and Dad was grilling so they all headed in there with Mina coming in soon after. Grandpa told Uncle Rickon to go put Grandma’s jacket up as Mom got up and started frantically apologizing for taking a nap.

“It’s fine, darling,” Grandma Cat said sweetly. She brushed the hair back from Mom’s brow. “As
long as you’re feeling alright. We didn’t have to come over if…”

“No, Mom. I’m fine, I promise.”

Dad came in smelling like the grill and promising that dinner would be ready soon. Mina was bouncing on the balls of her feet. They’d said they could tell them as soon as everyone sat down to dinner. Maybe they should go fetch the poster from their room.

But just then, Uncle Rickon walked back in holding the neon pink poster board and scowling. “What is this, girls?”

“What are you doing with that, Rickon?!” Mom shrieked.

“I was putting Mom’s jacket in Mina’s room. The wedding date’s March 23rd. Why does this say September 20th?” He brushed off a bit of glitter and held it up, trying to read Mina’s best attempt at cursive writing. “‘Baby Snow is coming?’ What does mean any—oh, shit.”

“Swear jar,” Lyarra said out of habit.

“Uncle Rickon! You ruined it!” Mina cried and stamped her foot.

But Lyarra wouldn’t necessarily say he’d really ruined anything. Grandma Cat and Grams both shouted and then started crying. They swamped poor Mom and Dad with hugs. She was pretty sure those were happy tears.

Grandpa Ned was looking as baffled as Uncle Rickon had a second ago before his head started whipping back and forth between Mom and Dad. He started to break into a smile but David was already having a hearty laugh. He winked at Lyarra and soon she was laughing, too. At least, she hadn’t managed to spoil the surprise for anyone else.

Chapter End Notes

Couple of things—

Yes, September 20th is GRRM’s birthday for you trivia buffs but I swear that was not intentional. I looked up the day I figured she might’ve started her last period in the story and went from there. But I am sort of tickled that it worked out that way. Not for George but because it’s a lovely lady's b-day who’s been a good friend and so supportive as we wade through our love of Jonsa together :D

When I conceived this story, it wasn’t nearly so long as this. It's really grown on me and the characters with it. David has become a more significant character instead of just Lyanna's husband who swept her off to England. As the story started to expand, I deliberated about choosing a canon character to take his place but honestly...none of them fit him quite so well for me. I wanted someone without canon baggage who readers wouldn't have preconceived opinions of. Just like for the girls and their childhood friends, he's a OC but I'm quite happy with that :)

Will we see the wedding next chapter or will I throw a rando chapter in between of pre-wedding stuff like stag night and rehearsal dinners?? Who can say?! Let's find out
together...lol. But, thanks to all of you who are sticking with this long-ass story. I appreciate every one of you!
Chapter Summary

As zero hour approaches, Sansa freaks out but Jon is a sweetheart. Later, she's out with friends but not at all sure that she wants to be (the drawbacks of being a people-pleaser.)

Jon receives an upsetting letter right before he heads out for his stag night with Theon. And the morning before the wedding, Lyarra has concerns to share with her father.

Chapter Notes

This one took me a while to get it where I was (mostly) satisfied with it. A nerdy part of me was enjoying the timeline of the story matching up with actual time there for a bit. I should've known I'd fall behind at some point. BUT...the story may be done before Sansa's due date in the story hits *fingers crossed*

Planning even a relatively small wedding is no joke. To be fair, Jon had argued that he couldn’t possibly consider any gathering with over sixty guests as small.

“Even the wedding party is huge.”

“It isn’t really.”

“Theon, David and Robb flanking me with Margaery, Arya and Rhae behind you. It’s like we’re meeting for arms negotiations and bringing a retinue of courtiers along.”

“Oh, don’t say arms negotiations. This is a peaceful meeting.”

“A peace treaty then except we’ve got Rickon and Bran as our appointed bouncers.”

“Ushers,” she’d laughed.

“Then, the girls and the minister. We’ll just let your dad stay up there with us for the vows and make it a dozen people...just at the altar!”

“I know. Margaery had nine bridesmaids in addition to me in her wedding. There were 300 guests invited.”

“Holy fuck.”

“Her grandmother wanted her to have a dozen but Robb said he didn’t have enough friends he’d feel comfortable asking.”
Sansa had sweetly patted his hand and then continued to call it a small wedding. It was less intimidating if she thought of it that way.

Admittedly, their simple ceremony at a local vineyard had morphed from an intimate affair into a full-fledged event.

And as zero hour approached, things had only grown considerably more harried. At least, it seemed that way to the bride-to-be.

A problem with the venue’s sprinkler system had them scrambling for another back-up location for the reception on Monday only to be told Tuesday that everything had been repaired and it ‘should be’ dry come Saturday. Other unforeseen tribulations such as flower girl’s shoes which had fit perfectly at the shop but now pinched unforgivably and thus had to be replaced had cropped up here and there to add to anxiety and compound a growing case of the jitters. Not serious jitters, for she had no doubts about the man she was marrying, just jitters over the event itself.

So, when the photographer called to bail on them Thursday evening due to a falling out with his business partner and girlfriend, the perfect storm of stress along with Sansa’s already heightened hormonal state had formed leading Jon to find his future wife sobbing at the kitchen table amongst the thank-you notes she was trying to get a jump start on while the girls were mercifully out back with David, Lyanna and the dogs.

“Put those away this instant,” he chided gently. “No thanking anyone for candle sticks and tea towels till the honeymoon is over…three months from now at least.”

“Why would anyone put themselves through all this? Are we crazy?” she whispered after her tears had subsided.

“Crazy in love maybe.” He swept the remnants of her tears away and kissed her brow. “We’re not crazy. There’s not many certainties in life but I know I love you, I know you love me and we love our girls.”

“I wasn’t questioning that.”

“I know.”

“We could’ve just eloped like you suggested months ago.”

“I was joking when I said that.” She smirked at him. “I was mostly joking when I said that.” He took her hand in his and kissed it. It was reassuring to know that could still give her butterflies. “But this is it, isn’t it? I’ve never been married before and neither have you. This is us, coming together to form a union, a partnership, a marriage in front of God and everybody till death do us part and all that jazz.” The butterflies increased their fluttering. “Our girls and our families are excited to be part of it and you’ve worked so hard to plan this.”

“You’ve helped.”

“I’ve tried.”

“You’ve done more than try.”

“I wanted to be part of the planning, too. It matters to me, too.”
“You would’ve been content if I’d said, ‘let’s run down to the courthouse and get hitched.’”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I would’ve but only if it was what you’d wanted, too.”

“Jon, I…” she said, feeling downcast again.

“No, don’t do that. We agreed to a ceremony with family and friends surrounding us months and months ago. T-minus 41 hours and counting. We’re nearly there.”

“The final countdown, huh?”

“I should’ve put that song on the DJ’s playlist!” he said, snapping his fingers.

“Oh, my God.”

“No, no, think of it, love. Flowers and music, your father walking you down the aisle and my mum bawling her eyes out as Mina places every rose petal precisely 18 inches apart while Lyarra dumps the entire contents of her basket three feet down the aisle.”

She grinned at the thought. “Don’t forget the reception with the ginormous lemon-flavored wedding cake.”

“I’d never forget your ginormous lemon-flavored wedding cake.”

“And your chocolate groom’s cake made to look like a soccer ball.”

“The gold standard in tasteful groom’s cakes if you ask me. What could be more perfect really?”

She laughed. “And dancing.”

“Dancing,” he agreed before he pulled her to her feet and twirled her across the kitchen floor making her laugh harder. “I think that’s wonderful. It’s a memory we won’t forget. It’s something our girls won’t forget.”

“But the photographer…”

“I solemnly swear to make it my mission in life to find us a replacement before Saturday.”

“You will?”

“On my oath, my lady.”

“You’re a dork.”

“I’m your dork.” His expression grew serious as he put his hands on her hips. “Now, I want you to accept that it’s probably not all going to go absolutely perfect. Can you?” She nodded. “But what matters is that at the end of the day, we’ll be married, right?”

“You’re right. It’s just…the wedding.”

“I love the way you say it in the same tone one might say bubonic plague.” She giggled and he pulled her closer. “I suppose that works if you consider that ‘in sickness and in health’ business. Even the plague won’t stop me from marrying you. Won’t you say you’ll marry me, Sansa Stark?”

He was a dork, an irresistible one. “Alright, Jon Snow. I’ll marry you. Meet me on Saturday at one o’clock. I’ll be the one in a veil.”
“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Her minor meltdown had faded away like magic then as he’d held her for approximately three and half minutes. Three and half blissful minutes…until Lyarra had burst in asking for a popsicle and Mina had followed to report that Lady had just barfed in the living room.

Deciding she may as well start saving up time off for her maternity leave in the fall, Sansa had chosen to work four out of the five days leading up to it. It was nice having the wedding coincide with Spring Break since they’d be off for their honeymoon already but now she wished she would’ve taken this week as well. With two kids, two dogs and two houseguests (she loved them but still…houseguests) at home on top of being pregnant, her energy was often sapped by 7PM and it was cutting into her already precious time to unwind at night with Jon.

Having more leave-time accrued, Jon had taken this week off to spend with his mother and David and see to his own wedding and house-related chores. Admittedly, he’d offered several times to take on other tasks for her but she didn’t wish to take him away from Lyanna or be burdensome.

“Burdensome? I think the word you’re looking for is stubborn.”

He’d had a pillow chucked at him for that which had prompted some laughter but deep down she knew he was right.

At night in their bedroom, Jon was eager to have his fiancée to himself but poor Sansa was usually snoring within five minutes of lying down. Other than sleeping, she couldn’t remember the last time they’d been together for more than ten minutes without someone else being present.

And we won’t even have that tonight, she thought with a sigh which might dissolve into a sob if she wasn’t careful.

Of all the ridiculousness, she’d allowed Megga’s prattle yesterday about wedding day superstitions to get to her and she’d suggested he spend the night before the wedding at Theon’s.

“It’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding and all,” she’d repeated like a ninny.

“If that’s what you want, love. It’s not like I’ve never crashed on Theon’s sofa before…back in college.” He’d muttered out that last part, not quite concealing his reluctance. She wished she’d just told him to forget she’d said anything now.

Nevertheless, here she was, less than 24 hours away from becoming a married woman. All the wedding-related irritants, great and small, would soon be part of her past and the new Mr. and Mrs. Jon Snow would be heading off for four glorious days alone together at Uncle Benjen’s cabin with no responsibilities to call them from their bed until the girls joined them later next week.

I hope he’s not offended if I spend the first twelve hours sleeping.

Sansa stifled a yawn and sipped her ginger ale and wondered how she’d ended up here tonight as Shae called for another round. She hadn’t particularly wanted a bachelorette party anyway. She’d already had the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner tonight which she’d barely had two seconds to really focus on Jon throughout it with everyone moving around and asking her this and that. She’d be rising early to start her wedding preparations, too.

Originally, Margaery had suggested a trip to Adventure Station for a friendly round of Dance, Dance Revolution with Arya and Rhae which had sounded fun. Unfortunately, that plan had fallen through when Little Neddie had come down with his first bout of the sniffles after the wedding shower last
Margaery and Robb as new parents had been freaked out to put it mildly. With a shocking lack of tact, they’d interrogated everyone who’d been present at the shower to determine who precisely had infected their darling child with their ill-timed sneeze or improperly washed hands. Never mind that Robb had been sneezing his head off a few days prior.

“That was just my hay fever kicking up!”

Recalling what it was like to be a new parent with a sick infant though, Sansa had cut them some slack when they’d methodically recounted their list of likely suspects carriers to her and Jon during dinner at her parents’ house the night before last when Margaery had begged off for tonight.

At the time, Sansa had been too distracted by her mother’s clipped words and her father’s stony expression to consider that the foiled girls’ night plans might be just as well. Catelyn Stark had kissed her grandson’s brow, declared he did not appear to be feverish (which he wasn’t) and said that it was likely ‘just a cold’ causing her first born to patronizingly point out his mother’s lack of a medical degree.

Jon, Lyanna and David had started studying their plates as her father had glared at his son. The other four Stark children had sat at the table with their mouths agape as they waited with relish to see the Perfect First Born receive his expected tongue lashing. But her mother had pursed her lips and said little else. She had seemed more than a little smug though the following day when they’d learned Neddie’s pediatrician had diagnosed the infant with a mild viral infection. The new parents had been incensed by the use of the word ‘mild’ but Robb had been forced to concede his mother had been right.

“And she’ll never let me live it down, you know.”

“Oh, big brother…if she ever starts to, I’ll be sure and remind her of it.”

As for her current predicament tonight though, Sansa only had herself to blame.

After Margaery had bowed out, Sansa had told Rhae and Arya she’d use the night to take care of some other matters and they could always enjoy a girls’ night together some other time.

But then, she’d gone and opened her mouth about it at work yesterday.

Megga, Shae and Randa had declared it would be a great travesty for her final night as a single lady to be spent at home. They’d roped Brienne in as their unwilling accomplice to take her out so she could ‘live it up.’

After the week I’ve had, my current idea of living it up would be a large bowl of mint chocolate chip on the sofa as I watch some fluffy romantic comedy once the girls go to bed with Jon massaging my feet.

She couldn’t bear to break it to them though as they’d become increasingly excited at the prospect of going out. Truly, she loved her co-workers and her boss. Shae could be taciturn at times, Megga was a gossip and Randa had her moments but she was nearly a year on the job now. They were all very supportive of her and Jon’s relationship and had formed a friendship of their own with her for which she was grateful.

There was nothing wrong with drinks at Sapphire which had been Megga’s suggestion. Even though I can’t drink at the moment. There was music and people watching to do and they’d been sharing some laughs. It was fun at first but, as the night drug on and as more men began to drift by with
offers to buy drinks or dance, Sansa was ready to go home.

She couldn’t seem to forget the first and only time she’d been here before either, the night she’d come with Jon last spring.

She’d wanted to go dancing and he’d agreed even though he’d admitted it wasn’t his scene. She’d quickly decided it wasn’t really her scene either after Joffrey had shown up and been rude. She’d asked Jon to take her elsewhere, to Goal Burrito where they’d had dinner with their daughters after the trip to the zoo before they’d had their first date. That night after dinner though, they’d gone back to her townhouse and made love for the first time.

She was being horrible company at present. It was only her and Randa at the table as Brienne had stepped away to take a call and Megga and Shae were both dancing. Randa didn’t seem to mind her silence at least but Sansa couldn’t stop thinking of that night and she remembered his wreck the next morning and all those memories of the early days of their relationship and how very far they’d come. She was missing him keenly. She should never have agreed to Sapphire. She should text him and tell him to come home tonight instead of sleeping at Theon’s.

“Sans?” a man’s voice said behind her.

For half a second, she thought she’d unintentionally summoned Joffrey with her memory but it wasn’t Joffrey standing behind her. That jerk had never got close enough to call her Sans anyway. No, this was another man from her past…or not really her past to be honest. For better or for worse, he would always be part of her life, she supposed. Luckily, that didn’t seem so much like a bad thing as it once had.

“Harry?”

“Hey. What are…oh, I guess you’re out celebrating with your lady friends, right?” he asked, darting a glance towards Randa.

She set her ginger ale down, her eyes immediately darting to his hand, checking for a beer. It was empty. “Yes, the girls from work wanted to take me out. What are you doing here?”

“Schmoozing,” he grimaced. “My uncle had some new clients in town and wanted to take them to dinner. They’re younger than him and he claimed he needed some help to bridge the age gap as he called it. And by younger, I mean they’re under 50…barely.”

She laughed and shook her head. “So, you came here for dinner?”

“No, they wanted to have drinks after so here I am, the DD. They’re gathered over there complaining about the loud music and flashing lights.” She frowned and wondered if Harry’s great-uncle was aware of his alcohol issues. “It’s okay,” he said quietly. “Seven months sober now.” He’d not missed her look earlier then. “It doesn’t bother me to be here. It’s just tedious.”

_Tell me about it._

He turned his attention back to Randa and Sansa introduced him. They made polite chit-chat about the wedding, Mina and the school for a while before he returned to his own table.

“So, that’s Mina’s father?” Randa asked as she watched him walk away.

“Yes, that’s him.”

“Hmm. He’s quite handsome.”
Oh, lord. She’d been rather chatty with him and maybe a bit flirtatious. Sansa’s eyes widened a touch but she bit her lip to keep from saying anything for good or ill.

“Is he actually coming to the ceremony tomorrow?”

“He is.”

“That’s…interesting.”

Sansa gave a non-committal nod. Friend or not, she didn’t owe Randa an explanation and she didn’t feel up to it. Some people would find it odd but that didn’t matter. What mattered was they were committed to co-parenting Mina and maintaining a cordial relationship to accomplish that. What mattered was Mina had wanted her father to see her fulfilling her flower girl duties in her pretty powder blue dress with cap sleeves, white satin sash and silver flats that didn’t pinch. Harry had said he’d come if they didn’t mind him being there. That’d been good enough for Sansa and Jon.

Randa spent the next ten minutes casting glances towards Harry so Sansa decided to return to remembering the night she’d come here with Jon and the particularly juicy parts that had happened afterwards.

*Ugh, too many nights of falling asleep on him lately. I definitely won’t be spending the entire first twelve hours of our honeymoon sleeping.*

It’s one of those daily tasks which he rarely forgot but it’d been a busy day. So, as luck would have it, shortly before Theon picked him up from the house with his knapsack for what Theon was jokingly calling their pajama party stag night, he’d remembered and grabbed the mail out of the box. He wished he hadn’t bothered. But then again, he’d have hated for his mother or Sansa to see it.

Jon shoved the envelope deeper into his pocket with a scowl. He’d give it to Rhae tomorrow before the ceremony to be returned. He wasn’t going to spend his night thinking about it. This was already the fifth time he’d told himself that.

*As if I’ve not got enough on my plate. What did I really expect from him though? Toxic people do enjoy asserting themselves at the worst possible times. However, if this is this worst of it, I’ll take it.*

The past week had been a blur of social activity. He was very happy to have the time with his mother and David but with everyone else and all of it heaped together over the course of a week, it had left him feeling decidedly flattened.

*If Sansa doesn’t mind, I may suggest we spend the first twelve hours of our honeymoon sleeping… after a quickie.*

His job required a great deal of interaction but a majority of them were children and his fellow educators. And being at work might require a certain amount of polite acting but it wasn’t the same as putting on his social smile for the likes of Olenna Tyrell or keeping his cool as half a dozen photographers laughed in his face (over the phone anyway) at the mere question of if they might be free this Saturday. With enough calling though (and outright begging), he had come through at last at
least. The look of relief on Sansa’s face had been well worth the hassle.

Naturally, Rhaegar had chosen to send him a pitifully disconsolate and equally spiteful letter along with an enormous check today, the day before his wedding. *Nothing like a narcissist playing the victim to brighten a person’s nuptials.*

He’d give anything to spend an hour or two by himself at the fields with a bag of balls idly taking shots on goal where nobody could find him or speak to him.

*Well…not nobody.*

Sansa and the girls were exempt from his reclusive plans anyway.

Two and half hours they’d spent together tonight at the rehearsal and the dinner and he felt like they’d exchanged a dozen words at most. Even when the reverend had quickly run through their vows with them, it’d just been part of the rehearsal without the gravity of the words attached. And while he’d hated that she’d been reduced to tears last night, her crying fit had been the most he’d held her and talked to her in days. He desperately missed Sansa. He hated the thoughts of going back to Theon’s tonight but he’d go along with the silly superstition if she wanted. *Fifteen hours to go.*

To be honest though, he was enjoying Theon’s company and their activities at present.

“Some stag night this is,” Theon laughed as Jon sank another basket.

“You can tease me all you like. I know you don’t really mind.”

Friday night at Adventure Station once more but with just Theon this time. Robb had begged off with Neddie’s cold and Jon hadn’t invited anyone else. He’d lost touch with most of his high school and college friends. A couple of them were coming to the wedding but Jon feared it’d only be awkward to spend time socializing with men he’d not talked to for more than three minutes in eight years or more.

Rickon was too young to go out drinking and, while Bran wasn’t, he was younger too and Jon had worried inviting him and not Rickon would be rude. He liked Gendry but he’d not exposed him to much of Theon yet and wouldn’t want him to feel like a third wheel. And honestly, he didn’t mind it being just Theon in a way. He was not only his best man and best friend but the one friend he’d managed to keep in close contact with through the years after becoming a father. Theon loved him for who he was and loved his daughter. They understood each other well and were completely comfortable together.

So, if this was the lamest stag night ever…oh well.

“I don’t mind, Jon.”

He smiled as he sank another basket. “I know.”

“Good thing I got a bunch of ones at the bank earlier. Works as well for these machines as they would at Honey Bunnies.”

“Christ” He shuddered and missed his shot.

“Air ball and I’m joking.”

“I know.”
Theon had drug him along to a few strip clubs back in their college days but he’d had little interest in those places then and absolutely zero interest now. He didn’t want a huge party either.

He’d been nursing the same beer for thirty minutes as they oscillated between Skeeball, Air Hockey and Pop-a-Shot. He’d already had a couple of glasses of wine with dinner and he had no intention to get drunk the night before his wedding. His stomach was already a bundle of nerves thinking about tomorrow as it was. Not that he had any doubts about the getting married part, just the whole production of it that would occur in front of most everyone they cared about.

_The courthouse would’ve been sweet._

No, if he were being honest, he was excited by the wedding in his own way. He looked forward to the girls’ reactions. This meant a lot to his mum and he hoped she’d enjoy it despite the tears she would shed. Most of all, he wanted to see his bride in her dress coming down the aisle towards him with a radiant smile on her face.

At the moment though, he just wanted to go home, fall asleep and magically wake up at the altar so he could finally slip that gold band on Sansa’s finger and run away with her as soon as decency allowed. But he couldn’t speed up time and he couldn’t go home tonight either thanks to Megga running her mouth and getting Sansa worked up about bad luck.

He glanced over at the dancing game Sansa had played with Rhae when they’d come out to celebrate his 30th here. She’d put her hair in a make-shift ponytail and sweat had been glistening on her brow, her face intense that final round. Rhae might’ve won but Jon had loved every second of watching her.

“Alright, you loser. Just say it.”

He’d been wool-gathering and glanced at Theon, trying to discern what he meant. “Say what?”

“You don’t really want to be here.”

He didn’t really but he felt bad. Theon was his best friend. “I’m sorry, Theon. I do but I also don’t. I guess I’m thinking about too much tonight.”

“Jitters?”

“Not exactly. I’m worried about fucking up something in the middle of the ceremony naturally.”

“Just don’t vomit on her or faint.”

“Thanks, I’ll add those to the growing list of possible catastrophes.”

They both laughed but then Theon was watching him closely. “What else is it?” He sighed and shrugged indifferently. “I’ve known you for twelve years, Jon. I can tell when you’re brooding more than usual. You don’t have to talk but you can’t lie to me either.” Theon was more intuitive than most people gave him credit for.

They’d covered this ground many times before regarding their fathers and he didn’t want to be even more of a party pooper. “Nothing much. Just that Rhaegar decided to send me a fat check while gaslighting me and Mum in a letter today.”

“Son of a bitch. What did Sansa say?”

“Nothing yet since she doesn’t know. I got it right before you picked me up. I stuck it in my pocket.”
Theon motioned with his hand and Jon handed it over. He whistled at the check but then shook his head as he read the letter. “You know every word of this is bullshit, right? Guilt-tripping, feeling-negating, sanctimonious, self-righteous, self-pitying bullshit at that.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t say nothing at New Year’s because I figured you needed space and you’d talk to Sansa but I’m saying it now because it’s true. You made the right decision, Jon, and I don’t want you to ever doubt it. I know it sucks and it’s not something you can snap your fingers and be over but you did the right thing.”

“Why does it still hurt so much?”

“Because you’re a decent person and you care even when he doesn’t deserve it. But, he’s a repugnant, lying, chicken shit who…” Theon proceeded to go on for a good while, weaving quite the tapestry of neglectful father hate interspersed with a lot of profanity. He really did love Theon. “I want you to try and forget about this. I’ll make sure it gets back to him for you and you let it go, okay? I mean, talk to Sansa about it whenever you’re ready but don’t let it spoil your day.”

“Okay. Thanks.” He was feeling better. There was just one thing…

“Now, what else?”

“Mostly, I miss my girl.”

“I miss mine, too.”

“You mean my sister?” he asked in a teasing tone.

Theon smirked. “Yeah, your sister…my girl. We should’ve had them come with us.”

“That would’ve been fun, a couples’ party.” His phone started buzzing and he smiled when Sansa’s picture came up on the screen. “Hey, love. Are you having fun?”

“Not particularly. Where are you? Or am I allowed to ask?”

“You’re always allowed to ask. I’m at Adventure Station.”

“What?! No fair!”

“How’s Sapphire?” She scoffed. “That good, huh?”

“Jon?” she asked in that voice that told him she wanted something.

“Yeah, love.”

“I was thinking, superstitions really are rather ridiculous.”

She wants me home. His stomach did a little flip of joy. “They really are.”

“But if we want to give a sop to fate and all, it’s really only bad luck for you to see me in the dress before the wedding, right?”

“Right.”

“So, if I wasn’t wearing the dress…”
“A perfect loop hole. I promise not to peek tomorrow or anything either.”

“I’m getting dressed at the vineyard so no worries there. But I was thinking, to be extra safe…if I wasn’t wearing anything at all…”

Oh, shit. She wants me! Even better! “Hang on, love. Hey, Theon? Give Rhae a call and see if she wants to see your face tonight because I’m going to have to ask you to drive me home right now.”

The night had passed all too swiftly and he was tired…but it was the best sort of tired.

“Dad? Are you awake?” Lyarra whispered in his ear. “It’s almost nine and Grams is taking us to the salon.”

A grin sprang to his face. Today was the day. “Um, why can’t I see?” There was something covering his face. He reached for it.

“DON’T!” two little voices screeched.

“Girls, no screaming,” he heard Sansa say as a door opened.

“Care to enlighten me, somebody?”

“It’s bad luck to see Mommy before the wedding. Grams had a sleep mask for the airplane and we borrowed it,” Mina said patiently.

“So, I’ve been blindfolded, more or less?”

“Yes.”

He chuckled and started to reach for the mask again which only prompted more shouts. “Alright, alright! I’ll leave it on! But, it’s not bad luck for me to see you girls.”

They both giggled and he felt them climbing across the bed towards him. He waited till he judged they were close enough and snatched them in his arms which led to more shrieking but it was a happy sound that he loved.

“I’m heading into the bathroom for a few minutes so you can unmask your captive, girls,” Sansa said.

The door clicked and suddenly the mask was whisked away. “Let there be light.” He smiled at the two precious faces peering down at him.

“What are you going to do all day, Jon?” Mina asked with an expression that brought Mrs. Flint to mind. It made him snort.

Picture your mother in her dress and then picture taking her out of it later. “David and I are going to brunch with my groomsmen and Grandpa Ned. I’ll be at the vineyard by noon to get ready.”

“The wedding’s at one. That’s not a lot of time to get ready,” Mina said worriedly.
He laughed. “It’s almost a whole hour!”

“Men have it easy, girls,” his mother said from the doorway. “It’s completely unfair.”

“Morning, Mum. And you’re all beautiful already so there’s really nothing much for you to do either.”

She laughed and came to stand beside the bed. “Look at you. Nearly nine and still abed on your wedding day,” she tsked.

“I’m getting up as soon as you leave.”

She brushed his hair back out of his face like she would when he was a boy. Her smile was tender and made him feel like a little kid but her eyes were dry for now. “Alright. I’ll see you there?”

“See you there, Mum.”

“Are you ready, girls?”

“Ready,” Mina answered before she turned back to him with another teacherly look. “No peeking?”

“She’s got her area, I’ve got mine. I promise not to snoop around.”

"Cross your heart?" she asked, making the little symbol.

He kissed her fingers then did the same motion. "Cross my heart."

“Alright,” she said with a satisfied nod. “Just don’t be late.”

“I won’t be late,” he chuckled. She hugged him and slid off the bed, chasing after his mother. “Looking forward to the salon?” he asked his daughter once they were alone.

“I don’t know. Maybe a little. Daddy?”

Daddy. Lyarra was chewing at her bottom lip and was calling him daddy. Something was troubling her. His bride-to-be wasn’t the only person he’d not had enough one-on-one time with this week. He lightly caressed her soft curls before cupping her face.

“Yes, baby?”

“I’m excited about today.”

“Me, too.”

“I’m happy you’re marrying Sansa.”

“Me, too.”

“But I’m kind of scared.”

“Me, too.”

She blinked in surprise. “You are?”

“Uh huh. It’s a big day. I’m worried that I might screw up and drop Mom’s ring or forget my vows or something. What’s got you scared, baby?”
“Sort of the same. What if I screw up with the flowers or something?”

“Impossible. You’re going to be amazing. And if one of us screws up, we’ll watch the video of it later and laugh about it.”

“There’ll be so many people watching us.”

“Yes, and nearly everyone there knows you and loves you, Lyarra, but none more than me.”

A flicker of a smile but then the frown was back. “Daddy…do you remember a long time ago when I said that I liked it when it was just you and me?”

Her eyes were welling up with tears and it tore at his heart. He swallowed hard and prepared himself for whatever she was about to say. They were hours away from the wedding and he didn’t know how he’d handle it if his daughter started expressing doubts about this today but, for better or worse, she had the right to say whatever was on her mind.

“Yeah, I remember. Right before I went out with Sansa the first time.”

“We were happy back then.” He bit his lip and tried not to feel too crushed. But then she continued. “But I think we’re happier now, don’t you?”

If he hadn’t already been lying down, he knew his knees would’ve buckled with relief. “Me, too. I’m happier than I ever thought I’d be,” he managed to choke out before he clasped her tightly. “So, I’ll see you soon?”

“Yeah.”

“And remember…two kinds of cake.”

She grinned widely. “Mina says her daddy’s going to dance with her at the reception.”

“Your daddy wants to dance with you. Would you like that?”

Her smile turned soft and made him feel like putty inside. “Yeah. You’ll dance with Mina too though, right?”

“Of course, if she likes.”

“She will. She likes that sort of thing.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“I’m going to miss you both while you’re gone to the cabin.”

“I know. I’ll miss you, too. We’ll go fishing and hiking and whatever you like when you join us though, okay?”

She nodded happily and hugged him. But when the bathroom door started to open, she shrieked and suddenly the mask was roughly pulled back over his eyes. “Keep it on!”

“I will,” he promised as he heard her getting a hug from Sansa and heading out of their room.

He could hear Sansa pad closer to the bed. He was grinning like a fool now.

“I like your mother’s mask on you.”
“Do you?”

“Yes. I love seeing your eyes but there’s something rather appealing about having you like this. Think she’d mind if we borrow it for the honeymoon?”

“I’m not telling her why but fuck, yeah…it’s coming with us.”

She laughed and grasped his hand. “I’m heading out with them. I’ll see you later. I’m glad I’m marrying you today, Jon Snow.”

“So, am I, love. So, am I.”

Chapter End Notes

It's been nearly two years since I started posting this story *crying emoji* and some of you have been sticking with it since the start *crying emoji x 10*

Quick note-I'd wanted to include a little mother/daughter moment for Sansa and Mina sort of like Jon and Lyarra's but decided that'll work better next chapter right before the ceremony. Next chapter should cover the wedding/reception.

Thank you all for reading!
I Choose You

Chapter Summary

The Wedding Day at last :)

Chapter Notes

Oof. Writing big 'events' is not something I feel like I do well with and my motivation to write has already been struggling lately. But I really wanted to get them married at last so a big thank you to Sweetaprilbutterfly for the gorgeous mood board to spark some inspiration and thanks so much as always to Tanya for your suggestion and lovely support ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Mommy was gently rubbing her back and Mina did her best to ignore the others in the room. She sniffled and wiped her face when Aunt Arya passed her a tissue, embarrassed that they’d all seen her cry and horrified that she’d almost got snot on Mommy’s beautiful dress.

“I’m sorry.” She hated sounding like such a baby. She hated crying like this and not understanding why.

“It’s alright. There’s no reason to apologize,” Mommy said.

It wasn’t that she was sad. She was happy, very happy for Mommy and happy for Jon and so excited for them to officially be a family but it had already felt like a really long day.

She’d barely slept a wink last night with all the excitement. Lady had been a comfort as she’d lain in bed trying to count sheep to fall asleep so the big day could hurry up and finally arrive but after a while her dog had decided to lay across her legs and that hadn’t been helpful.

When she’d woke up super early, she’d been ecstatic but, while getting her hair styled fancy had sounded fun, the actual experience was not so much. And the longer she’d sat in the chair sitting still and listening to the grown ladies chatter, the sleepier she’d felt. She couldn’t possibly take a nap today though. She was almost nine, far too old for a nap.

The bridal suite had been bustling with activity from the moment they’d arrived. Grandma, Grams, Lyarra, Aunt Arya, Aunt Margaery and Aunt Rhae were all there plus the event coordinator lady for the vineyard kept popping in and out with last-minute updates or questions. Mommy looked nervous and kept fiddling with her hands. It made Mina feel nervous, too.

It was stuffy in the room with everybody in there. She wished they could open the window. And, as much as she loved her pretty blue bridesmaid dress, she secretly had to agree with Lyarra that it wasn’t comfy like her regular clothes. Also, the hairpins used to create her beautiful braided fairytale princess-like bun felt weird. Actually, they were like little needles sticking into her scalp and she wished she’d just asked to wear her hair down like Lyarra now.

And then, the weather had decided to work against them. “It’s raining? It’s not supposed to rain!” she’d wailed. Why was that the straw that broke the camel’s back? She honestly couldn’t say. She just knew her eyes had clouded up with tears and her nose had started to drip and that was that.

“Could you all give us a few minutes?” Mommy asked everyone else.

Grams took Lyarra’s hand and led the others out except Grandma who stroked her face before following and closing the door behind her.

It was quieter with just the two of them there, more peaceful. Mommy stood and pulled her over to the vanity where she’d been retouching her makeup after the photographer had finished with her bridal pictures. She sat Mina down in front of the mirror.

“I’m sorry to cry.”

“Don’t be sorry, baby, but why were you crying? Are you worried or upset about the wedding or…”

“No, I’m not upset about the wedding. I’m happy about it. It’s just all the people and stuff going on all week and I’m…I’m sleepy.”
“Oh.” Mommy smiled and looked relieved. “It’s been a very hectic time, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah. And then it rained. I guess that sounds stupid.”

“Not stupid. I almost felt like crying a bit too when I saw the rain but then decided I don’t mind it.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Actually, I’ve decided I love it.”

“You love that it’s raining on your wedding day?” she scoffed.

“Yes. Do you know what I love about a spring rain?” Mommy asked as she pulled some lip gloss out of her make-up bag. It was a soft pearly pink. Mommy was already wearing a rosy red shade. She handed the tube to Mina and her eyes lit up. Mommy usually wouldn’t let her wear colored lip gloss unless they were playing beauty salon at home.

“What?”

“I love the way everything smells so fresh outside afterwards. I love the way the flowers are more vibrant and the grass seems greener when the skies are grey, even more than they do in the sunlight. Have you ever noticed?”

Mina thought about it and had to agree. “I like that, too. Grandpa says the rain washes away the pollen that makes me sneezy.”

“It can.”

“I don’t like when it’s super bright out and you have to squint.”

“Me, neither.”

“I freckle in the sun.”

“So do I.”

“And it’s not like the ceremony’s outside.”

“Nope,” Mommy grinned.

Mina grinned back at her and Mommy started humming ‘You are My Sunshine.’ She remembered learning it back in preschool and proudly singing it to anyone who’d listen until she got a little bigger and started to feel self-conscious about singing in front of just anyone. And sometimes, back when she was little and feeling sad, she’d ask Mommy to sing it to her.

As Mommy began to softly sing instead of just humming, Mina decided to sing with her. Suddenly, her whole heart felt happy again and she didn’t feel so tired anymore. It was like magic the way Mommy could make her feel better.

She loved Daddy and Jon. She loved Lyarra and her grandparents and all their family. But she wondered if there’d ever be anyone who understood her quite like her mother did. She didn’t think so and that did not bother her one bit. It was something special that she secretly cherished.

“You’re beautiful, Mommy.”

And she was.
Her hair was partly up for her veil but the bulk of her long red hair hung in soft waves down her back. She’d described her dress as having a heart-shaped bodice with a long tulle skirt. The swirly beading on the top part reminded Mina of butterflies or maybe dragonflies and the pattern fluttered along more randomly as it went down from the bodice to the skirt.

There was a satiny belt with flowers and something about it reminded Mina of her ballet recital costume from that year she’d taken dance. It was like Mommy was a ballerina too or perhaps a ballerina princess. She held hopes of someday being allowed to play dress-up in the pretty dress if she promised to be oh so careful.

“Thank you, baby. You’re beautiful, too.”

Beautiful? She thought she might look pretty in her dress but…she scrunched her nose up. “My eyes are all red from crying.”

“That will fade. You’re beautiful, my sweet girl.” She placed her hand over Mina’s heart. “You’re beautiful where it matters most, too.”

She flushed and felt like twirling in her dress now but instead she applied the lip gloss as Mommy helped put strands from her bun that had come loose back in place.

“Mommy?” she asked, peaking up at her mother through the mirror.

“Yes?”

“I don’t like the fancy bun. The pins hurt.”

“Let’s take it down then.”

Grams and Grandma had been so pleased when the stylist had finished. “I don’t want anyone to…”

“It’s your hair, Mina. Would you like for me to French braid it instead?”

That would still be fancy and it wouldn’t hurt at all. “Yes, please.”

Mommy’s fingers deftly removed every last pin and Mina ran her fingers through her hair, not liking the way the hairspray had made it stiff. But in no time, Mommy had brushed it out and had it looking perfectly nice in a simple but pretty braid. Mina smiled at her reflection as Mommy kissed the top of her head.

“We should invite everyone back in, shouldn’t we?” Mina asked.

“Only if you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.”

They opened the door and Aunt Arya was the first one back inside. “Ready or not, your groom has arrived, Sans,” she announced and pointed towards the window. “I’ve got my keys. Not too late to make a break for it if you’re getting cold feet.”

“Arya!” Grandma gasped.

The other women chuckled though and Lyarra raced over to the window. Mina joined her and saw Jon sprinting through the spring shower towards the main entrance with David and Theon. All three men were carrying garment bags but whereas David was strolling along sedately with an umbrella in hand, the other two were darting and dodging puddles like wild hares and obviously laughing.
Lyarra started laughing at their antics and Mina did as well. She didn’t even hear her mother’s soft
gasp.

Not for one second had Sansa thought, ‘What if he stands me up?’ She hadn’t even let the thought
enter her conscious mind. They’d not even made any jokes about it.

They were getting married today. Jon had proposed and given her a ring last summer. They’d moved
in together and adopted two dogs. They’d been busily working at blending their family and learning
to operate as a couple when it came to home and family matters instead of as individuals for several
months now. They were committed to raising their two daughters together, loving the other’s
biological child the same as they loved their own. They’d agreed to expand their little family and she
was carrying their child inside of her at this very moment. In about an hour, they’d agreed to
exchange vows in front of God and everybody to become husband and wife.

Never had she consciously thought he might not show today.

And yet, she felt the most enormous sense of relief at seeing him arrive with her own eyes. It was
enough to make her weak in the knees. Clearly, somewhere deep inside, there had been a little
seedling of worry and doubt after all. But one thing was certain, it wasn’t Jon who had planted it
there.

Was it those years with Harry doing that to her?

Short answer, yes. There’d been too many disappointments, too much broken faith for her to be the
same openhearted girl she’d been once upon a time.

And maybe she could also reflect on those other guys who’d never amounted to anything and only
served to make her question her judgement and even the existence of romantic love despite seeing
the living examples of it in her parents and Robb and Margaery. Perhaps it was a bit of worry that it
was real but it would never be real for her.

Perhaps a combination of all those things had left her feeling like she couldn’t really trust any man
who wasn’t her kin until Jon came along.

She’d been jaded and afraid to hope when they’d met. Oh, how much had changed. Even if she
would never be a carefree girl of eighteen again, so much had changed. She’d had her daughter and
family but she’d been so lonely too before he’d come along.

But like most worthwhile things in life, it didn’t just fall into place right away. It took a little patience
and a lot of courage.

Their very first meeting had been fraught with assumptions on both ends; him assuming she was a
lackadaisical parent when Harry had left her in the lurch to pick up Mina and she’d been so terribly
late arriving and her assuming he had some sitcom fantasy life with a loving wife waiting at home
with his supper and how dare he judge her?

What if one or both of them had never made an effort to let go of a poor first impression? She
couldn’t begin to express how grateful she was for second chances. She couldn’t help but pity how bitter life must be for those who could never give them either.

She felt herself growing weepy at the thought and quickly shuttered that nonsense. It was her wedding day. She’d probably cry later but they’d be tears of joy.

*He’s here just like I knew he would be. Jon isn’t Harry or any of the rest. He’s Jon. He’s mine and I trust him.*

She stayed back from the window a few paces. He probably wouldn’t have been able to see her even if he’d been looking and he was far too busy running through the rain at the moment as Theon shouted and made him laugh. She could only imagine what Theon might’ve said.

*Probably something that would’ve forced him to add more to the swear jar if the girls overheard.*

The girls were laughing and she felt it bubbling up inside her as well. She was overjoyed to see him laughing with his best friend and, despite the rain, looking perfectly happy to be heading to his wedding.

Lyanna came to stand next to her and the two women linked hands.

“Your son is very handsome even in blue jeans.”

“I’ve always thought so but then I am his mother.”

“He makes me very happy, Lyanna.”

Lyanna opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something but instead just hugged her. Her eyes were already watery. “I’m not crying yet,” she managed to squeak out before saying she should go check in with him.

“Tell him…” She hesitated and then bit her lip. “Would you take something to him for me, Lyanna?”

Rickon was complaining about his tie and Robb was helping him adjust it. Theon and Bran were busy telling jokes. Theon’s were dirty. Bran’s were too but funnier. They were currently in stitches over the last one. He supposed they might’ve been doing that for him but his stomach felt a little too queasy at present to enjoy their jokes.

*Obviously, brunch was heavy or something. Couldn’t be nervous at all, right?*

*Nah.*

David and Ned were already dressed and had gone off somewhere, likely hoping for some peace and quiet away from the younger men for a minute.

The photographer was waiting to get some pictures of him and his groomsmen. He was looking forward to seeing the girls soon as they would be taking pictures with him as well.
His hair was still damp but he supposed it would be alright. He combed it back off his face once more and decided it’d have to do. Even the best products didn’t do much about the curls when it was damp out. He knew Sansa wouldn’t mind at least.

He was dressed and slipping on his dress shoes when his mother knocked. She gave each of them a nod of approval before she settled on him. Her eyes were already welling up with fresh tears.

“Mum, I’m…”

It was all he could manage to say. David had joked over brunch that he had extra handkerchiefs in his pocket for anyone who needed them. The men had all laughed, except Rickon who had looked insulted by the suggestion he might shed a tear over his big sister’s wedding. But, he didn’t want to cry at all so he pulled his mother into a warm embrace and told her she was gorgeous in her dark blue dress until she was shaking her head at him and laughing.

“Stop it.”

“It’s true. Tell my mother she’s beautiful, Theon.”

“You’re beautiful, Lyanna. David had better beware because if Rhae ever dumps me, I’ll be putting the moves on you next. Then, I can be his dad instead of his brother.”

“You had to make it weird, didn’t you?” Jon groaned.

His mother just ignored Theon though. “Just wait till you see your bride, son. She’s a vision.” He didn’t doubt it. Sansa was a vision wearing sweatpants with messy hair in his opinion. He had no doubt his bride would be radiant and he couldn’t wait to see her. “This is for you.” She passed him a folded up piece of the vineyard’s stationary.

She turned to speak to Theon, replying to his earlier remark. He didn’t hear them. He was busy reading. His mother kissed his cheek and slipped out again and he was still staring at her words.

He wondered if she’d labored over this or just dashed it off. He’d ask her later he decided as he tucked the note into his pocket. He made a mental note to make sure he didn’t forget it later on. He wanted to keep it always.

Jon,

Just a few words before we marry…

Before we met, I’d almost given up on romance. I was alone which is fine if that makes a person happy but I wasn’t. I told myself I was content but in my heart I knew I wanted more. I was just too afraid to hope and isn’t that a shame? We should never give up hope, should we?

But we met and you took that first step to ask me out and I’m so happy that you did. You made me want to take a chance again. I was afraid of course but also afraid to let you go without even trying. Both of us chose to be brave despite our pasts and I can never express in words how happy I am for that.

I saw you a few minutes ago. You came to marry me like I knew you would. I saw you running through the rain and my heart sang. Thank you for loving me, Jon. Thank you for loving Mina and marrying me today and giving me everything I once thought I’d never have.
Sansa

“Theon?”

“Yeah?”

“Go tell David I’ll take one of his handkerchiefs just to be safe.”

The girls were so sweet in their flower girl frocks and Theon couldn’t really blame Jon for getting a little sentimental when he’d seen them shortly before the ceremony. The photographer had been busy snapping pics of Jon with them but Theon had taken out his phone to take some candids which he’d sent to Sansa. Lyarra had had great fun pulling faces for his pictures and convinced Mina to do the same. Jon had worn the sappiest grin throughout but Theon would excuse him this one day and figured Sansa would love the pictures all the same.

You are the best Best Man ever, she’d texted after he’d sent them.

You’re damn right I am.

You’re also the sexiest Best Man ever but don’t let that go to your head.

That one had arrived a minute later and been from Rhae.

Speaking of his girl, Rhae looked hot as fuck in her bridesmaid’s dress. Alright, it wasn’t that the dove grey bridesmaid’s dress was anything racy. Floor-length with cap sleeves, it was wedding-ish enough to not exactly set most men’s pulses to pounding but on her and to him…yeah, hot as fuck.

Her black hair was swept up in a messy bun. She wore a slight smirk and those smoldering dark eyes seemed to be challenging him to keep a straight face as she paced down the aisle towards them holding her little bouquet with all the innocence of a siren calling a sailor to his eternal and very welcome damnation. He wondered if there was a convenient coat closet nearby for them to slip away to during the reception.

He decided to get his mind out of the gutter though as Arya and then Margaery followed her.

And in the height of adorableness, the girls came next dropping their flower petals as they went. Mina had set to her task with all the gravity of Mission Control before a shuttle launch…except when Harry waved at her and she waved back, clearly delighted to see her father.

Lyarra was tossing the petals willy-nilly, left and right, waving to the groomsmen as she practically raced down the aisle ahead of her step-sister with the biggest smile on her face, looking like she was on the verge of bursting out in hysterics. She hugged Jon so tightly Theon could hear his stifled grunt before she took her place next to her aunt.

And of all the silliness, Theon felt a lump rising in his throat seeing her and Rhae together as his
mind started clicking through scenarios of things that could maybe happen someday. *Must be my allergies acting up.*

Once Mina made it to them, she smiled sweetly at Jon before joining her aunt and looking expectantly towards the now closed doors.

The violins stopped and the organ started the familiar reframe as doors opened again and there was Sansa and her father. Theon’s jaw dropped and, once he recovered himself, he leaned forward to chug his best friend on the shoulder.

“You’re a lucky bastard, Snow,” he whispered.

“You’re damn right I am,” Jon whispered back.

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She barely had any hair, just a little reddish fuzz and big blue eyes. She yawned as he held her and her tiny fists were clenched. His chest felt too tight.

He was already a father. He adored his son and loved him with a fierceness that was scary at times. But now he had a daughter and wasn’t that amazing? And just holding her in the room that was finally quiet at last, he knew he’d do anything to protect her and keep her safe, anything at all to see her happy.

“Already got you wrapped around her little finger, huh?” Benjen teased.

“Maybe,” Ned answered, unable to keep the grin from spreading across his normally solemn face. Of course, she did.

Cat was dozing when his brother had arrived to visit his newborn niece at the hospital that night. Robb had already left to spend the night with Cat’s parents, far more excited about the Happy Meal Hoster had promised him and Minisa baking him cookies than he was by his brand new sibling so far.

And so, the two brothers found themselves relatively alone for a few minutes as they gazed at little Sansa Stark.

“You know, Ned...someday, some guy’s going to come along and sweep her off her feet and marry her and then what will you do?”

“I’ll pray he’s a good man and be glad for them,” he replied, unable to fathom such an eventuality if he were honest.

“And if he turns out not to be a good man?”

He hadn’t been able to refrain from making the joke. “I’ve got a gun and a shovel and a brother who can keep his mouth shut.”

Benjen laughed and slapped his back. “Truer words, I’ve never heard.”
“Ready, sweetheart?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she smiled. She was trembling slightly and he couldn’t blame her for the nerves. She kissed his cheek and he patted her hand as Mendelssohn’s Wedding March began.

Honestly, Ned hadn’t much liked thinking about his daughter growing up and falling in love with anyone someday even as she’d played dress up and talked about handsome princes as a little girl. Even when Cat had taken her shopping for her first bra and she’d started wearing makeup and needing tampons, he’d not wanted to really see it.

From the moment he’d first laid eyes on her, she’d been his little girl and, though the logical part of him knew better, it’d been hard to remove the Dad goggles. In fact, he’d left them in place until the day she’d come home from her first semester of college and told them she was pregnant.

He could tell she’d been afraid of what they’d say and think but she’d stood tall and kept her voice steady even with the tears in her eyes. And for the first time, he’d seen a woman that day, not a little girl, a young woman facing an unexpected situation as courageously as she could manage.

It was not what they’d wanted for her at such a young age but neither Ned nor Cat would’ve dreamed of letting her down when she’d needed them most. And Mina…how could he ever regret it when Mina had been the end result?

Harry had not been the sort of man he would’ve wanted for his daughter back then, not at all. But, he’d hardly been a man to Ned’s eyes either. A dumb frat boy who had far too little acquaintance with the word responsibility, Ned had feared he’d never give Sansa what she needed, much less what she deserved. He’d still been sorry to be proven right. But while Ned had harbored his resentments, he didn’t think Harry had warranted the old gun and shovel. *There were a few times though*…

As Mina grew and Sansa and Harry stopped trying to pretend it would work out, Ned prayed in earnest for his daughter to find a man worthy of her someday, someone who would make her happy and give her everything she deserved in a partner, a man who would love her daughter like his own, too.

It had taken a good while but here he was, waiting at the alter with the look of a man completely in love but also strong enough to be whatever she needed him to be.

Ned’s eyes flitted to his daughter who was absolutely stunning in her gown and he smiled to himself. He swallowed hard and marched her down the aisle, remaining dry-eyed purely through sheer force of will and by clenching his stomach muscles until he thought he might keel over.

As they stopped in front of the wedding party, he was amused by the way the pair of them were drinking the other in and he felt joy for them all over again even as he waited to perform his duty, the bittersweet duty of symbolically giving her hand in marriage. This was not the Middle Ages and obviously the grown woman by his side made her own decisions in life but he was still grateful she’d asked for this.

The crowd of onlookers settled again and the minister began.

“Dearly beloved…”
After all the build-up, the ceremony seemed incredibly brief. It wasn’t that he hadn’t felt every bit of it. He had. From the exchange of vows to the kiss, he’d been very aware it was happening but it also rushed by in a blur. Sansa had been a vision just as his mother had promised and he’d lapsed into a waking daydream from the moment he’d laid eyes on her to be honest. It had been the best sort of daydream. And bonus…he hadn’t dropped the ring!

Afterwards, they’d headed back down the aisle, officially husband and wife but far too caught up in each other to really notice much else. Once they’d finished their pictures at last and then entered the reception hall, the new Mr. and Mrs. Snow were announced like royalty and Jon would’ve cringed at it if not for the beatific smile on his bride’s face.

The onslaught of well-wishers had been daunting but he’d managed with Sansa by his side as everyone from co-workers to Harry to old friends and all of the family had had a word or two to exchange with them. The girls had been playing tag around the vineyard’s reception hall with a couple of other young guests, happy to be free to behave like children again now that the serious part was over. Jon had envied them.

Food had been served and Theon had made his toast. He’d rapped half of it which was funnier than Jon would’ve expected. Three glasses of the vineyard’s best wine had probably helped. Margaery had made a rather sweet one of her own and then Ned had spoken, reducing his mother, Cat and Sansa all to tears.

Now came the ‘first dance.’ He’d promised four dances tonight. One with his bride, one with his mother and one with each daughter. Well, now he’d be dancing to five songs.

_Who am I kidding? I’ll dance to a dozen if she asks me to._

“This isn’t the song we chose,” Sansa frowned as the music began.

“Huh. You sure about that?”

“Jon,” she said with a smirk.

He grinned and kissed his wife. Unfortunately, that brought forth cheers from their onlookers. It was a bit disconcerting to be cheered for kissing. He really had to remember they weren’t alone yet. It was actually nothing short of a miracle that he could forget it considering how much he loathed the idea of standing on the dance floor while everyone watched but…well, Sansa could take his breath away on ordinary days. Needless to say, he wasn’t really rational at the moment.

_There was a time when I would have believed them_  
_If they told me that you could not come true_  
_Just love’s illusion_  
_But then you found me_  
_And everything changed_  
_And I believe in something again…_”

He spun his bride around and they began to sway. “Your note earlier got me thinking.”

“Okay…”

“My whole heart  
Will be yours forever
This is a beautiful start
To a lifelong love letter…”

“Etta James is amazing and I’ve already arranged for us to dance to that one next.”

“I get more than one dance?” she asked with an almost insulting level of astonishment.

“Yes, you get as many as you like,” he said, nipping at her ear. More cheers and a whistle…probably Theon. Dear God, leave us be. Drink the free booze, eat some more overpriced hors d’oeuvres.

“And while ‘At Last’ fits very well for us I believe, I liked this one, too. I wanted it to be our first dance after reading your words earlier. We chose to be brave…I liked how you said it.” He glanced up from where he’d been looking down at his feet for a second. “Do you hate it?”

“No,” she sighed and he pulled her closer. “I think it’s perfect in every way.”

“Tell the world that we finally got it all right
I choose
You
I will become yours and you will become mine
I choose
You
I choose
You…”

She heard her mother sigh as she quietly closed the door of the bridal suite. Mina was napping on the settee having surrendered to exhaustion thirty minutes earlier after enjoying cake and a dozen dances throughout the reception and Sansa had been enjoying a little solitude after all the activity with the excuse of checking on her daughter.

“Can you help me, Mom?”

Her mother nodded, gesturing for her to turn. She helped her out of her lovely dress and carefully placed it back in its bag to be taken to the cleaners tomorrow.

“Where’s Lyarra?” she asked as she pulled on her departure dress.

“She’s with Arya, Gendry, Bran, Rickon, Rhae and Theon at the moment. They’re doing things to Jon’s Pilot although I’m not supposed to tell you that.”

“Oh, lord.” The two of them shared a laugh before Sansa was hugging her. “Thank you, Mom. Thank you for everything.”

“Of course. It was quite a party.”

“It was…but I don’t just mean that.”

“I know. I know, my darling girl.”

They rousted a sleepy Mina who immediately brightened at the prospect of tossing birdseed. She was
a little disappointed not to have taken part in the vandalism of Jon’s vehicle but quickly got over it when Sansa tossed her bouquet and she was the one who caught it.

“Hold up! I object!” she heard Harry shout. She laughed and laughed harder as Jon nodded in agreement with him.

And then Jon had his arm around her waist and they were running through a barrage of flying seed and flashing cameras.

He helped her into the passenger seat, careful to avoid the streamers and liquid chalk, and then raced around to the driver’s side. Her heart was still pounding from their flight as he climbed in next to her, started the engine and kissed her hand.

“Ready to go, love?”

“Yes…and ready to begin.”

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from 'I Choose You' by Sara Bareilles.

Thank you so much for reading!
“Uhh, Sansa. Fuck, I’m... Oh-oh...oh, shit! Nooooo!”

“Well, that was, um... fast.” She didn’t sound upset at least. She sounded breathless and maybe a little amused as he collapsed in a heap beside her on the bed. He groaned and covered his eyes.

“Oh-oh...oh, shit!”

He vaguely pointed towards where he thought they might have landed. She didn’t get up right away so he looped an arm around her as his heart rate started to slow back down. A sweaty, disheveled mess, he still had his shoes on and his pants were around his ankles. And, what had he done the very first time he’d made love to Sansa after making her his wife? Climaxed faster than a teenager getting his first handjob.

“I am going to die of shame,” he whined even as he gave her ass a squeeze.

“You will do no such thing,” Sansa laughed. She rose to adjust her skirt which had been rucked up around her waist and scurried towards the bathroom to clean up. She was sweaty and disheveled, too. It looked good on her.

“I’m going to spend the next eight years brooding over it.”

“It’s fine, Jon. I enjoyed it,” she called from the bathroom over the sound of the faucet running.

“How can you call that fine? It’s our wedding day and I ravaged you like a man possessed.”

“As I recall, we were both rather eager.”

“I broke the land-speed record for ejaculating while consummating our marriage. I was the proverbial jackrabbit on a date, practically a two pump chump. Worse, I didn’t get you off. I’m...”

She poked her head out of the bathroom. “Husband?”

Despite his humiliation, he couldn’t help but grin at her calling him that. “Yes, wife?”
“Let it go.”

“Yes, dear,” he sighed as he rose to get himself back together.

It had been a long day on top of a short night after a hellacious week, alright? And the whole way to Benjen’s cabin, Jon had been thinking about making love to her and getting hornier with every passing mile.

*Okay, not the entire drive.*

Actually, she’d talked nonstop about the wedding from the moment they got on the highway until they were about fifteen minutes from their destination. Given how loquacious and animated Sansa had been throughout the rehash, he had a sneaking suspicion they were nowhere near finished with the play-by-play breakdown of the event. *Well, we’ve got plenty of years ahead of us to relive it.*

Was it his desire to speak endlessly about the wedding as well?

*Um…no.*

But he was happy that the ceremony had gone smoothly and immensely relieved that his father had not tried to crash it or anything. He’d have hated to have wound up in jail on his wedding day.

Certainly, there were memories made he would treasure and he was glad the girls and their families had enjoyed themselves. Most of all, he’d loved the way Sansa had been glowing throughout their discussion just as much as she had when she’d been walking down the aisle towards him. Fantasies of elopement to tropical islands or just waltzing into the county courthouse aside, it’d been worth the hassle for her smiles today alone.

So, if it pleased Sansa to talk about it ad nauseum, that was fine. He’d do anything to please Sansa.

*Anything except manage to last two full minutes, huh?*

*Don’t fucking remind me.*

Once they’d turned up the long, winding drive that led to Benjen’s lakeside cabin retreat though, she’d fallen quiet about the wedding and placed her hand on his knee with a familiar gleam in her eye. He’d already been half-hard at the thoughts of sweeping her up into his arms and making sweet, sweet love to her all evening.

They’d planned on just unlocking the front door and making sure all seemed in order before unloading their things. But then it had hit him how this was it, this was their honeymoon and they were truly alone, not to mention he was recalling how much sex they’d had last time they were here.

He’d pulled her close and started kissing her with a needfulness that wouldn’t be denied. She’d clutched his shoulders and rocked against him as she’d reciprocated that kiss. And, that had been that. He’d walked her backwards across the cabin towards the master bedroom with his hands tugging at her skirt while hers had been busy unbuckling his belt.

His lips quirked into a lascivious grin at the memory. Fast and furious hadn’t been the plan but he sure hadn’t hated it.

Sansa emerged from the bathroom after he’d pulled his pants back up. She brushed back his hair and kissed him slow and sweet. He leaned into that kiss to savor it, just like he meant to savor every minute of this time away together.
“We have four wonderful days ahead of us here, Jon.” He smiled and nodded. “Let’s unload the Pilot and have some dinner. Then, we can get back to other activities.”

“You mean I get another shot at making you fall apart for me, Mrs. Snow?”

“You get as many shots as you like, Mr. Snow.”

He groaned and pulled her close again. “Tonight, I am going to do my damnedest to make you forget your own name, love.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I want to hear you scream my name though.”

“We can be loud here.” He saw the spark of excitement in her eyes as she realized it.

“We can be loud here. Clothing optional and highly overrated in my opinion. Hot tub out back, fireplace in the living room and nice big bed in here. No little girls down the hall. No house guests. No neighbors within shouting distance even. Just us and the forest critters outside.”

“We might frighten them.”

“I plan on it. I want to leave you boneless. I don’t care if my jaw is sore for a week. I’ll…”

“I get the picture,” she laughed before tugging him towards the door.

They grabbed their bags and the groceries they’d picked up on their way through the sleepy little mountain town. They had no plans to leave the premises any time soon. It was the ideal honeymoon in Jon’s opinion and he was doubly glad now that Sansa had suggested it back in the fall.

She had the groceries as he carried the luggage but, as she started across the front porch on their way back inside, he recalled something else he’d meant to do earlier. *It’s your honeymoon, dumbass!*

“Wait! Don’t go in yet and set those down.” She looked perplexed as he set his own burdens down. “I fucked up in my eagerness earlier to, um…”

“Make things official?”

“Yes,” he snorted. “But I failed to make it official in another way. It’s antiquated and maybe corny but may I carry my bride inside?”

She flushed and he knew she didn’t think it was corny. “Yeah, alright.”

She shrieked with unfeigned delight when he lifted her into his arms and carried her across the threshold. “Welcome to our little home away from home, wife. I love you.”

Sansa sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. “I love you, too. This is perfect, Jon.”

“It is. I’m glad I thought of it.”

“Hey!”

“I’m kidding. I’m glad my smart wife did.”

“Your smart wife?”
“Your new title.”

“I like it.”

“It’s undeniably true.”

“Will there be an essay to follow about your smart wife?”

“Maybe,” he smirked. “Or maybe I’ll write a 500 word ‘thank you’ letter to your uncle for letting us have the cabin.”

“Uncle Benjen would probably worry he needed to have a talk with you if you did such a thing during our honeymoon.”

He snickered. “You’re right. So, am I forgiven for earlier?”

“There’s nothing to forgive, honey. Now, let’s put these things away and continue with our wedded bliss.”

“Yes, dear,” he happily agreed.

Before they’d even pulled away from the vineyard, it’d been building up inside her. Even at the reception, she’d felt it, this incredible sense of relief that the wedding had gone so well and that it was nearly done which brought about an unstoppable desire to talk about it. Or talk it to death. Poor Jon.

He hadn’t seemed to mind. He’d even contributed to the discussion here and there beyond just a grunt or nod of acknowledgment. She hoped he’d not grown too tired of her babbling. She couldn’t help it. It was one of the biggest days of her life. For an everyday person unaccustomed to the spotlight, it was a big deal. And she’d loved it!

She recalled how she’d met Margaery for lunch a week after her and Robb’s wedding. They’d talked for nearly three hours straight until the wait staff had stopped bringing them refills and started glaring at them. And that time, it’d been Margaery’s big day. This time, it’d been hers. We’re definitely getting together once I’m back home.

But yeah…she’d dominated the conversation with recounts of everything from Mina’s hair do-over pre-ceremony to a tipsy Theon’s rendition of ‘Gin and Juice’ (mercifully cut short with one look from Rhae) towards the end of the reception.

As they’d neared her uncle’s cabin though, her thoughts had taken a different course. He was sexy as hell and this was their honeymoon. She’d wanted him. And boy, had he apparently wanted her.

There’s nothing wrong with a swift and needy fuck once in a while and though Jon’s enthusiasm might’ve meant it was over much quicker than anticipated, Sansa wasn’t complaining. He’d been seeking a release from the tensions the day had brought and she liked knowing he wasn’t always in control when it came to her. She also understood her own body well enough by now to acknowledge
she’d been so keyed up herself that climaxing might’ve been unlikely anyway.

Not to mention, I was starving.

With so much going on pre-wedding and post-ceremony, she’d barely eaten all day. Maybe that was common for brides but this bride was also expecting. So when Jon had grilled some shrimp to go along with her lemon basmati rice and mixed greens, she’d devoured her meal with relish.

Content and relaxed at last, she was now ready to properly enjoy their wedding night.

If I don’t start snoring at him.

It had been a long day after a short night after all.

But all thoughts of snoring soon vanished when she came out of the bathroom from changing and brushing her teeth and found Jon standing by the bureau, still in his dress pants and button down with a sinfully naughty look on his handsome face as he looked her up and down appreciatively.

“That’s new.”

She was wearing a slinky negligee, an ivory lace confection that she probably wouldn’t be able to wear a month from now. She wouldn’t regret the purchase though. It was their honeymoon and she could always hope she’d be able to wear it later on after the baby came.

“It is. Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s…” He shrugged as he tried to think of something to say before throwing up his hands in surrender. “It’s…it’s like…wow.” She laughed. “You have rendered me inarticulate.”

“I’ll accept that response.”

“You’re gorgeous, Sansa.”

“Thank you.” She bit her lip and could feel herself blushing. “You’re still dressed.”

“Not for long. I’ve got a surprise for you, too.” She felt a little weak in the knees but couldn’t stop the smile spreading across her face as he pulled a black blindfold out of his pants pocket.

“Is that your mother’s sleep mask?”

He grinned wider. “She uses it for flying. She won’t miss it this week.” He pushed off from the bureau and took a step towards her, snapping the elastic band between his fingers in a promising manner. “So, who’s first?”

She grew short of breath. Me, please. “I didn’t think you’d really bring it.”

“Oh, my bride said I should. I wasn’t about to disappoint her.”

He was stalking slowly towards her. She pressed her legs together and suppressed a whimper. She might be the one to lose control this time. Maybe I don’t mind. Jon had an ardent temperament and was a passionate lover but he’d never been quite so…well, dangerous wasn’t the right word but Sansa was incredibly turned on by this side of her man.

He stopped right in front of her. She could smell the hint of cologne that still lingered on him along with the smokiness from the grill and the outdoors. It was intoxicating. His body radiated heat, too. She trembled and swayed towards him.
“So, who’s getting blindfolded first?” he asked again.

“I’m…I could…if you…” She couldn’t seem to spit it out with him staring at her. His eyes were dark and hooded. She licked her lips.

“Would you like me to put this on you, love? I’d like to do that. I’d like it very much.” He’d practically drawled those words and a hitching breath as she nodded was her only response. “I did promise to make you forget your name earlier, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Sit down on the bed, my sweet girl.” She did as he said and waited for him to climb up behind her. “Be still for me now?”

“I will,” she whispered.

The silk of the mask felt cool against her heated cheeks. She shivered when his lips barely caressed her ear. The bedroom disappeared as the blackness covered her eyes. “How’s that? Can you see anything?”

“No, not a thing.”

“Good.” His voice was deep and husky, that panty-dropping voice of his that always did things to her. She turned her head, not exactly sure where he was. She leaned forward with her lips puckered. “Did you want a kiss, love?”

She huffed in mild vexation. He’d leaned farther back. He was teasing her. She could smack him but she’d honestly rather fuck him.

“I want a kiss.” His lips brushed hers but it was too quick and he pulled away once more. “Maybe I’d rather you be blindfolded,” she grumbled.

“Maybe we’ll do that next. We could make it a little game maybe. I’d wear the mask and have to see if I could catch you. What would I get if I caught you, love?” Oh, Sweet Jesus… “But for now, I like you like this.”

She felt the bed shift as he leaned forward and his lips met hers again except this kiss was fiery, a searing hot kiss full of desire. His hands were cupping her face as he slid his tongue in her mouth. She pressed forward, wanting their bodies closer. They both moaned and then he disappeared again. She whined and reached out.

“Was that a nice kiss?” he asked from farther away.

“Very nice.”

“Good. I’m going to kiss you elsewhere now.”

Sansa’s belly gave a little flip as the warmth spread through her loins. “Where else were you going to kiss me?”

She gasped when his breath tickled her collar bone. “Everywhere.”

And he did. Feather-soft kisses along her throat, sweet pecks on her shoulders and even down her arms. A gentle kiss to her forehead and then a quick one on her nose that made her laugh.

Her head lolled back as his hands circled her waist. His hands roamed across the lace and the silk of
her flesh. He tipped her head back and kissed her senseless yet again.

“What’s my name again?”

He chuckled and she could tell he was climbing off the bed. “We’re just getting started.” She was panting by the time his warm hands started pushing up the fabric of her negligee. “Oh, my… matching panties. Perfection.” He was already whisking them away. “Lie back, love.”

“Jon…” She had no idea what she was going to say but she wanted to say his name. She had a feeling she’d be screaming it soon.

“I want to make you feel good, Sansa. May I?”

“Yes. Yes, please.”

She couldn’t see. She could feel though. Oh, God…she could feel. He kissed her knee and she whimpered. She moaned as she felt his breath on her thigh and then higher. She was already soaking wet by the time he touched her.

“You’re glistening, love. Such a pretty pink pussy, so sweet and wet,” she heard him mumble before he lightly kissed her curls down there.

“Oh, fuck…” She wantonly bucked her hips. It was pitch black behind the mask but she knew she’d be seeing stars before long.

“I’m leaving that negligee on you for this round but I want my mouth on those tits after this. I’ll do my best not to tear it off you.”

“Oh, shit…Jon.”

He dove in, grasping her hips firmly as he licked her slit. She writhed beneath him when he lightly sucked on her clit, blindly grasping at his curls.

“That’s right. Use me, love. Hold on tight.”

She knew very well that Jon prided himself on bringing her pleasure this way. He already knew what he was doing down there but there was something so intense about not seeing, only focusing on the sensations.

He lapped at her and murmured, “Like sugar on my tongue,” before he really began.

Just as he promised, she did forget her own name for a time that night but screamed his plenty.

The bowling alley was busy for a weekday but it was spring break so Grams said it made sense. Kids like to get out and do fun stuff rather than just sit home all day. Parents and grandparents seem to like that, too.

Unfortunately, Lyarra’s arm was getting tired and her thumb was sore even though she’d begged for
another game. Mina had asked for quarters to play video games instead. She’d admitted she was tired after bowling three frames. _I should’ve done that, too_, Lyarra thought as she gazed towards the little arcade area where Mina and Grams had gone a while ago.

But, David liked bowling and Lyarra wanted him to have a good time today. This was her and Mina’s last day with them before they’d join Mom and Dad at the cabin by the lake. When they returned home Saturday night, they’d only see them for a little bit since they’d be flying home to England the next morning. She didn’t like thinking about it.

Lyarra wondered how David felt about it. He’d been acting a little odd since yesterday morning when he’d come to breakfast wearing a suit and tie.

“*Where are you going?*” she’d asked.

“*Just a meeting, love.*”

“*But you don’t work here.*”

“We’ll see,” he’d said as he’d smiled and patted her cheek.

Grams had seemed extra happy all day. When David had returned home a couple of hours later, they’d spent a long time chatting in the kitchen while her while her and Mina worked on bead crafts at the dining table. It’d been rainy or Lyarra would’ve been outside kicking her ball. She hoped Mom and Dad weren’t too bored stuck in the cabin with it rainy.

She wasn’t patient enough for the little beads so she’d decided to listen to Grams and David talking in the background. They were happy about something but it didn’t make a ton of sense. She’d felt that familiar frustration of when grown-ups were talking about something important but it was flying just over her head.

However, by this afternoon, David had been strangely downcast and barely said a word as he drove them to the bowling alley. He usually made jokes about all the cars driving on the wrong side of the street in America. He hadn’t said that this time.

And, Grams hadn’t been her cheerful self either. She’d been quiet and her mouth had looked pinched like she was either trying not to cry or trying not to yell. It made Lyarra feel sickish.

What had happened? Had they argued? Was he missing England and eager to go home? Had he grown tired of being stuck with her and Mina this week and last?

“No, little lady,” he said gently when she worked up the courage to ask that last question. “Quite the opposite.”

“Then, why are you sad?”

“Who says I’m sad?”

David was a grown-up, older than Dad and older than Grams. He was clever, too. But he wasn’t much of what Uncle Theon would call a bluffer. She folded her arms across her chest and gave him the look that always made Dad laugh but also got him to tell her the truth if he was trying to shield her from something not-so-nice.

“Alright then,” he chuckled. “I guess I am a bit down-hearted but don’t worry about me.”

“Why wouldn’t I worry about you? I love you.” His eyes grew glassy and Lyarra’s throat got all
thick and tight. He was hurting. That made her hurt, too.

“Lyarra…do you know how much I love being your granddad?”

Her heart did a flutter. He’d never called himself her granddad before even though that’s what he was really. Maybe Grams hadn’t married him until Lyarra was four but he’d been more of a grandfather to her than Rhaegar Targaryen ever had been…even with living 4000 miles away.

“How much?”

“So very much,” he said as he pulled her into a crushing hug. “And I am sad to think of going home in a few days and not seeing you and Minisa or your father and Sansa for many, many days. I’m sad to think of not being here when your little brother or sister is born. I’m sad because I know how very sad all of it makes your grandmother, too.”

That made her sad, too. Her nose twitched and felt drippy. She buried her face in his neck and cried. She couldn’t believe she was crying in the middle of the bowling alley. What if one of her friends was here and saw her? But, she couldn’t help it.

She’d never cried on David before. She hoped he didn’t mind. He patted her back and said sweet things. She didn’t think he minded.

She wanted David and Grams to be here for the baby to be born. She wanted them to be here for Mina’s birthday next month and hers in May. She just wanted them here.

“Shush, love. It’ll be alright. You’ll make me blub my eyes out if you keep that up. That might make Grams and Mina cry, too.”

“You could move back,” she said as he wiped her face with the handkerchief he’d pulled from his pocket.

“We’d like to but it’s…complicated.”

Lyarra didn’t like that word very much. But, she didn’t know how to make any of that better. She was just a little girl. “Maybe something will happen to make it less complicated,” she offered hopefully.

“Maybe so. We’ll see,” he shrugged. He didn’t sound very confident.

Sansa was practically skipping beside him as the car came into view. Admittedly, he was excited, too.

Four glorious days of sleeping in (especially the day before yesterday when it’d rained all morning) and sex anytime they pleased had been marvelous but they’d dearly missed their girls. He supposed that was the conundrum most parents faced; you miss the luxury of uninterrupted couple time with your kids around but when you get a break, you wind up longing for the mayhem of family life again.
Lyarra’s door opened as soon as David had put the car in park and she came racing towards them. Lyarra was very fond of leaping into his arms when she was excited and he knew she’d missed them. He started to step between her and Sansa, fearful she might be too exuberant and not mindful of Sansa’s condition. But just as she reached them, she slowed down, walking into their arms instead of leaping. She’d be nine before long and Jon wondered if her days of leaping into his arms were almost done. He didn’t like to think of that.

He smiled to see Mina hurrying up behind her, already chattering about the drive there, how pretty the lake was and a type of bird she hoped to see when they took their nature hike later.

Hugs, kisses and a flurry of words were exchanged in the time it took his mother and David to join them. They were going to stay for lunch and then head back to his house afterwards to allow the four of them these three days together.

“Lunch is ready,” Sansa announced after hugging his mother and David. “It’s a beautiful day and we thought we’d eat on the back deck if that suits everyone.”

“That sounds perfect,” David said as Sansa escorted him and the girls inside.

Jon would’ve followed but his eyes were drawn to his mother. Something wasn’t right. The girls seemed happy but they were kids. There’d probably been hundreds of times his mother had been struggling and he’d failed to notice it when he’d been a kid. He wasn’t a kid anymore.

He grasped her hand before she could follow the others. “You alright, Mum?”

“I’m fine.”

“Did they wear you out?”

“No, they’ve been a delight. I haven’t got my hug yet.”

He held her close and could feel her shaking. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Mum…”

“It’s just…David didn’t get the job.”

He’d told her then. Jon was glad David had decided to share the news of his interview with his wife but on the other hand, it meant she was now suffering the disappointment of learning it had not gone as hoped.

“It went so well and he was feeling so optimistic when he came home Tuesday but then they called the yesterday and said they’d decided to offer it to someone within the department. He’s convinced he’s too old for anyone to take him on here. I don’t know if he’ll be willing to apply for something else at this point.”

“I’m sorry. They’re clearly idiots.”

She laughed. “They are.”

“There’s other jobs.”

“You’re right.” But then, her face crumpled and the ache in her voice killed him. “Jon…I don’t want to leave you all again.”
It was Saturday and the weather was amazing so he’d wanted to go boating today. Karsi was working though and his buddies were busy. He could still spend the day on the lake. Granted, he didn’t need his cabin for that but that’s where the boat was docked. He’d called Sansa and asked if she thought the girls or Jon would want to try wakeboarding.

“I don’t want to impose on your honeymoon obviously.” He never wanted to walk in on her and Jon again but he figured if the girls were there he’d be safe from that at least.

“No, that’d actually be awesome, Uncle Benjen. I’m sure they’d love it.”

“Guess you’ll want to stay on shore though?”

He’d got an emphatic yes from his niece. She’d never much cared for lake sports. That was alright. She’d mentioned making them fried chicken for dinner. His stomach was already growling at the thought.

“Dad’s down again!” Lyarra shouted from aft of his 224FS.

Benjen smirked, figuring Jon would say he’d taken that last bend a bit too sharply. Well, maybe I did. Every young man needs the piss taken out of them from time to time.

“Allright. Tell me when he gives the thumbs up, hun,” he told Lyarra as he eased off the throttle. “So, how do you know it’s a girl?” he asked Mina next as they waited for Jon to swim back to them. “I thought your mom’s ultrasound was next month.”

“Our friend Tanya from soccer told me about that Chinese Lunar Birth Chart thingy...”

“The what?”

“See, she told us how her aunt is going to have a baby at practice last week and that the baby’s coming around the same time as ours. She told me all about how the Chinese figured out how to tell what the baby will be by the mom’s birthday and the moon or something. Her aunt says she’s having a girl because of it and I told her I hoped Mommy would have a girl so Lyarra and I could have a little sister.”

“There’s nothing wrong with little brothers. I’m a little brother.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’re fine,” she said dubiously. “Anyway, she asked how old Mommy was and said since Mommy and her aunt are the same age she’s going to have a girl, too.”

“How’d she reckon that?”

“I dunno,” Mina shrugged. “But it’s scientific, she says.”

Benjen bit his lip to keep from laughing. “Well, we’ll know soon enough, I guess.” Lord, help. Twenty bucks says it’s a boy.

“I know! I can’t wait to see the pictures!”
“Hand me that water, will ya?”

“Sure thing.”

He looked back at Jon who was nearly ready. Fried chicken was calling his name and Lyarra was getting the last three turns. Jon would be wiping out quickly, he decided.

“Hey, Uncle Benjen?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you ever going to have any kids?” Mina asked.

He choked on his sip of water. “Um…well…” Had he wanted kids of his own at some point? Yeah. But, he’d stayed single for so long that he’d kind of given up on that. Karsi had two kids that were practically grown by her ex. They were good kids but he knew she wasn’t interested in having more so he supposed he wouldn’t either. He smiled and mussed Mina’s hair. “I don’t know but I know I’ve got plenty of nieces and nephews. I’ve got great-nieces and a great-nephew, too. I’m good, Little Red.”

“Dad’s ready!” Lyarra shouted.

“Alright. Tell him to hang on.” And prepare to get dunked again.

“Home, sweet home,” Sansa sighed to herself as she sank into her bubble bath.

Soft music and candles glowing, she closed her eyes and let the hot water sooth her aching muscles. She rarely indulged in bubble baths but she’d wanted it after all the activity the past couple of days with the girls at the lake. She might not have done any wakeboarding but hiking and fishing on top of lots of sex were more than enough exercise for her right now.

“Since you can’t have wine, I figured I’d bring you some ginger ale,” Jon said as he entered her retreat.

“Thank you. Are they asleep at last?”

“Yes.”

“Did Lyarra stop crying?”

“Yes.”

“My poor baby.”

“Then, Mina started.”

“Oh, no!”
“It’s alright, love. She’s asleep now. School will be back in session tomorrow and they’ll be back to the routine before you know it.”

“That’s true.”

Jon had told her about his conversation with his mother and about David’s interview. Sansa hated that it hadn’t gone as hoped. It had been very hard this morning when they’d driven them back to the airport. There’d been quite a few tears. She wished there was an easy way for them to move back but money didn’t grow on trees.

“I hate to think of going back to work tomorrow. This time has been so nice.”

Jon sat down on the edge of the tub. “It has but the honeymoon’s not over yet,” he said in that voice. She grinned. “Did you give your mother her mask back?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, that’s too bad then.”

“But I bought another one.”

“Oh?”

“Sure did.”

“Just for us?”

“Oh huh.”

“My smart husband.”

“I’m flattered. Shall I fetch it?”

“I’m not sure I’m in the mood to be blindfolded tonight.”

“Of course, love. I’ll let you enjoy your bath.”

“But I think I’m in the mood for you to take your clothes off and join me in my bath.”

“My smart wife has the best ideas.”

“Yes, I do.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, it'll be time for the big ultrasound appointment and we'll meet some new friends for Sansa and Jon.

Thank you for reading :)
Chapter Notes

Since it’s my husband’s favorite story, I’m posting this update today. Happy Father’s Day, honey! I’m sorry there’s not any smut ;P

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa came inside from opening car doors and greeting students a little after the bell rang for class to begin. She sat down the tray of blueberry muffins she’d baked and almost forgotten in the Pilot earlier.

Shae immediately snatched one. “This will make Tuesday bearable…almost,” she mumbled around a mouthful.

“You’re welcome and it’s a wonderful day. April 30th. The azaleas are blooming and so are the dogwoods. It’s sunny but still cool enough for a cardigan this morning. I love spring.”

“You are far too chipper to be at work today.”

“I won’t be at work all day,” she replied with a smile.

“That’s right. You’ve got the big one today, right?”

“I do.”

Megga clapped excitedly behind her. “Promise you’ll text us!”

“I will.”

“Maybe that’ll brighten his day, too,” Shae said pointing towards Jon’s closed door.

A parent-teacher conference had turned ugly yesterday afternoon. The parents were divorced and had wound up arguing before they’d decided to turn on the teacher. It was her first year teaching and she’d not remembered to ask anyone to sit in with her for the conference. The child had been reduced to tears and the young teacher had been as well before Coach Leathers had overheard the fracas and stepped in to settle things down.

Sansa frowned and almost wished they’d told Brienne they’d need to take the whole day. But Jon felt a keen sense of duty and he’d be the head principal next year so he was acting as mediator this morning on his own while Brienne minded the teacher’s kindergarten class. Sansa knew he’d handled his share of difficult discussions in the past in his role as an administrator but she hated for anything to potentially spoil the mood for today’s big news.

A fluttery sensation that had nothing to do with worry for her husband soon brought her smile back. The baby’s movements were becoming more frequent and noticeable. That was sweet.

What wasn’t so sweet was how heavy her own muffin from earlier was sitting right now. She sat
down at her desk with a very slight groan.

“Are you alright?” Megga chirped, rising to her feet. She seemed to be on high-alert already. Sansa wondered if she had clean towels, boiling water and a catcher’s mitt tucked under her desk somewhere.

“I’m fine. Just a little indigestion.”

“Small, frequent meals are best they say.”

“Yes, I know, Megga. I’ve been pregnant before but thank you.”

“How big is the baby now?” Myranda asked to divert things. She liked the weekly comparison to food.

She also liked Harry Hardyng but Sansa was staying out of that. They’d sat together at the wedding reception and wound up dancing to a couple of songs. According to Myranda, he’d asked for her number but never called, much to her friend’s disappointment.

Sansa felt sorry for her friend but respected that Harry was a recovering alcoholic and tackling a demanding new position. On top of fatherhood, it could be a delicate balancing act and, if he was holding back from pursuing anything with Myranda, it may be because even casual dating could be demanding in its way and he might not be ready yet. Sansa was the closest Harry had ever come to having a mature, romantic relationship and he’d been very far from mature for 95% of their time together.

However, she did want good things for them both and if he was concerned about dating Myranda simply because she was Sansa’s co-worker and friend perhaps she could give him that much reassurance.

She looked at her app to answer Myranda’s question. “Since I’m between 19 and 20 weeks, looks like the baby’s the size of a mango or a sweet potato.”

“Mmm…sweet potatoes,” Shae said as she snagged another muffin.

“Is it true mangos are an aphrodisiac to men?”

“I don’t know,” Sansa scoffed.

“Are there any foods that turn you on, Sansa?”

“No! I mean…well, I have been told I tend to moan a lot when I eat lemon-flavored treats.”

“Is that why Jon keeps running to that bakery downtown for those lemon cakes every other day?” Myranda smirked.

He had been keeping her well-stocked in lemon cakes. “I mentioned I was craving them a bit. He usually makes a fuss if the girls try and bring food to our bed but the other night he, um…”

She felt herself flushing. He’d brought her one to their bedroom after the girls were asleps. He’d then talked her into eating it naked while he was busy making her moan in other ways. Neither one of them had worried over the crumbs in their sheets.

She raised her hand to her cheek. It was on fire and she was smiling rather dazedly. Myranda was still smirking.
“We shouldn’t talk about these things at work,” Megga squeaked, looking scandalized.

“I love mangos but I could definitely go for some sweet potato fries at lunch,” Shae chimed in.

Sansa blanched at the thought of fried foods this early. And later, I’ll be wolfing down anything that doesn’t move. Her appetite had been increasing a good deal. For food and other things. Wonder if Jon likes mangos.

Her phone dinged with a text and it was Harry asking her to give him a call. She slipped into the file room, not wanting to be overheard by the others.

“Hey, Harry. What’s up?”

“What time’s your appointment today?”

“1:30. Are you…” Are you bailing on us? She bit her tongue and rephrased that question in her mind before asking, “Is there a conflict?”

“No, shouldn’t be. Well, the new accountant quit on the fly so it’s a little topsy-turvy over here but it’s not my department so I don’t have a dog in that fight. I just wanted to confirm so I could let them know I’d be leaving before 3 to get Mina and not returning. I also wanted to ask if you minded me taking Mina to see that Pokémon movie next weekend.”

“I’ve not seen the trailer yet and it’s PG.”

“She’s nine and I’ll be watching it with her.”

Sansa sighed at the reminder that their daughter was officially nine now. Jon and her had hosted a sleepover with eight girls including their own last weekend. There’d been lots of giggling way past lights out and poor Abby had woke up crying around 3 AM, wanting to go home after a bad dream. Jon had probably broken a world record for telling the most dorky dad jokes to get her laughing again. The other girls had woke up to listen. No one had wound up getting much sleep and their girls had been cranky butts well before dinner time the next night but she was happy Mina had enjoyed her party.

“I know Lyarra wants to see that movie as well.”

“I could take her, too. Or I could ask Jon if he’d want to join us. You could come if you want of course.”

“I think I’ll pass on Pokémon.”

Harry laughed. Sansa would take Mina to anything based on the classics like ‘Heidi’, Disney films or live-action animal movies she wanted to see. By agreement, Harry was ‘volunteered’ to take her to anything else.

“So what happened to the hot new accountant? I thought she was some whizbang with numbers.”

“A whizbang with an offer from another company.”

“Okay…”

“In Hawaii.”

“Nice.”
“Said she’s always wanted to live on the beach.”

“I can’t say I blame her.”

“Yeah but it’s less money than she thinks if you figure up the higher cost of living there.”

“And she’s the accountant?”

“I know, right?”

“Look at you sounding all responsible.”

“Scary, huh? Anyway, Uncle Jon is grumbling about the younger generation being flighty again.”

“I’ll bet.” The wheels were starting to turn. An accountant. And Mr. Arryn is rather old-fashioned.

“Say, Harry…how does your great uncle feel about hiring more experienced people?”

The call ended a few minutes later. Sansa had just returned to her desk when Jon’s door opened. The parents seemed to be in a better frame of mind than yesterday. The office ladies feigned busyness for the sake of not revealing themselves to be the big old snoops that they were. Once the parents left, Miss Cassel turned towards Jon to thank him again for his help.

“It’s no problem, Beth. That’s my job. We can talk again later if you have any concerns at all.”

“Thank you, Mr. Snow. I’ll go relieve Ms. Tarth now.”

“Alright. I’ll be in my office if anyone needs me,” Jon added with a significant glance Sansa’s way.

She waited until things had settled for a few minutes before heading down the short hallway to his office. “Did it go alright, honey?”

“Better than I’d hoped,” he shrugged. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. I’m excited about today.”

“Me, too.” He didn’t sound excited. She gave him an appraising look. He noticed. “Mum called me right before the meeting.”

“Still depressed?”

“Afraid so.”

Which depresses you, too. “I’m very sorry to hear that.” She walked around the desk to rub his shoulders. It was not secretarial behavior. It was wife behavior but she figured he might need his wife right now.

Lyanna had been battling depression since returning to England a month ago. Sansa feared David might be as well but he tended to hide it better. Lyanna had been asking her about the planned visit today just yesterday and then cut off the conversation mid-sentence and said she needed to check on dinner. It would’ve been around 2PM in her time zone and Lyanna didn’t typically fix meals that required hours of preparation.

“Does she still want us to call her tonight?”

“Yes. She’s very eager to hear all about it. I just hope she doesn’t start crying.”
“And did she say anything about David?”

“Just that he says he’s too busy with work to apply for other positions right now. It sounds like they’ve been quarreling but I don’t like prying too much. I feel miserable for them but I can’t do anything to solve it.”

“Hmm. How long has David been an accountant?”

“Oh, uh…he’s nearly 58 so over 30 years, I’d guess.”

“Wonder how he feels about plastics manufacturing.”

“What?”

“What if there was a potential position available over here? One where they might be looking for someone stable to be their next accountant…mature even?”

He spun his chair around, grasped her hands and gave her an inquisitive look. “What have you been up to, Mrs. Snow?” he asked, the grin slowly spreading across his face.

He tugged at her hand, pulling her into his lap. She let him. Not secretarial behavior at all. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Uh huh.”

“Harry called and had some news is all.”

“I see.” He was licking his lips and staring at hers. Megga might faint if she walked in right now. Actually, someone could walk in.

Sansa jumped up, earning a pout that was satisfying to her currently body-conscious ego if nothing else and smoothed down her dress. “I’ll tell you all about it on our way to the doctor’s office later, Mr. Snow.”

“How does it work?” Parker asked.

He looked half scared. Several of the others were listening in. Mina liked having information to share. It was almost like she was the teacher of lunch time.

“There’s this wide plastic stick-like thing. Mommy called it a wand.”

“Like a magic wand?”

She didn’t know. Teachers were supposed to know answers though. “Yes, like that. Anyway, Mommy says they put this gel stuff on her tummy and rub the wand over it and they can see the baby on the computer screen.”

“Like an x-ray?”
“Kind of, I guess. But they can hear the baby’s heartbeat, too.”

“Like a microphone?”

“Uh huh. Mommy had an old DVD of when she had her ultrasound with me and we watched it last night. It was kind of hard to tell much at first but when she pointed out my head or my foot, I could see it. There was one good shot of my face but it was all scrunchy looking.”

“Weird. Will they find out if it’s a boy or girl?”

“Of course they will.”

“My mom said she wanted to be surprised with me and waited until I was born.”

“Well, we’re finding out now but anyway, it’s a girl.”

“You’re very sure of that.”

“I just have a feeling I’m meant to have a little sister…besides just Lyarra. And the lunar calendar thing is supposed to be scientific.”

Parker nodded. If a thing was scientific, it couldn’t be wrong, could it? She had a 50-50 chance of being right so she’d decided to be right.

“Lyarra and I have a bet running with my Uncle Bran, too. He says boy and we say girl. His girlfriend is actually the one who waves the wand around at Mommy’s doctor’s office but we told Meera she couldn’t cheat to make her boyfriend right. She promised she wouldn’t.”

“Cool.”

Mina glanced towards Lyarra who was chatting with her friends at Miss Manderly’s table. She felt kind of bad for her sister. Last night after they’d watched Mina’s movie, she’d asked Jon why there wasn’t a DVD of her inside her mom’s tummy. He’d looked sad but said her mom hadn’t asked for a copy and he hadn’t been at the appointment.

“Why not?”

“You mother and I weren’t…together then. It wasn’t until later that she told me I was going to have a little girl. But I was very excited when she did. I’ve still got the pictures she gave me.”

He’d brought out the little wallet-sized black and white photos. Lyarra had seemed like she was trying to decide how she felt about him not having a movie like Mommy did so Mina had said she could tell more from the pictures than the video. It wasn’t really a lie. The pictures didn’t jump and move like the video did.

“So, is Mr. Snow going with your mom?”

“Oh, yes. I wish I could go too but they promised to pick me up from my dad’s after dinner and said we’d all go have ice cream.” What could be more perfect?

“I think I’d rather have ice cream than a little brother or sister,” Parker said before digging into his pretzels.

Mina frowned at him. Boys could be so odd. It was a good thing the baby was a girl.
Jon let out a long sigh and checked his watch again. He’d been filled with nervous excitement when they’d arrived but Sansa had been called back by the nurse nearly thirty minutes ago. Now, he was feeling more bored than anything. Okay, to be honest, the nerves were still with him. Mostly, he wanted to know that their child was healthy and developing as expected. He wasn’t thinking too much about the gender, not consciously anyway. Normally, they would’ve come to fetch him to join her after five or ten minutes.

Well, you are just sort of along for the ride when it comes to this part.

Sometimes, he felt more in the way than anything when they’d be in the small exam room and the doctor would be asking Sansa questions or Sansa would be asking her own.

Then, speak up and ask if you have questions. They’re not going to bite you just because you possess a Y chromosome.

Several women had gone in and out of the door that led to the back hallway. What were they doing with Sansa? Was she alright? Had they forgotten about him?

Sansa wouldn’t let them forget about me. Just relax.

He could be patient. He could be a little bit patient at least.

There was a soap opera playing on the television. The sound was low but the melodramatic music was getting annoying. He stretched his legs out from the cramped quarters and got a baleful glare from a woman sitting across from him. He murmured an apology and quickly drew his legs back, not meaning to be rude. By just, you know…existing.

He glanced at the small table next to him. There were several magazines on it about childbirth and parenting. He’d read a couple of the books Sansa had at home but more information couldn’t hurt. He randomly flipped to an article and found himself reading horror stories about botched episiotomies and ‘the husband stitch.’ He cringed and started to cross his legs before making a mental note to mention that he didn’t want them doing anything like that to his wife and laying the magazine back down.

He spied a Sports Illustrated on the table across the room. I need to stretch my legs anyway. He moved to another chair after retrieving the magazine. It was an issue from November…two years ago. College hoops and football…from two years ago. He rolled his eyes and tossed it aside to check his watch again.

He’d not gone to every appointment but he was making it to the ones he could. Sansa had said he was welcome to come to any of them but only if he liked. She’d said Harry had only come to ‘the big one.’ Weren’t they all big in their own way?

He knew Harry hadn’t been a supportive partner when she’d been expecting Mina. Jon wanted to be the epitome of a supportive partner for his wife.

The exact opposite of Rhaegar. He grimaced, thinking of his father’s hands-off approach to parenting. At least with me and Mum.

Stop thinking about him!
Val hadn’t even told him she was pregnant until she was nearly seven months along. It’d taken some time before she’d started to allow him to be as involved as he’d wanted to be. That had been her choice and he knew she could’ve waited even longer to tell him about the baby, if ever. He was grateful she hadn’t kept the news from him. What if she’d decided to remain in Europe after she found out she was pregnant? What would’ve happened to Lyarra if he’d been left in the dark and then Val had died? Who would have she have wound up with? Would she have grown up thinking her father was as indifferent to her existence as his father had been about his?

He shuddered not liking the flow of these thoughts.

*Then, stop thinking that way! I need them to come get me so I’ll stop sitting here and thinking too much.*

Yeah, he was not a big fan of sitting in doctor’s waiting rooms.

*Who is?*

*Well, maybe that guy.*

The only other man in the waiting room at present was sitting right across from him since his move. He was a big guy with a friendly face. He was happily smiling to himself as he pecked at his phone. Jon wondered if he was playing a game.

“Clash of Clans,” the man said as if Jon had actually spoken.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m playing Clash of Clans. Helps pass the…um, never mind.”

He looked embarrassed. Jon didn’t want the guy to feel embarrassed. “I’ve never played it. Some of the kids at school talk about it.”

Now, the guy looked even more uncomfortable. *Shit. You made it sound like something only kids would do.*

“I like games,” Jon ventured next.

The guy gave him an uncertain smile. *‘I like games?’ Wow, that sounded weird.* Small talk with strangers wasn’t exactly his thing any more than waiting in doctor’s offices was.

“I’m Jon Snow and I hate waiting in doctor’s offices.” He stuck out his hand.

He got chuckle and a handshake from that. “I’m Sam Tarly and I don’t care for them either. Thus, the time waster.” He held out his phone.

It looked like a cartoon version of a fortified medieval village. “Looks…interesting.”

“It can be addictive. My wife likes teasing me about it. You waiting on them to come fetch you, too?”

“Yes, my wife is supposed to be having her 20 week ultrasound today.”

“Oh, that’s a big one. Gilly…she’s my wife, is 24 weeks along. It’s our first.”

“Ours, too. Well, it’s our first together.” He scratched at his beard feeling awkward now but Sam didn’t make any comment. “So, are you having a boy or girl?”
“Boy.”

“Congratulations. Sansa and I have two daughters between us.”

“That’s lovely. How old?”

“Eight. I mean…well, Mina just turned nine and Lyarra will be nine in a couple of weeks.”

“That’s marvelous that they’re close in age.”

The two of them fell into an amiable discussion about their families and jobs and other things. He didn’t know when he’d ever felt so comfortable with someone after so short a period of time except for maybe Theon.

The nurse came to the door and called his name. “That’s me.”

“It was nice to meet you, Jon. Maybe I’ll see you again when we’re stuck waiting.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind waiting so much then. It was nice to meet you, Sam.”

“Sorry for the wait, Dad,” the nurse said jokingly as they headed back. “Are you ready to join your wife and find out if it’ll be pink or blue in the nursery?”

“Yes, of course.” Why was his stomach suddenly twisted up like a knot?

“So, this is my number…”

“And here’s mine.”

“Once school is out, I’ll have plenty of free time but I’m free most weekends anyway. Oh, would you want to come over this weekend maybe? I’m sure Jon and Sam would get along. We could grill out.”

“Yes, please! It’d be so nice to have friends here. Relocating was necessary for Sam’s job but it’s terribly lonely with my mother and sisters so far away. I didn’t want to find a job right now with the little one on the way but our neighbors are either older or single and…”

“Sansa?” the nurse called. “Since Dr. Hornwood is still tied up, we’re going to go ahead and take you to ultrasound.”

“Okay.” She glanced at the clock on her phone and did a double take. Didn’t time always fly when you were having fun? “It’s been lovely getting to know you, Gilly. I’ll call you later, alright?”

“Yes and tell me what you’re having!”

Her OB had been called away for a delivery at the hospital next door. So, after the usual routine of peeing in a cup, the dreaded weigh-in, having her blood pressure checked and getting asked if there was anything she wanted to talk to the doctor about without her partner being present, Sansa had
been sent to wait in a smaller waiting area right outside the exam rooms.

The two little benches available weren’t terribly comfortable but she wouldn’t complain. It was where she’d met Gilly Tarly who had moved to town in February after her husband’s job transfer. Gilly was expecting her first child, a boy, who was due about four weeks ahead of hers. In their twenty minute discussion, they’d covered a lot of information and now Sansa felt like she had a wonderful new friend. She hadn’t minded the wait at all.

She was led into an exam room where Jon was already waiting. He leapt to his feet to give her a kiss the second he saw her. “Hey, stranger.”

“Hi! I hope you’ve not been worried. Hello, Meera.”

“Hey, Sansa. Help her onto the table for me, Jon, and we’ll get started.”

Sansa loved her OBGYN. Her mother and Arya saw Dr. Hornwood, too. But she didn’t just love her doctor, she loved all the staff here.

Naturally, Meera was more than that to her though. She was a couple of years older than Bran but they’d been dating since meeting through their dads years ago. They made a lovely couple. And when her highly intelligent but sometimes esoteric brother began to get a little carried away by some new obsession, Meera kept him grounded.

“Oh, that’s cold!” Sansa hissed as Meera spread the gel across her tummy. Jon grasped her hand. He’d been so wonderfully attentive. It was a huge contrast to the first time she’d gone through this.

“Sorry about that. Okay, the serious stuff first,” Meera said as she returned to her stool and began taking dozens of measurements.

The lighting was low in the room and the exam table was actually more comfortable than the little bench she’d shared with Gilly. And on the monitor she could see their baby and through the speakers she could hear its heart beating. She was relaxed and couldn’t be happier as Meera recited various things which she only half understood. She understood enough. Their child was developing as expected and that was what mattered. She glanced at Jon who was smiling down at her.

“Alright. Last chance if you don’t want to know ahead of time,” Meera told them as she started moving the wand again.

“We want to know.”

“Okay then,” Sansa barely had a moment to think about it before Meera was chuckling to herself. “Well, that didn’t take long. It’s a boy. God, Bran is going to be so smug. Can we lie to him for a little bit, Sansa?”

Sansa beamed at her not even comprehending Meera’s teasing. “A boy,” she breathed. She thought of her little nephew and how the boys could grow up close like brothers. She would’ve been happy either way but she was already picturing him now; Jon and Lyarra’s soft, dark curls on a tiny little head and dark eyes.

Perhaps they’ll be blue. Baby blue eyes for our baby boy.

She turned to look at Jon again. He’d let go of her hand. Her smile faded when she saw his face. His shoulders were hunched and his eyes were studying the floor. The tension could be felt in the air.

“Jon?” He shook his head and turned away. “Meera, could you give us a minute?” she asked, willing
herself not to cry. She didn’t know why he’d react this way. A safe pregnancy and delivery with a healthy baby was all he’d said mattered to him.

Meera had been busy making a few notes but she looked at them both when Sansa spoke.

“I’ll be right outside,” she said with a furrowed brow before she left the room.

“Jon?”

“It’s stupid,” he muttered.

But it wasn’t really. This was their baby. How could anything about it be stupid?

*Think, Sansa.*

He was profoundly moved by this information and not in a good way. Why? She was worried by his tone, his body language and everything about him at the moment.

“What is it?” she prodded gently. “Are you…” She swallowed hard. It was difficult to say it. “…disappointed?”

She never would’ve imagined a man being disappointed to learn he was having a son. She certainly never would’ve expected this from Jon.

“No, love.” There were tears in his eyes when he turned back to face her. “I could never be disappointed by something as wonderful as our baby. I just…”

“You thought it would be a girl?”

“I did. The girls were so convinced and I just let myself believe they were right.”

“But that’s not all is it?”

“No,” he admitted. He sat down in the chair, the one he’d sprung out of earlier when she’d entered the room and not sat in since until now. “I’m scared.”

“Scared?”

Everything had been perfect with the scan. She was healthy and their son was, too. But like a lightbulb flicking on, she realized what the real issue might be. She decided to let him work through it before she said anything.

“I’m scared because I worry about being a good father to him.”

“Jon, you’re a great father.”

“To Lyarra, to Mina. I said it was stupid.”

“It’s not stupid if it has you this distressed but I promise you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

He covered his face and his words were muffled through his hands. “What if I’m…my father was a good dad to Rhae. But with me…what if I’m like that?”

“You are not your father, Jon. You could never be like him. You may get half your DNA from him but it was your mother who raised you and helped make you the man you are. You see the big picture in a way your father never could. You know the things that matter most. You’re kind and
giving. You’re a terrific father. Son or daughter, we’re going to love this baby so much…aren’t we?”

“Of course, we are,” he said as his face crumpled. “Sansa, I’m so sorry. I’m an…”

“Stop it. I’ll cry too if you do.” Too late. She wiped her eyes and reached for him. He was back beside her in a flash. “Meera is waiting and we’re going to have a son. No more I’m sorry’s. Give me a kiss instead.”

He laughed and wiped his own eyes before doing just that. “A son. What will we name him?”

“We have time to choose. We could name him Jon.”

“No,” he demurred. “I…I’m sure we can come up with something.”

“We could name him David. He’ll never have any children of his own but we’re his family.”

“David,” he repeated. “I’d really like that.”

“I started considering it after Eddard was off the table. It’s Hebrew for beloved.”

“He’ll certainly be loved. Thank you, Sansa.”

“I didn’t…”

“Yes, you did. You understood. You understand me even when I don’t understand myself at times. I love you.” He cupped her face. “You’re having my baby.” He leaned down to kiss her softly again.

“I love you, too. Promise not to sing Paul Anka at me?”

He laughed and nodded. “That’s a promise.”

The rest of the afternoon and evening had passed swiftly. In the typical style of children, the girls had had a strong initial reaction to the news but had adapted to it by the time they’d got their ice cream. Lyarra had said she’d teach the baby everything about football just like he’d taught her. “If you coach his team when he’s my age, I’ll be 18. Maybe I could be your assistant coach or something.”

“I’d love that, baby. You could even coach by then and maybe I could be your assistant.”

“Wow! Me a soccer coach? Coaching boys?”

“Why not you? Why couldn’t you coach boys? I get to coach girls, don’t I?” He thought his daughters could do anything if they tried. Coaching was no exception. He was only tempted to cry a little bit at the thought of her being 18. It’s raining on my face.

“You know, Dad…you’re going to have to stop calling me baby. We’re going to have a new baby at home. He’ll be the baby.”

“Yes, you’re right…baby.”

Mina, who had been the more confident regarding the baby’s gender, wound up taking the news in stride as well. “Science is not perfect.”
“No, it’s not but very few things are.”

“This ice cream comes pretty close to perfect.”

“It certainly does, sweetheart.”

She had then decided her little brother would like playing school when he was big enough and he’d be the perfect pupil.

“Could we get some of those preschool workbooks? I could teach him his colors and letters and numbers and…I’ll have him all set for kindergarten!”

“He’s going to be our little baby for a while,” Sansa said, clearly not wanting to think of the child still growing inside her going off to school yet.

It was after seven when he called his mother. They’d already sent a text with the gender news and that all was well but he’d wanted to talk over the name with them as well as other things. He would’ve taken some satisfaction in waking her for a change but she’d already been up waiting for his call. He’d asked to speak with David after a few minutes.

“Mum? Is David…”

“You made him cry.”

“Oh, shit.”

“It’s not a complaint, Jon.”

“It was Sansa who suggested the name but I loved it at once and it felt right.”

“I think he’s very touched. And I love you all so much. I can’t wait to meet Baby David and I really want to come back!” she ended with a sob.

“I know, I know. About that…can David talk with me again? Sansa spoke with Harry earlier today and there’s something we wanted to run by him.”

“Sure. Hang on a minute, love. He wandered upstairs to have his cry, the old softie.”

Jon waited for his step-father to come back on the line. He was still berating himself for his initial reaction to the news. He’d wanted to be the epitome of a supportive partner for Sansa and he’d freaked out temporarily over the gender causing his wife to worry.

“I can hear you beating yourself up from over here,” Sansa said quietly from where she was propped up on the couch, finishing the last lemon cake. He’d need to make another trek downtown tomorrow.

“I’m not…well, I am. Sorry.”

She smiled at him knowingly and he needed to be closer. He moved from his recliner to sit at her feet, pulling them into his lap. She immediately started moaning when he began squeezing. She loved a good foot massage. Meanwhile, the moaning had his mind turning another direction.

Girls are still up and you’re on the phone for fucks sake.

“We all have worries, Jon.”

“I know. What are your worries, love?”
“Right now, I’m just worried I’ll fall asleep here if you keep squeezing my feet.”

“That’s no reason to worry. Fall asleep if you like. I’ll take care of the girls and then carry you to bed.”

“I’m probably getting too heavy for you to lift.”

“Not by a long shot,” he whispered as David came on the phone.

“‘Lo again, Jon.” His voice was still more of a croak. “Sorry about earlier.”

“Don’t apologize. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I just didn’t expect it but I’m chuffed to bits.”

“I’m glad.”

“I love you, Jon. I love all of you.”

“We love you, too.”

It didn’t matter that Rhaegar Targaryen had fathered him. His mother had raised him and she’d been all the parent any boy could need. He knew he’d sometimes fail but he would never stop trying to be the best father he could possibly be to all of his children. And despite not having a father figure in his life growing up, he had a wonderful one now. Two actually since he felt the same about Ned.

David cleared his throat and continued. “Lyanna said there was something you wanted to talk about?”

“Yes, there is.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! There’s three planned chapters left (maybe four if I’m as undisciplined as usual) and I really don’t know how I feel about that :/
“Now, I know all of you are eager to start your summer break...” Ear-shattering screeches that would make his dogs whimper met his ears in the packed auditorium. He held up a hand to quiet them. “I’m going to need you teachers to settle down. I’m sure the kids are excited, too.” Scattered chuckles that could be described as polite at best followed. Sansa was biting her lip but more in embarrassment on his behalf, he suspected. He sighed and shoved his glasses up his nose. Stick to the script, Snow.

“Before we dismiss you for the final time, I wanted to take a second to recognize a woman who Chelsea Elementary has been very blessed to call our principal for the past seven years, a woman who has taught me everything I know about being an administrator and a whole lot more. She’s someone we all greatly admire and I know she’s going to do amazing things as the head principal at Black Castle High next year. Some of you students may be lucky enough to have her as your principal again someday but on behalf of the students, faculty and staff here today, I want to say thank you, Ms. Tarth, for everything. We’re going to miss you very much. So, to wrap up our assembly, Ms. Frey and the 5th Grade Chorus have put together something special for us all to mark the occasion.”

Jon signaled Coach Leathers to dim the lights so the photo montage could begin as the chorus students sang Green Day’s ‘Good Riddance.’

He stepped away from the podium to find Brienne twisting a lone tissue in her hands and glaring at him. She loathed the prospect of crying in public which he knew very well. Jon reached into his pocket for a handkerchief but Jaime Lannister beat him to it. He did take a childish satisfaction out of claiming the seat beside her though and did not think he was imagining Lannister’s irritated huff.

“I’m never forgiving you for this,” she hissed in his ear.

“You will, too. And, I did nothing. This was the 5th graders’ idea with Ami’s help.”

“Bullshit.”

“Swear jar, Ms. Tarth,” he snickered under his breath.

“You approved this...behind my back.”

“Enjoy the video, Brienne. I won’t tell anyone you cried.”

“They’re all going to know,” she whined. “I’m going to bawl my eyes out. My face will be all blotchy for hours afterwards.” He hummed in response. “I’m going to wipe my snotty nose on you.”
“I love you, too,” he whispered before putting an arm around her shoulders.

There were tears. There may have been snot. There were also many, many hugs afterwards and Brienne smiled and laughed more than she cried.

An hour later, Jon strolled down the halls of the nearly empty school to make sure everything was in order. He’d be there a few more days but would soon be enjoying his two months of freedom with Sansa and the girls before it was time to return in August and prepare for the new school year.

Oh, it wouldn’t all be rest and relaxation for those two months. There was a nursery to prepare and some other household projects he had in mind. He’d also be busy helping his parents find a place.

After a few phone interviews with Mr. Arryn, David had been offered and accepted the accounting position with Arryn Industries. He was working out his notice with his current employer and would then be flying in to stay with them for a few weeks while he got started. Unfortunately, someone had to pack up the house in England and prepare it to sell which fell to his mother. She was more than a little frustrated that David got to return three weeks ahead of her.

“Frustrated doesn’t cover it, Jon.”

“I know, Mum. We’re looking forward to you arriving though. Are all the fellows down at the pub in mourning that you’re leaving?”

“They have talked about hosting a little send-off during the next Champions League match.”

“What does David think of leaving you there alone with all your boyfriends for three weeks?”

“Don’t get cheeky, Jonathan.”

Despite her delayed return, he knew she was overjoyed at the job situation working out and that she would be back well before the baby was due.

Once it was time to get back to work, Jon would be heading up Chelsea Elementary and getting to know Ms. Santagar, his new assistant principal better. Sansa would be with him at the start of the school year along with the other office ladies. That was until she delivered. After that, they weren’t so certain.

She’d done a few free-lance projects for Harry to try out her marketing degree and liked it. She’d also indicated that she might want to stay home the first year after the baby was born. That suited Jon fine. He wanted her to have that opportunity which hadn’t been possible for her with Mina. He wanted her to be happy with whatever she chose to do in the future though if she did decide not to return, he would admit he’d greatly miss seeing her beautiful smiles every time he stepped into the office.

He was greeted with one of those now as he entered to find Lyarra perched on the counter telling Megga and Randa about their plans to go swimming next so long as it didn’t thunderstorm. He cringed as he glanced out the window. Not looking too promising, baby.

But poor Mina was sniffling and wiping at her eyes. She was leaning against Sansa who could no longer comfortably accommodate her sitting in her lap.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“She’s alright. Just a little sad.”
“I’m going to miss Mrs. Flint. She was my favorite teacher ever.”

“I know but you say that every year, baby,” Sansa mumbled.

“I’m going to miss Ms. Tarth. She was the best principal ever.” She gave him a guilty look. “I mean, you’ll be my favorite once you’re the…” She trailed off and more tears came.

Sansa did not appear all that concerned over their daughter’s heartbreak but it broke him. He scooped Mina up in his arms, shushing her tears as her shoulders shook. “My sweet Mina, we’ll see Ms. Tarth around some, I’m sure. And Mrs. Flint will be here next year. You can always pop in and visit. I’m sure you’ll enjoy 4th grade.”

“But what if I wind up with Mrs. Dustin, Dad?” she asked fearfully. “She hates me.”

“She does not hate you. Who could hate my girl?” But there’s no way I’m assigning you to her class after the whiteboard debacle last summer. “And I wouldn’t worry about who your teacher will be next year today. School’s out for summer. What can we do to cheer you up?”

She blinked and then tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. “Could we maybe go to the mall after swimming?”

“Of course, we can, sweetheart. Is there something there you wanted?”

“Jon…” Sansa warned.

The tears had disappeared but her blue eyes were still sparkling. “Build-a-Bear has characters available to go along with the Pokémon movie. I’d love to get an Eevee. Can I, please?”

You walked right into that, Dad. Mina’s expression was heart melting. Sansa’s was somewhere between amused and vexed. “Um…well, you and Lyarra did very well on your report cards and Mom and I can talk about…”

She wrapped her skinny arms around his neck, squeezing the life out of him as she squealed with delight.

Sansa mouthed something at him. It might’ve been the word ‘sucker.’

Yeah, that’s me.

As the four of them headed to his Pilot a few minutes later, thunder rolled in the distance and Lyarra sighed. “No swimming then?”

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m sure Bran will invite us over another day.”

“Maybe it’ll be nice tomorrow and we can set up the sprinkler,” Sansa said, putting an arm around her.

“It’s okay. Today was already a sad day.”

He’d never expected Lyarra to describe the last day of school as sad. But upon reflection, she had known Brienne since before she’d even started school.

“You sad about Brienne leaving?”

“Yeah, Dad.”
“Do you want to talk about it, sweetie?”

Lyarra gave Sansa a perplexed look. “Mom…we just talked about it.” And then she shrugged signaling that the topic was concluded. That was pretty typical for her. “Can I get a Pysduck since Mina’s getting an Eevee?”

“Well…”

“Um…”

“And ice cream?”

School was out and summer was ahead of them. He was happy…even when he left the mall later that day much poorer than when he’d arrived.

“GOOOOOOOOOAL!!” Rhae shouted before she stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled long and loud.

It was just a Friday night recreational indoor league for 30-somethings like him. No one ever did more than high five a goal and even that was considered pushing it. Only the most devoted girlfriends attended their games, hardly ever any wives.

So, was Theon blushing like a teenager because his girlfriend was cheering for him?

Well, yeah.

And, despite the razzing his teammates would likely give him, not to mention Jon, was he glad she was here?

Fuck, yeah.

“How many drinks you put in her before dragging her here tonight, Greyjoy?”

Redwyne was a teammate…and an asshole. “One. Which by my reckoning is precisely one more than the number of goals you’ve scored all season.” That earned him the bird and some laughs from the others. He’d never liked that prick anyway. “Be sure and take your hand for a drink later since it’ll be the only action you’re likely to get,” he added under his breath as the whistle was blown to signal the end of the match.

The shouts of ‘BEER! BEER!’ rang out from several of the guys but Theon grabbed his water and headed over to where Rhae and Jon were sitting on the small set of bleachers. He could drink with those guys some other time.

He’d tried to get Jon to join the team but his friend had given a polite refusal, only promising to come catch a match at some point. Tonight had been the night. Theon wondered if Sansa had given him permission to come. Considering that he probably wouldn’t be playing if Rhae wasn’t supportive of it, he figured he’d better not ask that.
Theon checked the time on Rhæ’s watch and gasped, “It’s nearly midnight, Cinderella. We gotta get you back from the ball.”

“Shut up, idiot.”

“Idiot?! That’s not what you were calling me last week.”

He ignored Jon’s pained groan. Rhæ did, too. “My idiot soccer stud. How’s that?”

“Much better. Jon, you want to go for drinks with us?”

“I should probably head home. Sansa’s rethinking the nursery colors and wants to head to Home Depot bright and early. Not a word, Greyjoy.”

Theon bit his tongue. “Hey, I’m just happy you came to admire my skills tonight.”

“I was here to defend my sister from any creeps that might be loitering around this time of night.” Theon gave his best wounded look. “And to watch your amazing showcase of football prowess.”

“I detect some sarcasm. You owe me a beer for scoring.”

“Alright, one beer.”

Theon grinned, probably looking like someone just told him Santa Claus was real and bringing him another Liverpool title for Christmas. Well, they did win the Champions League. He may have given a giddy little hop as they headed outside, happy to have Jon come along with them if only for a little while.

He loved that Jon had found the one for him. He loved all of them and was excited for them to be expanding their family before too long but he missed having as much time with his friend as they once did. He got it. Jon was a family man and that’s where his focus should be. It still didn’t change the fact that he missed Jon sometimes even with Rhæ turning out to be the one for him.

And, to be honest, Theon might’ve been feeling a teensy bit jealous, too. Sansa and Jon had made friends with a new couple; a couple who were already married, like they were, and expecting a little boy soon, like they were. He could see that for him and Rhæ at some point but not just yet.

And while Sam Tarly had seemed alright, Theon had been a bit taken aback to see him and Jon paling around like old buddies over air hockey when he’d never even heard of the guy before they’d met by happenstance last weekend.

He and Rhæ had decided to swing by Adventure Station for wings and a round of Skeeball. You know, sort of a ‘winner chooses the position later’ type thing.

But then they’d run into Jon, Sansa and the girls there with another couple. Jon had said the Tarlys were new to town and they’d met at Sansa’s doctor’s office. They’d had the Snows over for dinner and the ladies had suggested taking the girls to play putt-putt afterwards.

Jon had said Doctor Tarly had recently been transferred to the government’s research facility nearby by the DOE. Theon had asked if he had a fingerprint or retinal scanner outside his office. The guy had chuckled nervously in response and asked what Theon did for a living.

“I’m a shipwright and I do some semi pro inland powerboat racing on the side,” he’d answered.

The big guy’s eyes had boggled with interest. Jon’s eyes had boggled because it was a lie. Managing
a call center for a boating manufacturer paid alright but it was, um…not exciting.

*I mean, we do build boats and occasionally I take them out for a test drive so…*

Theon had left Adventure Station in a sour mood even after soundly beating Jon at air hockey, a rarity. He’d trounced Sam as well but couldn’t take much pleasure in that considering the guy didn’t even know how to hold the paddles correctly. He’d looked ready to cry when the puck had smashed into his thumb.

Theon’s mood had only improved once Rhae had pushed him up against the door the instant they’d got back to her place and started sucking on his neck and whispering what she wanted. He’d eagerly led her to the couch for her to climb aboard. She’d won the round of Skeeball. Either way, he’d called himself a winner.

So, why did he care if Jon had a new friend? Why should it matter? He wasn’t bothered by Jon being friends with Robb Stark. Was that because he was Sansa’s brother? Or because all of them had hung out together before?

Rhae urged Theon to ride with Jon to the bar, claiming that he wouldn’t stink up her car that way but he knew what she was doing. She was a perceptive girlfriend. He may have whined once or twice about Doctor Tarly, too.

“So, how’s the wife and kids?” he asked, feeling strangely awkward now that they were alone. He’d not been alone with Jon since his stag night. He couldn’t believe that had been nearly three months ago.

“They’re all good. Enjoying summertime.”

“Nothing beats summer vacation when you’re a kid, right?”

“That’s right.” Jon had that kind of goofy but sweet look on his face like he got when he talked about any of them. Did he look like that when he talked about Rhae? *Yeah, I do.* “The girls are asking when you’re coming over to watch the World Cup with us. The ladies are looking pretty dominant.”

“Man, 13-nil over Thailand. That was dominant, alright. Did the girls watch with you?”

“They did. Why don’t you and Rhae come over Sunday and watch the match against Chile? We could grill out or make hot wings.”

“That’d be great. I’ll check with Rhae…and I vote hot wings.”

“Deal,” Jon laughed.

He frowned and rubbed at his nose. “Will there be anyone else there?”

“No, just you guys. David won’t be flying in until Tuesday.”

“Great!” He’d known that Jon’s step-father wouldn’t be arriving to stay with them until then and yes, he felt better knowing it would just be them that was invited.

It was stupid to be jealous of some guy Jon had just met anyway. They’d been best friends since college, since they were practically kids. And who’d stuck by him with his parents’ messy divorce? Through all the shit with his dad? When he’d nearly flunked out of college? Jon had.
And who had Jon commiserated with when Val had left? When he’d found out she was pregnant? When Lyarra had been born? When Val had died? Me.

Yeah, it was dumb to worry that some new guy was coming to take his place just because his wife was due around the same time as Sansa.

“How are things with you and Rhae?”

He glanced at Jon warily. He still felt like he was walking on eggshells sometimes when it came to Rhae around Jon. There was no pinched expression or narrowed eyes. That was a good sign.

“They’re really good. We’re good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad. You’re…” He started chuckling and shook his head.

“What?” Why’d he feel so defensive?

“I was just going to say you’re good for each other. I’m glad you make each other happy. What?”

“I’m waiting for the joke or the threat that follows,” he grumbled.

“No jokes or threats, I promise.”

He tried to laugh if off like he’d not meant anything by it but maybe he had a little. “Still not prepared to call me your brother anytime soon though, right?” Damn, that came out bitter.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

"Theon, did I say that?"

"Forget it."

“I did say that, didn’t I? Shit.” Jon gripped the steering wheel harder and was scowling. “At Christmastime when we were talking about presents for Sansa and Rhae…shit.”

Theon crossed his arms, not liking how ridiculously vulnerable he felt. They were going for beers. They were guys. They didn’t do this kind of thing.

But Jon pulled over to the side of the road and stared at him. “I shouldn’t have said that in December even if I was joking. I know I acted like a drama queen last year when I found out about you and Rhae but you’re my best friend and…I already consider you my brother. I hope you know that.”

“Well, yeah I do but…shit.” If he said anything else, he’d probably cry like some wuss.

“If I made you feel like I didn’t think you were good enough for her, I’m sorry.”

“I can’t completely blame you,” he shrugged. “I know how I was before about women and keeping things casual.”

“Yes, but I’ve always known you have a good heart and I see how you treat her. I couldn’t think of a better man to be with her.”
“That’s…” He wiped his face off with his jersey. He was sweaty, alright? “That’s a really nice thing to hear. So, if I told you I was hypothetically thinking of proposing someday…”

“I’d be the first to congratulate you.”

“Right. Okay, then.” They sat there grinning at each other. It lasted all of ten seconds. “We’re not hugging here on the side of the road or anything. Or should we hug? Maybe a one-armed hug?”

“You had to make it weird.”

They both laughed and then Jon pulled back onto the road. Theon had to admit he was feeling pretty excellent now. He’d scored a goal, he was hanging out with his best friend, he might even score again later if Rhae was agreeable. He felt downright magnanimous.

“You know, if Sansa was okay with it, you could invite the Tarlys over on Sunday if you like. Give me and Rhae a chance to get to know them better.”

“Sure, we could. I’ll warn you that talking football, or sports in general, with Sam is probably a waste of breath but I’m sure Sansa would enjoy having their company since she doesn’t follow the matches that closely. I’ll see what she thinks. They’re very nice people. Also, his father’s a complete dick so the three of us have that much in common anyway.”

“Oh, man. Why didn’t you say so? We could form a club. Maybe write a book. ‘When Bad Dads Happen to Decent Dudes.’”

“It might be a bestseller. But aren’t you worried writing might cut into your boat racing and ship building lifestyle, Captain Greyjoy?”

“Kiss my ass, Snow.”

Mommy’s sewing machine and crafting supplies had been moved to a corner of the living room and Jon had moved his old computer and desk up to the attic to clear out the little office which would become Baby David’s room. Mommy was making curtains to cover the boring blinds and Jon had painted one wall a dark midnight blue. Mommy had called it an accent wall which was obviously something fancy. She’d bought some decals that Jon, Grandpa and David were going to be putting up this coming weekend. There would be stars and the moon and a tall white tree with friendly owls sitting in it and other adorable nocturnal critters. The baby was sure to love it.

And last weekend, they’d purchased a rocking chair which was sitting in the corner. Mina liked imagining holding her little brother and singing to him while she rocked in the chair. She’d overheard Grandma saying Mommy would need help when the baby came so Mina wanted to help. She wasn’t volunteering to change any diapers but rocking the baby was helping, wasn’t it?

Yes, she had thought she wanted a sister but having spent more time with Little Neddie since school was out, she’d decided he would need a playmate. And Sam and Gilly were having a little boy so there’d be another friend for him. That was good because there might be times she and Lyarra had big girl stuff to do and it’d be a shame for the baby to feel left out. If he had friends his age though, he might not mind.
For now, David was using the nursery-to-be while he stayed with them for a few weeks until they found a place for him and Grams to live. The baby’s crib converted into a daybed so at least there was a place for David to sleep. It wouldn’t be big enough for both him and Grams though. They should probably ask Uncle Bran if there were any townhouses empty where he lived.

*Then, maybe we could go swim more often.*

Uncle Bran liked inviting them over but he was busy a lot trying to finish his thesis, whatever that was. Going to the community pool nearly every day in the summer was the one thing Mina missed about her old home.

But Mina could not complain. The days were just packed with things to do. Obviously, there were days of just sitting around reading, playing video games or playing in the backyard but sometimes Jon would wake up and say they needed an adventure that day. On those days, she never knew if they’d be gone for an hour to the library or farmer’s market or spend the whole day visiting the zoo or aquarium or going on a bike ride. Mina loved it and so did Lyarra.

Most of the time, Mommy joined them but sometimes she’d just pack their lunch and tell them to have fun. At first, Mina worried about leaving Mommy behind but Jon said Mommy would enjoy the rest. Being pregnant was hard work apparently. And since Mommy always seemed happy when they returned, Mina had decided not to fret too much.

She’d meant to tell David good-night just as she did every night since he’d arrived but she started giggling as she stood in his doorway.

“*What are you doing?*”

“Just pressing my clothes for tomorrow, little lady.”

“But those are your socks.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

David could be very funny at times but maybe this was not a joke. Tomorrow was his first day at his new job. Maybe Mr. Arryn preferred socks with no wrinkles. She should ask Daddy.

“Are you nervous about tomorrow? I know I was nervous my first day of school last year because it was a new school.” Grown-ups could get nervous just like kids, Mommy had said.

“I am a little nervous and I’ve got the fidgets, I believe.”

“The fidgets?”

“When I’m nervous I like having something to do. Sometimes, I play darts. Sometimes, I like pressing my clothes.”

How could anyone like ironing? “I’m sure you’ll do great.”

“Thank you, Mina,” he said, coming over to give her a hug.

“My daddy works there.”

“I know. It’s partly thanks to him that I’ll be working there and that me and Grams were able to move back.”

She felt a pleased flutter in her tummy. She’d not realized that. She’d be sure and hug Daddy extra
tight and thank him when he got back from his business trip next week.

“Lyarra gets the fidgets, too, I think.”

“Yes, she certainly does. Don’t you, my dear?”

“Well, I do get nervous sometimes but I usually just talk to Mommy about that. Or I read.”

“Oh, that relaxes me, too. I finished my latest novel on the plane over here though. I should ask Jon if he has one I can borrow.”

“I’m reading a good book right now. You could borrow it if you like.”

“That’s very sweet of you, Mina. Since I’ve just about finished here, why don’t you fetch it and perhaps we can read some of it together?”

She was supposed to go to bed but Mommy and Jon wouldn’t say no to her reading with David, would they? She also loved the idea of reading with David. “I’ll be right back!”

“Mom?”

Sansa slowly opened her eyes. It felt like she’d just closed them. But her groan of protest died on her tongue when she saw the outline of curls standing beside her bed clutching her stuffed pal Ghost.

“What time is it, sweetie?”

Lyarra didn’t answer but as soon as Sansa heard the thunder she knew it was probably still far too early to get up. She reached back to nudge Jon. He made a snuffling sound and rolled over.

“Did you want to lay with us?” No words again, just a vigorous nod. “Get in on Daddy’s side.”

She got a moment’s satisfaction out of Jon’s grunt when Lyarra scrambled around the bed and climbed over him before settling between them. Not out of any maliciousness, just that he was sleeping so soundly when she couldn’t seem to at all anymore.

She could feel Lyarra’s breath on her back as a small hand came to rest on her tummy. The skin felt stretched and itchy but she would not move that hand. “Has he been kicking any with the thunder?”

_I didn’t even know it was thundering before you came in._ “No but he had the hiccups earlier. He might start again. Did the storm wake you?”

“Yes.”

She knew Lyarra had had issues with nightmares in the past but that had been improving once they’d moved past the Slenderman business last October. But a particularly violent thunderstorm ten days earlier had knocked down one of the Tallhart’s pines and it had fallen into their backyard.

They’d been asleep during the storm but the horrendous crash had jolted the whole household awake. The dogs had been barking like mad, the girls had started crying and Sansa had felt
dreadfully sick at her stomach with worry. The power had been knocked out, too. Sansa had lit candles and tried to calm the dogs and girls while Jon and David had gone out to check for damage. When they’d come back inside soaked to the bone, they’d reported that there were no injuries but part of their fence along with the swing set and hammock had been demolished.

“But Mina and I were playing there earlier,” Lyarra had gulped.

It didn’t matter that they’d been playing there hours earlier under blue skies. The incident had left Lyarra decidedly spooked.

The clean-up was underway and they’d found a replacement swing set and hammock but Lyarra hadn’t wanted anything to do with them. In fact, she’d barely set foot out back since then. Her soccer ball sat idle and Ghost was running around with Lady and Mina but not Lyarra. She’d also taken to sticking very close to either herself, Jon or David whenever there was even the threat of a thunderstorm.

“How big is he now?”

Sansa smiled in the darkness. She’d just answered this question a few days ago but during a storm Lyarra would want the distraction. “He’s the size of a head of lettuce…” She could imagine Lyarra’s scowl of distaste. “Or you could say the size of a smaller soccer ball maybe.”

“Oh. That’s a good size.”

She was 28 weeks, entering the third trimester of her pregnancy. She knew any semblance of comfort would be leaving her in the dust before long. An aching back, swollen feet, Braxton Hicks contractions and bouts of insomnia were starting to make themselves known along with the never-ending heartburn. Fatigue was making a comeback as well.

There was certainly one element of her pregnancy she couldn’t complain about though and that was Jon. He was patient and caring even when she was constantly snoring on the sofa by eight o’clock or sobbing over how snug her engagement ring was getting.

Or being awful to him.

She wasn’t really awful to him but she was certainly more irritable than normal.

But that does seem to have one interesting side effect.

Any time she was frustrated or they wound up bickering lately, Jon would get this look in his eye and she’d get this tingle. Then, they’d be slipping off behind a locked door together as soon as their parenting responsibilities allowed. No mangos required.

Her second trimester thirst had been there the first time around but Jon was much more fun than her vibrator had ever been.

However, as her belly kept swelling, things were likely going to get a little trickier and she dreaded the point when even walking would be something of a chore, let alone trying to have sex.

And, that body-conscious part of her which was developing a serious aversion to mirrors of late couldn’t believe he’d even want her much longer.

“Stop that. I won’t let you talk about yourself that way,” he’d said gruffly the other night. “You’re gorgeous and I’ll never stop wanting you.”
He’d proceeded to prove his point rather well…and more than once.

Obviously, there was much more than sex to their relationship. Large or small, Jon seemed truly happy to do anything to please her. It was terribly sweet. She felt sorry for her younger self when she recalled Harry’s half-hearted attempts at taking care of her with her first pregnancy…that was, when he was around at all. She wondered if Val had appreciated Jon’s attentiveness but then again, they’d been apart for much of it and things had been strained at times he’d said. But this time it’s us.

“Mom? What if it’s storming tomorrow when Gram’s flight is due?”

“Airplanes can land in lots of conditions but if it’s bad they’ll just fly above the storm until it goes away.”

“What if it doesn’t go away?”

“All storms go away eventually, sweetie.” Jon was no longer snoring. She’d bet $20 he was awake. They’d both been trying to figure out how to handle Lyarra’s storm phobia.

“What if they run out of fuel first?”

“They’d find another airport to land where it’s not storming before that would happen.”

“What if…”

“I wonder if Grams would like the aquarium. Has she ever been?” Distractions and redirection, the go-to of parents everywhere in the face of fear in the middle of the night.

“I think she took me when I was little but I don’t remember it well.”

“I didn’t go last time with you girls and Dad. Maybe we could all go together.”

That seemed to do the trick as Lyarra happily started telling her about the stingrays and sea turtle she would see.

Tomorrow, Lyanna would be joining them and Sansa was overjoyed that things had worked out so perfectly. They’d be staying with them for another week or so before moving into the townhouse they’d found thanks to Bran. Jon thought his mother would want a house eventually but she’d said less yard work might be nice and the girls seemed overjoyed at the prospect of more pool time.

“Meanwhile, if you let me knock you up again, we might need a bigger house,” he’d teased her earlier that night.

“Maybe, Mr. Snow, but let’s get through this pregnancy first.”

The thunder had been quiet for a few minutes and so had Lyarra. Maybe she’d fallen asleep and they could all get more rest.

Or not.

“Mom? If the baby’s scared of storms, will he sleep with you?”

Sansa smiled, picturing her sweet little baby. She knew there’d be rough patches with a newborn and little sleep but she was also looking forward to it very much. She’d been so young with Mina and felt in over her head. Plus, she’d not had Jon then. This time, she wanted to treasure the fleeting newborn stage as much as she could. She wanted to treasure every bit of this time with them all.
“He might.”

“But do you think I can still sleep here, too?”

“Sure, sweetie.”

“But what if Mina was afraid?”

“Well, I suppose we could all fit. We might have to kick your dad out though.”

“Like when we had the flu, remember?”

“I remember.”

“I object to this plan,” came a grumpy sounding voice behind them. They both giggled in response and knew he was playing.

“Could we have a big cookout after Grams comes?” Lyarra asked out of the blue a few minutes later.

“A cookout?”

“Like we had last year where everybody came over and the neighbors, too. I liked that.”

“I did, too. But in the backyard, sweetie?”

“Uh huh.”

“You’d be okay with that?”

“Yeah, we could check the forecast and make sure the weather was going to be all clear.”

If a cookout would help Lyarra get over her fear of thunderstorms, or the backyard at least, Sansa was all in favor of it. “It would be nice. What do you think, Jon?”

“The Starks and Smiths, along with one Greyjoy and Targaryen, right?”

“Yes and the neighbors and the Tarlys.”

“On two conditions. We’ll shoot for three weeks from now to give Mum and David a chance to get settled and hopefully the backyard will be completely back in order.”

“Okay, and two?”

“That it’s a potluck and you promise to spend more time in the hammock I’m going to set up than in the kitchen that day.”

“I promise.”

“‘I promise,’ you said.”
“It’s annoying to have your words thrown back at you.”

She was getting vexed. He didn’t want that when they had a house and backyard full of friends and family. He also tended to become aroused by it. And even though she always felt bad when her temper got the better of her lately, he couldn’t say he minded. *Especially when I get to fuck her against the bathroom counter with our clothes still half on.*

Definitely not a good idea right now. But maybe he could have a little fun? The bedroom’s just down the hall. “It’s annoying when someone breaks their word.”

*Oh, a huff and an eyeroll.* This was promising. “Jon…”

“No, Sansa. No spur of the moment culinary creations.”

“It’s a simple pasta salad and a brownie mix.”

“Which I can make if you really want them.”

“You’re doing all the grilling.”

“You’re doing all the grilling.”

“Your dad is itching to take over and your mother brought enough to feed a small army all on her own. Everyone else brought a dish. We’ve got plenty of food.” He took the brownie mix from her hands and set it on the counter before kissing her forehead. “Please, love. I’m glad we’re doing this but you’re barely sleeping lately and you’re almost 32 weeks. Let me do the work.”

“You’ve been taking care of me all summer it feels like. It’s wonderful but I hate feeling like a big old…”

“Stop that. Taking care of my wife pleases me. You’re having our baby in a couple of months and it’s hotter than hell outside. Go get on the couch.”

“I can’t stay inside when everyone else is out there.”

“Then, go get in the hammock.”

“It’d be more fun if someone would join me,” she said putting her arms around his shoulders.

Now, that was tempting. “I’ll gladly hand over my spatula and tongs to your dad and swing with you.”

“What kind of hosts are we?”

“The kind who are setting an example that this is meant to be a fun, relaxing occasion.” He nipped at her bottom lip and started gently massaging her lower back.

“You’re persuasive.”

“Damn right, I am.”

“Yikes! Every time I turn around you two are kissing.”

“Hello, Rickon.”

“Hey. Ooh, are you making brownies, Sans?”

Sansa started to open her mouth, no doubt to agree. Jon didn’t let her. He shoved the box in Rickon’s
“Hands. “Nope, you are. Congrats.”

“But I…”

“Don’t burn them though. I won’t be comforting you in the kitchen if you do.” Sansa started laughing but poor Rickon was staring helplessly at the box. *You really are the baby of the family, aren’t you? Oh, well. Mum spoiled me, too.* “Follow the directions. It’s easy as pie.”

If he was going to object further, one look at Jon’s warning glance had him swallowing it. “Yeah, okay. So, let me ask you guys…what’s wrong with the name Rickon anyway?”

“Nothing.”

“Who said there was anything wrong with your name?” Sansa asked. Her tone brought a mama bear to mind.

“Well, I asked Robb if they had another kid would they consider naming him Rickon and he laughed.”

“Oh, that was not nice of him,” Sansa cooed.

“Yeah. He was really mean about it, Sans.”

More cooing from Sansa. *Okay, baby of the family, but she’s not making you brownies just because your big brother laughed.* “What if they had a girl?” Jon asked to redirect.

“Maybe Rickonette?”

“Make sure I’m around when you suggest that one to Robb. Meanwhile, get cracking on those brownies.”

“So if you guys have another boy someday…”

“Oh, I’m afraid we’re neglecting our guests, love, and I should check on the grill. Good luck, Rickon. And your mum and mine are having a lovely time chatting so no texting Cat to come take over.”

“Such a mean brother-in-law,” Sansa laughed as he led her back outside.

He kissed her cheek. “We’ll make it up to him later when we announce the baby’s full name.”

“But we’ve not decided on a middle name yet.”

“Yeah, we have. David Rickon Snow.” He dared to glance her way. She’d stopped walking. “I mean, it’s not terrible. Unless you hate it. Do you hate it?”

She didn’t hate it. Her eyes were getting all teary though. “Oh, Jon! That is the sweetest…”

“It’s completely selfish of me.”

“How so?”

“Pleasing my wife pleases me. And it seems like no one names babies after their little brothers these days. We’ll be trendsetters.”

“We’re not remotely trendsetters,” she laughed.
“You’re right. Our hammock is calling.”

They passed by the grill where Ned and Benjen were having a minor spat over when the burgers needed flipping while David and Tallhart were retelling the tree disaster to Cat and his mother. Robb was carrying Little Ned around the back yard for a closer look at the dogs as Margaery sipped a cocktail and chatted with Rhae and Gilly. Sam and Bran had discovered they shared similar gaming interests and were deeply engrossed in some discussion that no one else would understand. Arya, Gendry and Meera were discussing summer movies they’d seen with the Cerwyns. And Theon was playing soccer with Lyarra, Mina and the neighbor kids. He’d have to ask Theon if he’d want to be his assistant coach again in the fall.

“This is perfect,” Sansa sighed after he’d helped her into the hammock and joined her.

“It is. Sometimes, I wish summer would never end.”

“Why just sometimes?”

“Because I prefer cooler weather to hot and I’d get bored if I was off all the time. I love summer break but I couldn’t handle it all the time. And I’m especially looking forward to this autumn.”

Her eyes widened with innocence as they laced their fingers together over her belly. “And why would that be?”

“Because I’ll finally be in complete control at the school. It’ll be my chance to lord over everyone at long last. All my dreams of conquest and tyranny will be realized.” She snorted. “You know why,” he grinned.

“I sure do.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.”

“Me either.”

Chapter End Notes

I know not everyone likes Theon but I wanted to give their friendship another look since the final two chapters will focus on the family.

Next chapter, Sansa will give birth but the emphasis will be on what comes after as the four of them work at adjusting to their new normal.

This story is longer than Moby Dick. WTF?! Well, I'm no Melville but thank you so much for sticking by this story as it heads towards the end. I truly appreciate it :)
“Oh, he’s perfect,” Sansa cooed as she took the sweet sleeping baby into her arms for the first time. “Jon, isn’t he gorgeous?”

“Yeah,” her husband replied with a quick glance their way before returning to his conversation. “So then, this enormous grey dog comes charging across the field right in the middle of the match and Abby, she’s one of my players…anyway, Abby’s afraid of dogs and…”

“Jon,” she said with more emphasis. She gave him a look, a look that she hoped screamed, ‘shut up about the freaking soccer match and the damn dog that interrupted it earlier and pay attention to the baby!’

Their eyes met again and his widened. His face might’ve paled a touch, too. “But enough about that! We’re here to see Little Sam, of course! He’s wonderful and I’m sure you’re both very proud.”

“Not going to lie, I’m proud as a peacock.” Sam was literally preening as he gazed at his son.

“Yeah, you sure worked hard earlier,” Gilly murmured under her breath causing Sansa to bite back her laughter.

“So, then what happened with the dog?” Sam asked next, oblivious.

Labor Day weekend and the girls had played their first match of the season that morning and enjoyed the novelty of a friendly canine who had wanted to play, too. Abby had had the ball at the time but ran away screaming when the dog had come barreling up to her.

“Ball? Play?” Sansa could almost imagine the dog thinking it but she also understood the child’s fear.

She’d had to be coaxed down out of a nearby tree. Actually, Theon had shimmied up after her like
she was a cat. Play had been interrupted for a good while but no one had minded all that much since it had been pretty amusing…except to poor Abby.

Once she was down and introduced to the dog though, who had been shaking himself silly from wagging his tail so hard, she’d decided he wasn’t so scary at all.

The dog in question had not been wearing a collar and Robb had offered to take him around the neighborhood behind the fields and see if someone was looking for him.

“And if not, well, we could maybe take him home with us for the time being and…”

“We’re not adopting a dog, Robb. And he probably has a home. He’s friendly and looks well-groomed. He probably just escaped his backyard or something.”

“Aww, come on, Margaery. Neddie wants a dog.”

“Neddie is seven months old. You want a dog. Don’t we clean up enough shit?”

“But look how excited he is to see him.” Neddie had been actually been grinning at his Aunt Arya who’d been pulling faces for him on the sly. “Think about how much he loves seeing Ghost, Lady, Summer and Shaggy.”

“Your brother is incorrigible, Sansa.”

“And you love him anyway.”

As they’d been leaving the game, Jon had received a text from Sam announcing the arrival of Samwell Tarly, Jr. at last during the night. Poor Gilly was going on six days past her due date and she’d had an induction scheduled for Tuesday if she’d not gone into labor by then. Luckily, that wouldn’t be necessary.

But Gilly had expressed her disappointment more than once that her mother and sisters probably wouldn’t make it in town until after the baby came so Sansa had wanted to be there for her friend. They’d asked Lyanna and David to take the girls for them and hurried over to the hospital.

After about 30 minutes though, the new mom began to yawn from her labors and the excitement since giving birth. They’d taken that as their cue to give her and the baby a chance to rest.

It was hot on the pavement as they made their way back across the hospital’s endless parking lot. Sansa wiped the sweat from her brow and stifled a groan. The ache in her back had been building on and off all day. There had been more than a few contractions as well. Part of her wondered if this might be it but, after being sent home from Labor and Delivery’s triage center four nights ago and told she wasn’t in labor when she’d been convinced she was, she was afraid to get her hopes up.

“An orgasm can bring on severe cramps or contractions for some women but you’re not in labor,” the on-call physician had smugly told her and Jon.

“But they were so intense and didn’t seem to let up afterwards so I thought maybe…”

“A lot of first time moms make that mistake. Baby’s already considered full term so you two can have your fun but you may want to dial it down a notch to avoid any more scares or confusion.”

“I’m not a first time mom,” she’d grumbled.

She was more than two weeks from her due date but, at her last appointment, she’d been told she
was already starting to dilate.

“That could mean something or nothing, Sansa,” her mother had warned her just yesterday. “I walked around at 5 centimeters with you for three weeks. I walked out of the doctor’s office not dilated one whit with Rickon and gave birth to him twelve hours later.”

“Gee, thanks, Mom.”

“I know you’re sick of being pregnant by now but don’t worry, darling. It won’t be too much longer.”

She was 37 ½ weeks and her baby was supposedly the size of a cantaloupe this week. She felt more like she’d swallowed a whole watermelon by this point. Jon had taken to offering her his arm wherever they walked together the past few weeks which she appreciated even if she hated waddling like a duck. He also helped her in and out of bed and the shower and off the couch nine times out of ten lately. He was just as wonderfully attentive as he had been since the start of this and she knew she was very blessed to have him. She was also very tired of relying on him so heavily and told herself things would be better once the baby came. Her mother had given her a warning about that, too.

“So, am I in the doghouse for dominating the conversation with my story earlier?”

“Doghouse. Funny guy. No, I think Gilly was amused and you had a rapt audience in Sam.”

Jon gave her a fetching grin as they neared the Pilot at last. Him and those fetching grins. Her husband was a handsome devil and she felt like a cow.

At school, she’d noticed more than one mom checking him out since the start of the school year. That part was alright, she supposed. They had eyes. They could look but he was all hers. Unfortunately, she’d also overheard a few comments. From remarks about his looks to his ass, she hoped none of them repeated such things within earshot of their children and wished they’d be a little more cognizant of the fact his wife worked in the office. And isn’t deaf!

Of course, Jon didn’t hear the comments and he never noticed their stares. His eyes were only for her but she still couldn’t help the way her lip would curl back into a snarl at some of those women. She couldn’t remember the last time a man had looked at her like that besides Jon either.

Yes, I’m having some self-esteem issues at present. Try being this pregnant and not having some issues, okay?

Still, they were happy, very much in love and their family of four would soon be five.

Just as he unlocked the vehicle, she grimaced at a particularly insistent contraction and started counting under her breath.

“Sansa?”

“I’m just…” She held up a finger and gritted her teeth as her uterus was apparently trying to tie itself into a knot. She may have dug her nails into his forearm, too. When the pain let up, she let go and shook her head. “I’m okay. Help me in, honey.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t turn around and go back inside?”

“So, I can get another pat on the head before being sent home again?”
“Sansa.”

“Dr. Hornwood said to call when they were coming five minutes apart consistently. They’re not that frequent…yet.”

“It’s a holiday weekend and Dr. Hornwood’s not on call.”

“I don’t want to see that guy from the other night again.”

“He might not be the one on call.”

“He was a big jerk.”

“He’s a doctor,” he shrugged. She frowned and he amended his statement. “And he was the biggest jerk ever. No way is he delivering our baby. You can cross your legs until Tuesday or maybe I’ll drive us to the next town over to be safe.”

“I love you,” she cackled.

“I love you, too. So, can we go back inside, have a bite at the cafeteria and see how you’re feeling in another half hour or so?”

“I’m not hungry for hospital cafeteria food,” she said stubbornly.

“No one is ever hungry for hospital cafeteria food. Come on, love. Humor your nervous husband. Please?”

“Alright. Thirty minutes and then we’ll go home unless something happens.”

“Something happened,” Jon said softly, kissing his wife’s brow after she’d finally succumbed to exhaustion early the next morning.

The nurse had returned with their little bundle only a moment ago. He squirmed and shifted where he was wrapped up like a burrito in his wheeled bassinet. “Where do you think you’re going, baby?”

He lifted his son into his arms and made his way back to the lounger-style chair he’d been attempting to sleep in. As a sleeping apparatus, it sucked. For holding a newborn, it was just fine.

Seven pounds on the nose, blue eyes and a bit of black fuzz on top of his head, David Rickon Snow was perfect. Yes, he was biased as hell.

He had attended Lyarra’s birth but it had been a last minute decision on Val’s part. She’d said she had a friend who had a kid already that she thought she’d rather have there instead. At first, he’d meekly accepted her choice but then, the more he thought about this little girl coming into the world, the more he’d wanted to be there. They’d wound up arguing over it. He’d felt like an asshole arguing with a pregnant woman about her delivery experience but he’d also desperately wanted to be part of it.

As it turned out when the time came, the friend had begged off with other plans last minute and Val had texted him to come at once. He’d been about to take a final. He’d stood up in the midst of papers
being passed out and told his professor that he was about to be a dad and had to go. He’d walked out of the classroom without waiting for a response and rushed to the university’s medical center two miles away. He’d been allowed to make up the exam later.

He was grateful he’d been there but on the other hand, it had all passed in such a rush. He’d not known much of what to expect and he’d felt like a helpless kid standing to the side for most of it.

*I was still standing to the side for most of it this time, too…but it felt very different.*

True, he hadn’t been the one giving birth and he wasn’t a doctor or nurse but at least he and Sansa were in sync in a way that he never had been with Val. He knew she was nervous just as she knew he was but they were good at easing the other person’s nerves. He did everything he could to support her through the birth and would help in every way he could in the days and weeks to come just like she’d taken care of him after his wreck. They were, for lack of a better term, a team. But, in this case I’m more like the water boy and Sansa’s the MVP.

“Did you know you’ve got the most amazing mother, David?” A gurgling sound met his ears as the baby blinked up at him. Obviously, that was an agreement. “It’s true. She’s fantastic and she loves you so much. I won’t tell you all the gory details but let’s just say bringing you into this world was no picnic. But now you’re here and you’re perfect and your mum is the bravest, kindest, strongest, most beautiful woman I know. Your sisters are incredible, too. They can’t wait to meet you. You’re so lucky.” Another gurgle of agreement. “And your grandparents are wonderful and will spoil you rotten if we let them. Oof, your aunts and uncles will probably try that as well. We’ll have to be careful.”

“He’s got an amazing father, too,” Sansa murmured sleepily from the bed.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping. And are you talking about me?”

“Yes, you, precious man."

David grunted…and then farted. “I’m afraid he disagrees, love.”

“He’s four hours old,” she laughed. “Now, listen to your mother, David, you’re going to be very happy to call him your father. Just as I’m happy to call him my husband.”

They shared a smile and as the baby settled, Sansa’s eyes closed again.

“I’m not sure you’ll always be happy to call me your dad. I’ll probably screw up some but I’ll try every day to be the best dad I can for you just like I try with your sisters. And no matter what your Uncle Theon says, you don’t have to play football…unless you want to, of course.”

He heard something more like a coo this time.

His heart melted and expanded within his chest and he thought of something Sansa had said the other night. She’d asked her mother when Bran was born if she could possibly love him the way she loved her, Robb and Arya or if she’d have to give up some of her love for them in order to have any for Bran. Cat had told her about the heart and its never-ending capacity for love. As an only child, Jon had never thought about anyone stealing his mother’s love from him but, since Sansa and Mina had come into his life, he saw the wisdom of Cat’s words. And he was feeling it now, too.

He hoped their girls knew how much they were loved and that David coming along would not change that but Lyarra had expressed worries when he’d started dating Sansa. He would do his best to watch for any trouble.
If someone had asked, he couldn’t tell them how long he’d sat there holding his son. But when there was a quiet knock on the door, the baby was snoozing in that twitchy newborn sort of way and his tired eyes opened to realize there was sunlight coming through the blinds now.

“Hey, Dad? There’s some eager grandmas out here,” the nurse told him as she peeked around the corner.

“Tell them just a minute.” He looked to his wife but her eyes were already open. “Are you up for some visitors?”

“Of course. I want to see them. Can I have him back?” she asked, holding out her arms.

“I think he wants you anyway.” The baby was smacking his lips, a hunger cue. He handed him over and kissed his wife. “I love you, Sansa.” Then, he lightly kissed the top of David’s little head. “I love you, baby.”

A whirl of dark hair greeted him when his mother flew into his arms just as he opened the door. “Cat will tell you I’ve been a bloody nightmare waiting for it to be visiting hours and I won’t deny it,” she said in a stage whisper.

“She has not been a nightmare,” Cat laughed as she kissed his cheek and went to her daughter.

“Oh, my God,” his mother squeaked next when she laid eyes on the baby. “Sansa, he’s perfect.”

“Isn’t he?” she beamed. He was delighted to see them both here, sharing their joy but Sansa asked the next question before he could. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Your father and David are down at the coffee shop with the girls.”

“Oh, the girls must meet their brother and of course you must have Dad and David come up, too.”

“We know, darling. They’re very eager but it’s early and we wanted to make sure you were alright with the visit,” Cat said, stroking Sansa’s hair. “You went into labor around noon yesterday and gave birth around 3 this morning. I know it must’ve been a very long day and night.”

It had been without a doubt and he hadn’t even gone through what Sansa had. There’d been a point when they’d grown concerned over ‘lack of progress’ and started talking C-section. But in the end, the baby had arrived the old-fashioned way. Despite all the stress and fatigue they’d been feeling at that point, Jon would never forget the look of pure relief and adoration on Sansa’s face when they’d heard their newborn son’s first plaintive wail.

“I’m fine, Mom. Jon, please go get them.”

He nodded before departing, allowing the grandmothers a chance to see the baby. He walked past the room where they’d visited Gilly and Sam yesterday. They’d be in for a surprise soon to learn they’d never made it home and that Little Sam had a playmate already. But first, he had a mission. He was practically skipping in anticipation at the thoughts of introducing the girls to their new little brother.
She was falling and someone was crying. The treehouse was not this high up. The fall was taking forever. She knew she should be afraid but something whispered it wasn’t real.

There wasn’t any milk in the fridge and Ghost was whining at her. Since when did Ghost want milk? Mina said she’d dropped it and spilled it everywhere. Dad was mad at her but she couldn’t remember dropping it. Someone was crying about the milk. Who was crying?

Mr. Condon was going to make her stand in front of the class and do another book report but she couldn’t remember the book’s title. In the back of the classroom, someone was crying. She slouched down in her seat, wishing he’d forget her name or that she existed.

“Mom? Dad?” she cried when she startled awake.

No one heard her but she heard them. She’d left the door to her bedroom open so she could fall asleep and not be afraid. Dad hadn’t closed yet like usual. The baby was crying but so was Mom. Lyarra crept from her bed and down the hall towards the living room.

Mom had been camped out in there all day saying she was tired of being in bed. She’d let her and Mina help her tidy up when Dad had gone to the store and the baby had been napping. Dad had seemed frustrated when he’d come home and found Mom vacuuming but she’d told him to turn his frown upside down in a sing-song voice that had made him laugh. He wasn’t laughing now.

“Come on, love. You’re exhausted. Let me take him for a bit.”

“He wants to nurse.”

“He’s been nursing for nearly an hour. I don’t think he’s crying from hunger.”

“I can do this. You need sleep. The dryer repairman is coming early.”

“So? He won’t care if I yawn a time or two. You need sleep more than me right now.”

The clothes dryer had stopped working the day before yesterday, the day after they’d come home with David. At first, Mom had just grumbled over it with Dad but earlier this afternoon the baby had puked (or ‘spit up’ as Mom said) all over Dad after nursing and Mom got very teary about the dryer and piles of laundry and smelly clothes. Dad had joked about hanging up a clothesline out back. Mina had said they’d be like ‘Little House on the Prairie’ which sounded kind of nerdy to Lyarra. Dad had laughed though. Mom had not.

“The more upset he gets, the more upset you’re getting. I’m trying to give you both a break.” Dad sounded upset, too.

“I’m sorry. I hate being like this. I’m sick of it.” She started crying harder.

When Mom cried, it made Lyarra want to cry, too. And what was Mom sick of? Was she sick of the baby? Part of Lyarra felt sad for the baby if that was true. Part of her couldn’t blame Mom.

“Sansa, love…please, don’t say sorry but you’re tired and trying to do too much, too soon. And I think the post-partum upheaval of your…”

Mom cut him off with a swear jar word but Lyarra wasn’t about to shout, ‘swear jar!’ “If you say the word hormones, Jon Snow, I’ll send you to live with Dr. Jerk.”

Lyarra gasped softly. Who was Dr. Jerk? Please, don’t send Daddy away. Please, don’t fight.
Thankfully, Dad chuckled at that so maybe it was a joke.

David was five days old. First, the dryer broke down and now Mom was crying and they sounded almost like they were fighting. Bad luck must follow poor little David around.

Lyarra had thought he was cute at the hospital. Okay, she still did. Mina had cried and hugged him real gentle and wanted to rock him as soon as they met even though there was no rocking chair in the hospital room. Lyarra hadn’t been too sure about holding someone so tiny and wiggly just yet. She’d gently booped his nose instead and he’d blinked at her like he was trying to figure that out. That was going to be their special thing, Lyarra had decided. She’d boop his nose and someday that’d make him laugh maybe.

He was going to look like her, she thought. Blue eyes and dark hair. Did that make Mina jealous? She hoped not. Mina had blue eyes, too.

Mom had seemed happy at the hospital other than when her brothers and sister had come at the same time and the baby had started crying. Uncle Rickon, Bran and then Aunt Arya had gotten louder and louder over the sound of his crying. Mom had started acting kind of panicked. Dad had rudely told them all to shut up and get out. They’d apologized before stepping outside. But soon, Mom had been happy again and nursing David and she’d told Mina to call Aunt Arya back inside.

What had changed?

She peeked around the corner of the living room in time to see Dad taking the baby from her arms and kissing her forehead. “I can’t blame you for wanting her but right now your mother needs a rest.” He started walking with the fussy baby and humming. Maybe that would shut him up for a little bit.

“You can’t go outside with him!”

“Why not? It’s pleasant out there tonight.”

“It’s dark out.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s too little to be afraid of the dark yet. Maybe it’ll calm him some.”

He opened the sliding glass door that led to the deck and closed it behind him. And Mom started crying again. Lyarra felt sick. What could she do to help? She was afraid she’d start crying and that wouldn’t help Mom at all. There was something that made her feel so small when she saw Sansa cry.

But she needs someone. Dad’s with David and Mina’s asleep and there’s just me.

“Mom?” she said softly.

She swiftly wiped her eyes and put on a big smile. “Oh, sweetie! Did the baby wake you?”

“I had a…” She decided not to tell her about her weird and upsetting dream. Mom would only try and make her feel better and she wanted to help her instead. “I just wanted to check on you.”

“Oh, that’s really sweet, Lyarra,” she gulped. Her eyes were getting all teary again. Was this helping or not? Mom must’ve sensed her uncertainty. “I’m okay, sweetie. I promise. Will you come sit with me?”

Mom was in Dad’s recliner, all propped up with pillows. Dad’s TV tray was set up beside it but instead of the remote and a beer like he sometimes had when he watched soccer, there was water and
tissues, gum and a medicine bottle.

Mom’s tummy wasn’t as flat as it had been before she’d been pregnant but she was smaller than she’d been all summer. There was room for her. She carefully climbed into the chair. Dad had told her more than once she had to be careful around Mom and David. No jumping into bed next to them or rushing to give big hugs yet. Sometimes, Dad seemed to forget that she was nine now and didn’t do those things anymore…not much anyway.

They sat together for a bit before Lyarra worked up the nerve to whisper what was on her mind the most. “Why are you sad?”

Mina talked about babies so much and she liked mothering her dolls and stuffed pals. She’d said stuff like, ‘when I’m a mom someday’ before. Lyarra couldn’t honestly say she’d thought that much about having a baby someday ever. She wasn’t sure she’d want to, especially if it was going to make her sad.

“I’m not really. Well, I am but it’s…sometimes, after a woman has a baby, she’s got all these feelings that are trying to come out at once and sometimes the one she feels the most is sadness. Some people call it the baby blues.”

“Does it only happen when you have a boy?”

Mom looked at her funny for a second and then she laughed. That was the first time she’d heard her laugh today or maybe since the day before even. That made her feel good.

“No, it doesn’t have anything to do with boys or the color blue. The blues, like when you’re sad.”

“Does it always happen?”

“Not always but for most women it happens at least a little bit. I don’t want you to worry though, Lyarra. I think I’ll be feeling better in another week or so but I may have some days of feeling down. If I get to feeling worse or it doesn’t stop, I’ll go see my doctor.”

“You’re my mother. I have to take care of you when your sad or sick just like you take care of me.”

“Lyarra, I love you.” She was teary again but she was also smiling. So maybe she’d helped some.

“I love you, too. I can stay home tomorrow and take care of you if you like.”

Okay, that wasn’t completely a selfless gesture but at least Mom was laughing. “No, sweetie. You’ve got school and your dad is taking very good care of me.”

“I’m trying to,” Dad said as the sliding glass door opened. The baby was quiet. He’d fallen asleep.

“You are, Jon. You really are.”

“What about when Dad goes back to work though? I can take care of you then.”

“I’ll be alright. And I’ve got Grandma and Grams offering to come over and help, too. I’m very lucky to have so many wonderful people in my life to help me with David as I recover.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t mind missing a day or two.” Mr. Condon was alright but he liked making everyone do oral book reports once a week. Lyarra could definitely live without that pressure.

They were both chuckling at her now and she wasn’t going to get to miss school.
Dad turned down the lights and laid David in the bassinette by the sofa. He’d hardly slept in his actual crib at all yet. Mina had been kind of upset by that because she’d been sure he’d love the way they’d decorated his room. Mom promised he would sleep there eventually.

“Sansa, do you want to lay in the bed?”

“No, I like it here right now,” she said, hugging her tightly.

She was going to get to stay next to Mom, sleeping in the recliner on a school night. She smiled real big at Dad. He wouldn’t make her go back to bed yet. “For a little while,” he agreed.

Lyarra snuggled up close as Dad laid a blanket over them both. He got on the sofa to try and sleep. She felt her eyes getting heavy as Mom’s hand drifted through her hair. She woke up later as Dad was carrying her back to bed. He kissed her on the forehead and told her he loved her. He looked very tired. She’d need to think of a way to help Dad next but at least she’d helped Mom a little tonight.

Mina finished braiding her hair and chose one of her prettiest dresses that was still suitable for school to wear. After all, today wasn’t just any day at school. She loved being in Mrs. Smallwood’s class and Read With Me Friday was one of her favorite things. And today, it would be her mother coming to class during Language Arts to read three of Mina’s favorite story books to the class.

Mina hoped everyone liked the books she’d chosen. She’d been a bit nervous about that but Jon had said she’d made some really good selections. And after Read With Me Time, Mommy had promised to stay and have lunch with her and Lyarra.

Jon said he wished he could join them but he had a lunchtime meeting with the School Superintendent downtown. Mommy had also said she’d leave David with Grams. It’d just be the three of them. She sort of wanted to show off her little brother but, on the other hand, this wasn’t Show and Tell like kindergarten or something.

Mina had been looking forward to this for nearly two weeks, ever since she’d shown Mommy the slip of paper Mrs. Smallwood had sent home with Mommy’s reading day clearly circled. So much had changed since David was born but this day was fixed and decided on and that was comforting somehow. She loved being a big sister and super helper with the baby but there were times she missed having as much of Mommy’s time.

She was getting used to Mommy staying home now and Jon being the only one with them on the way to and from school every day. She missed passing by the office for lunchtime or gym and seeing Mommy in there and them waving at each other. But this was kind of nice, too. Besides, she knew Mommy would be waiting for them when they returned.

Most days, David would either be napping or Mommy would have him cradled in her arms with a bright smile on her face when they got home. She often had an afterschool snack waiting and they’d sit around the kitchen table while Jon went back to their bedroom to change and ‘get settled.’
But some days, Mommy would be holding David and looking a little worn out when they got home. Mina couldn’t describe it exactly but she knew those days the baby had kept poor Mommy hopping all day. On those days, Jon would swoop David up into his arms and take him with him to go change and ‘get settled.’ Then, Mommy would smile, hug them both and ask about 4th grade.

So, there were new routines they were adapting to and Mina thought they were doing fairly well. Unfortunately, for such a little baby, David did seem to cause lots of disruptions in plans.

Mina sat down with her toaster waffle. Mommy complimented her on her dress and started talking about taking David to the doctor…later this morning.

“When?”

“At eleven.”

“Today?!” That was Read With Me time.

Mommy nodded saying the pediatrician’s office had called to reschedule David’s 3-week visit the other day. “But don’t worry. He’s not getting any shots this trip.”

She had cried when he was first born and she’d heard that he’d had a shot. She hated shots and couldn’t imagine someone doing that to someone as little as David. But Mom and Jon had said they both got theirs too when they were little.

“But…”

“What are you and your daddy planning to do tonight?” Mommy asked next.

She couldn’t even remember her plans with Daddy right now. She was too stunned. Mommy didn’t remember. She’d forgotten all about Read With Me and lunch with her. And even if she reminded her, Mommy would probably still choose to go with David. He was so little even if he wasn’t getting shots. He was the baby.

I used to be your baby.

For three weeks, she’d been getting used to Mommy spending so much of her time giving David what he needed. He nursed a lot, all the time it seemed sometimes and, while Mommy had started letting Jon give him bottled breast milk now, most of the time he got it directly from her. Most of the time, it didn’t bother her. She was a big girl and had big girl stuff to do. But she’d thought that today would be different. Today, she’d thought she might matter a little more than David.

She might have grumbled something along those lines.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Mina didn’t want her toaster waffle anymore. Lyarra bounded into the kitchen as Mina decided she didn’t want to wear the dress today either if Mommy wasn’t coming to school. She hoped Mrs. Smallwood wouldn’t be cross with her for her mother not making it.

For a second, she got another idea. Maybe Jon could come read to the class but would everyone think that was weird if Principal Snow came to do Read With Me? They all knew Jon was her step-dad but the kids sometimes teased her and Lyarra about being stuck living with the principal even if he was wonderful and not at all mean. And then she thought maybe Jon could take David to the
doctor instead of Mommy until she remembered he had a meeting.

“Mina…”

“I, uh…forgot something in my room,” she said, hoping Mommy wouldn’t notice she was about to cry. It didn’t matter if she noticed or not because at that moment David started crying in the nursery and Mommy hurried away to see to him. Mina knew who Mommy would choose first from now on and believing that hurt worse than anything she could think of.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Jon said when she practically ran into him in the hallway. “Are you all finished with breakfast?” He was in a nice suit and had his hair all slicked back today. His meeting was important, more important than Read With Me or lunch in the cafeteria probably.

“Uh huh.”

She didn’t want to answer any more questions. Jon noticed things and he didn’t always pick David first. Or maybe he would. You’re not even his daughter really. Her chin started quivering at that thought and she ducked her head and hurried past him.

Daddy had let her down a few times when she was smaller but Mina had always felt very assured of her mother’s unfailing love and presence. There’d been a time or two that she’d had little jealous feelings over Lyarra but she loved her sister and she felt sorry for Lyarra with her birth mother not being alive anymore. Even once Mommy had officially adopted Lyarra after the wedding, Mina had celebrated the news with them all with never a qualm about it. And deep down, a small part of her that maybe she wasn’t so proud of would remind herself that Mommy was her mother in a way she’d never be Lyarra’s.

But David was Mommy’s child the same way she was except Jon was his father. Mommy was in love with Jon and not her daddy. David had them both wrapped around his teeny tiny finger, didn’t he? David, who was three weeks old and still couldn’t hold up his own head for more than a few seconds at a time, had it all. Why did that seem so unfair?

She reached her room and changed her mind, sneaking into their bedroom instead. She picked up the phone on the nightstand and started dialing. Her tummy was all twisty feeling as she waited for him to answer. She was supposed to go to his house tonight. Lately, she’d not wanted to miss out on time with the baby. This morning, she couldn’t wait to have the whole weekend away with him.

“Sansa?”

“No, Daddy. It’s me…Mina.”

“Good morning, Princess.” Normally, she’d be fighting the urge to roll her eyes. She was tired of him calling her princess. She was nine and getting too old for that jazz. But right now, she didn’t mind it. She’d always be his princess at least. “Are you looking forward to coming over tonight? I was thinking we might do pizza for dinner if that’s okay. Ham and pineapple but no peppers, right?”

“Right.”

“Mina…are you okay?”

She had him on the phone but now what? She thought to what Mommy usually said when she called people. “I’m okay. How are you?”

“I’m good but what’s got you calling me so early on a school morning, baby?”
Just as she heard him say it, she looked up and saw Jon standing in the doorway watching her. Mina burst into tears.

“I’m the worst mother ever!” she sobbed when reinforcements arrived an hour later.

“No, you’re not. Very far from it,” her mother said.

“How could I forget about this? Mina was so excited. Hell, I was excited.”

She’d just carried David into the kitchen when Lyarra had mentioned their lunch plans. It had all come flooding back to her but, by that point, Mina had already been having a breakdown over the phone with Harry and on Jon. It broke her heart…and pricked her already sensitive ego that Harry had been privy to it all. Not the point right now! He’d actually been sweet about it, trying to remind Mina of the times he’d forgotten stuff, too. Not truly helpful considering but...

“You’re one person, Sansa,” Lyanna said as she placed a cup of tea in front of her and picked up David to give him his bottle. She was so happy Lyanna and David had moved back to the States and were here to enjoy their grandchildren.

“Blink and you’ll miss it’ I keep telling myself. I’m trying so hard to not let this time slip by too fast but also be everything for them. I just feel like a huge failure.”

“We’ve got to blink, darling. You’re not a failure at all. All the times I felt torn in two when you kids were little, it’s so much to deal with especially with a newborn. We have to accept that we have two hands and do what we can.”

“I only had Jon and it was still overwhelming at times. I can’t imagine having three…or five. I hate how much time I wasted beating myself up until I finally learned to let go of some of those unrealistic expectations.”

“They were so upset when they left and I couldn’t do anything but stand here crying as Jon ushered them out the door. I feel like I’m dumping so much on him.”

“I highly doubt that and did you forget they’re his kids, too? Don’t feel like it’s all on you just because you gave birth.”

“Listen to your mother. Don’t think he’s doing you a favor by being an involved and responsible father and husband. If he ever acts like he is, tell me and I’ll make him regret it.”

She smiled despite her tears. “He never acts like that, Lyanna. But Mina...” She could cry all over again.

"Mina will be just fine. Sansa, you have devoted more than nine years to being the best mother you can possibly be to her. And she has a father, step-father, grandparents and aunts and uncles who adore her. She doesn't live inside a bubble and I'm sure she'll endure this adjustment just fine. But I
do think you’re trying to do too much.”

Her mother was probably right. She’d promised Mina and Lyarra she’d figure something out but only managed to call her mother, crying like a little girl. She’d not counted on both grandmas showing up but she was glad of it.

“We’d made brunch plans anyway.”

“I’m sorry to ruin your…”

“Sansa,” her mother had said, just this side of exasperated, “we’d rather see you and our grandson than eat brunch today.”

Sansa wasn’t sure. Brunch sounded nice. And a mimosa. Adult conversation sounded nice, too.

She loved her baby so much but she’d felt nearly sequestered in her home for three weeks now. Her biggest excitement of the day was when Jon and the girls came home. The mail delivery was a distant second. Some days, she rolled with the flow of feedings and diaper changes and cat naps and some days, she thought if she watched another episode of ‘The Price is Right’ or ‘Ellen,’ she might tear her hair out. The grocery store was a big event but there was always the real possibility that David might wait until she was halfway through her list to have a diaper blowout or crying fit.

Her early days with Mina had been filled with anxiety and depression. She’d convinced herself that everything would be different this time around with Jon as her partner and the girls being so wonderfully helpful and sweet. She’d been so determined to ‘enjoy’ this fleeting newborn period that she’d allowed herself to forget how damn draining it was.

“What do I do to fix this?”

“Well, as for today, that’s simple. Lyanna and I will take David to his appointment and you’re going to school to read to your daughter’s class and have lunch.”

“Oh, but…”

“No, arguing with your mother, Sansa,” Lyanna grinned. “We get to spoil this sweet boy for a few hours and you get some time with your girls.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” They both looked like they were ready to throw something at her. “Thank you so much,” she sniffled.

“Of course.”

“No thanks needed. But…I have a request,” Lyanna added.

Thank God for grandmas.

Mina’s face when she’d walked into Mrs. Smallwood’s class at ten ‘til eleven was priceless. Actually, so was Lyarra’s when her and Mina walked into the cafeteria later and pulled her over to the visitors’ table to share lunch with them. Spending time with just the girls with no baby nearby to interrupt was something she’d dearly missed…even in the middle of a noisy cafeteria. All the tears from the morning were long gone as they sat there together chatting and enjoying the hustle and bustle of day to day life at school.
Later that evening, she fulfilled Lyanna’s request and got a gift in exchange.

Once Mina had gone to Harry’s, Lyanna and David had picked up Lyarra to spend the night with them, allowing her and Jon to be alone with their little boy for the first time since he’d returned to work over a week ago. And, rather than the frenzied game of hot potato she’d felt like they were playing those first two weeks of passing the baby back and forth while trying to accomplish monumental tasks like showering semi-daily, feeding themselves and the girls or emptying the garbage in between diaper changes, nursing and crying, David took a beautifully long evening nap and they decided to take one, too.

“This is perfect,” she sighed. Jon looped an arm around her waist. “Tell me about your day.”

“The meeting was dull.”

“Of course, it was. Tell me stuff about school. Tell me gossip.”

He laughed quietly. She shivered at the way that laugh affected her and his hand gliding up and down her back, gently caressing. Too soon for sex but she’d missed this relaxed sense of intimacy with her husband.

“Hmm…I’m not sure I’m supposed to know this but Sylvia was chatting right outside my door and it was hard to not hear them.”

“Go on…”

The new assistant principal was a good fit. She’d been thoroughly harangued by her and the office ladies for not bringing David in with her earlier.

“Well, Myranda has a date next weekend.”

“With who?”

“Some loser named Hardyng.”

Her head popped up from where it’d been resting on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. “Really?!”

“Yeah.”

She sighed and laid her head back down. “I know Randa had been interested. I’m glad he asked her out. I wish them both happy.”

“Me, too. We’ll have to see.”

“What else?”

“Lyarra asked me what a condom was this afternoon.”

“What?!”

“Yeah. One of the kids in her class started calling Kyle Mr. Condom instead of Condon. All the streetwise 4th graders had a good time with that until Kyle nearly had a conniption fit apparently. Lyarra didn’t know what was so funny.”

“Oh, holy shit,” she snickered. “How’d you handle that?”

“I may have taking the cowardly route and acted kind of dumb.”
“Jon…”

“I said maybe her classmates thought it was funny that they’d mixed up their M’s and N’s.”

“Smooth, Mr. Snow,” she laughed.

He looked adorably sheepish and she stroked his beard. The next minute, he was kissing her. It stole her breath away, these soft but passionate kisses from the man she loved. Since they’d moved in together last year, this type of kissing was nearly always followed by sex but it was too soon, they were both tired and the baby was sleeping. Tonight, it was lovely just to enjoy sweet kisses before letting her eyes drift closed and she fell asleep in her husband’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, that was me vacuuming the house while Baby #1 a few days old and napping. Good grief. The dryer broke down with the second one. Fun! When #3 was a newborn, I forgot something that my son had been excited about at school. Yikes... There's more ripped straight from my life but we'll let it go at that ;)

Thank you so much for reading!!
Chapter Summary

Four flashes of their lives as we head towards the end: Mina shares some concerns with Jon when he picks her up from Harry's, Lyarra is not sure she's enjoying entertaining the twins from next door but David steals the show, Jon and Sansa get away for their 1st anniversary and then Sansa sheds some tears over her big girl's birthday.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I know this was supposed to be the last chapter but it became enormous (over 8000 words!) and the epilogue will follow in a few days. Sorry! (Not sorry really. Don't @ me. You should know who you're dealing with at this point and how I ramble on and on with them!)

Chapter title taken from the Calvin & Hobbes collection by Bill Watterson.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why’d you come in the van?”

“Your mom asked me to fill it up for her.”

Okay. Don’t you love that new car smell?” Mina sighed as she climbed into Mommy’s minivan. She closed her eyes for emphasis and breathed deep as Jon turned on the engine.

She could hear him chuckling. “It is a nice smell. The van wasn’t new though, just new to us. I think it’s these lemon-scented air fresheners your mom put in it.”

“I know. It still smells new to me.”

They’d got it at the end of October when Mommy’s old car had ‘given up the ghost’ as Jon had joked. It had been near Halloween. He’d also said they could use something bigger for Mommy to comfortably transport three or more kids in. She supposed that ‘more’ referred to friends.

“How was your weekend at your dad’s, sweetheart?”

She stared out the window for a second as they turned out of Daddy’s neighborhood and tried not to think about how it felt sometimes being the one person in their family who went somewhere else every other weekend. She told herself she was lucky to have two dads who loved her so much and that she got to do special things during her weekends with her father that Lyarra didn’t get to do. And it wasn’t as if she didn’t have friends who had two homes like her. But there were times she
couldn’t help feeling a little down about it. Grandpa had told her that life isn’t always easy though and he was right about that.

She shook off that sad feeling and answered Jon’s question. “It was good. We went ice skating yesterday together after my lesson. Daddy only fell once.”

“Oof! I’d probably fall down a bunch.”

Mina studied her fingernails. It wouldn’t be very nice to say that he was probably right. The one time Jon had taken them ice skating the day after Thanksgiving at Market Square he had indeed fallen a bunch until he’d declared that his soccer injuries were acting up and he’d have to watch them skate from the sidelines where David and Grams were sitting with the baby.

Mommy had laughed and continued skating. She’d been so graceful. Jon hadn’t been able to stay on the sidelines for long as he’d watched Mommy. He’d wound up holding hands with her and letting her help him stay on his feet. She’d skated backwards and pulled him along as Mina and Lyarra did laps around them. It had been a fun outing.

Mina had asked about taking ice skating lessons after that trip. She wanted to be as graceful as her mother. She also liked the idea of skating with a boy like Mommy had with Jon someday.

“Where’s Mommy and everyone?”

“Home. Your mom wanted to feed David but then says you girls will be off to have your fun.”

Mina grinned happily at the thought of their special plans; manicures at the mall for herself, Mommy and Lyarra and then lunch with Aunt Arya.

She caught Jon looking at her in the rearview mirror. “Did you have a nice weekend?” she asked to be polite. Jon had mentioned needing to fix the hall toilet that kept running. He’d not sounded very enthused about it. Mina couldn’t blame him.

“It was alright.” They were stopped at a red light and he turned in his seat to meet her eyes this time. “I missed you though.”

“You did?”

“I always do.”

That made her heart squeeze in a nice way and she grinned bigger than before. Even though he’d tell her nearly every time she’d go that he would miss her, she never got tired of hearing it. She missed him, too. He was her dad too and no one could take that from them. But that brought something else to mind.

“Dad?”

He was driving again but she knew how his face would look, how it’d turn all soft and mushy every time she called him Dad. Mostly, she called him Jon but sometimes he was Dad. This was one of those times.

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

“My daddy’s going to have two Christmas dinners.”

“He is?”
“Uh huh. One with Grandma Anya and then one later with Ms. Royce’s family. I heard him talking to her about it on the phone late last night when I got up to use the bathroom.”

“Oh, well…that’s…I’d probably eat too much if it were me.” Mina giggled, knowing he was being silly. Jon cleared his throat and sounded more serious. “That’s nice for him, isn’t it?”

She nodded. It was nice.

Mina already knew Ms. Royce from school and liked her. Her and Mommy had met Daddy for ice cream one afternoon last month to tell her that Daddy had started dating Ms. Royce. She’d nodded and eaten her Rocky Road. It was later that she’d thought more about it.

She was glad for him to have a date just like she’d been okay with Mommy dating Jon. When Daddy came to her soccer games and Mommy and Jon might kiss each other when it was over, she couldn’t help but wonder if that made Daddy sad because he was alone. Maybe now, he wouldn’t be alone. But Christmas dinner? That seemed like a big deal.

“Do you think they’ll get married some day?” she asked quietly, picking at the chipped polish on her nails. It was the cheap kiddie kind. Mommy said the manicure polish would last a couple of weeks maybe.

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I don’t know how serious they are. They may just be dating and enjoying each other’s company for now. Does the idea of him marrying someone someday bother you?”

“No. I want Daddy to be happy but…he’s…he’s my…”

Jon had dated her mother and then married her. They’d had a baby together but Mina and Lyarra were already there before David ever came along. He’d disrupted the family routine some but they’d adapted. And even if she went to stay with her dad every other weekend, they were her family always and she lived there.

But if Daddy married Ms. Royce and they had a baby someday, what did that mean for her? Would she be the stranger who showed up every other weekend and disrupted things? And as much as she liked her, she couldn’t picture herself thinking of Ms. Royce the way she thought of Jon. Ms. Royce could never, ever be Mommy either.

Jon pulled into a nearby parking lot and turned off the engine. He climbed into the second row with her. She angrily wiped her eyes. She didn’t want to be crying. She was happy for him but her chest was all achy and the tears wouldn’t be denied. She couldn’t understand all these confused feelings.

“It’s alright,” Jon said gently as he held her tight in his arms. She was crying and not even sure what all she was saying before she buried her face in his neck, smelling the hint of his cologne which seemed to bring her comfort. It smelled nice, nicer than any car. He wiped away her tears at last. “Let me tell you something I told Lyarra when I started dating your mother. No one could ever take your place in your father’s heart, my sweet Mina, I promise. No one could ever replace you for him or your mother or me. Not ever.”

Jon understood. He always seemed to understand. He was the best step-dad any girl could ever have. “Promise to miss me every time I go away?” she whispered, still wanting his reassurance.

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Always. That’s a promise. Every time you go away.”

When he climbed back up front and started driving again, Mina decided to think about Christmas. She felt better after her cry. Grandma had told her it was good to cry sometimes and she was right.
“What are you getting Mommy for Christmas?”

“A minivan. She got it early,” he chuckled. Mina scowled. Compared to the pretty earrings he’d got her last year, a used minivan didn’t seem very exciting. “I’ve got something in mind for her but she’ll get it later on.”

“Oh?” That was mysterious. “What is it?”

“I’ll tell you but you’ve got to promise not to let the cat out of the bag yet.”

She looked around for a second but realized they weren’t getting a kitty. “I promise.”

They arrived at home soon after that and she rushed inside to pet Lady and Ghost and then hugged Mommy and kissed the top of David’s head. He was nursing but he was much more alert at three months than he’d been as a newborn. He pulled off Mommy’s breast and twisted his little neck to look at her. He started grinning with his mouth still all milky. It was kind of gross but also the sweetest thing ever.

“Baby? Are you okay?” Mommy asked, cupping her face and looking concerned.

“I’m great, Mommy. I’m just happy to be home. Can I get my nails polished like candy canes today?”

The snow had started falling New Year’s Eve when they were heading home from Grandpa Ned and Grandma Cat’s party. By the next morning, Dad had said it was the biggest snow their area had seen since before they were born. Mina had declared it a magical start to a magical year. Lyarra agreed though she preferred sledding and having snowball fights to studying icicles and looking for animal tracks like Mina. They both enjoyed building snowmen anyway. Ghost and Lady loved rolling around in it but you had to watch those two because they liked leaving patches of yellow snow in their wake.

Four days later, it had melted off some but there was still plenty to play in. Lyarra hoped that they’d have to cancel school on Monday. Dad said it was too early to tell and that he didn’t get to make that decision. That was a shame. Lyarra was convinced if it was up to her dad, he’d cancel and give them all another day off.

But today was Saturday and they’d been permitted to have three teammates over after their indoor game earlier. The plan was to play outside all afternoon. The Cerwyn twins from next door had shown up to play along with Beren Tallhart. Unfortunately, a cold blast had caused the temperature to keep dropping as the day went on until the grownups had declared it too cold for extended outdoor play.

They’d all come in with wet gloves and red cheeks and had hot cocoa which was good. Beren left after the cocoa. Maybe he’d felt funny about being the only boy with seven girls. Lyarra wished he would’ve stayed. He was more fun than the twins. It was after he left that things began to lag.

Kaylie and Kylie had declared the movie Lyarra had picked lame. The twins never agreed on anything except apparently not liking one of her favorite movies. She was beginning to regret asking
Mom if the neighbor girls could stay after cocoa. But, they were their guests and Mina said they’d find something else to do…and then looked expectantly at her.

Mom wasn’t back from the craft store yet after having realized there were now seven girls looking for something to do and she was short on construction paper and easy-peasy type craft projects. The dogs had retreated to their doggie beds to snooze after their snowy romp. The twins were whiny, Abby and Tanya had been asking to see David and Julie had declared she was hungry. Pizza was coming after craft time. Maybe this would be a good distraction.

She crept into the nursery with Mina and the others on her heels. She eyeballed the baby monitor. If Dad heard them, the jig would be up. He’d been pretty stern about letting David nap in peace but, if he was already awake, that’d be okay, right? Mina had admonished everyone to tiptoe and wash their hands first at least.

Lyarra wiped her still damp hands on her jeans as she peaked over the side of the crib and saw blue eyes blinking up at her. “Hey, bro,” she said quietly before gently booping his little nose and getting a big grin. He grinned all the time now when he saw people he liked. It made you feel like you were something special to get one of David’s big grins. Lyarra would be willing to bet he wouldn’t grin at the twins.

“Get him up, Lyarra. He needs his tummy time.” Mina was always adamant about David getting his tummy time as if he’d be taking a test on it later. She talked about being a teacher someday. Maybe she really would be. She had the bossy behavior down pat. Still, she’d take her sister over certain bossy butts from next door any old day.

“Oof, you’re getting big!” she huffed affectionately as she lifted him from the crib. Mom said he was thirteen pounds now. Thirteen pounds doesn’t sound like all that much but when you’re nine and trying to hold a wiggly 4 month old who clocks in at thirteen pounds, it sure feels heavy.

“Where’s his favorite quilt?”

“In the wash. Grab the other one.”

Mina frowned but laid out the other one on the nursery floor. Actually, this one was David’s favorite playtime quilt. It was red and blue and covered with frolicking puppies. Mina liked the one with the cow jumping over the moon. Grandma Cat had made both but David was a dog person so obviously this was his favorite, along with Lyarra’s.

He started kicking his little legs in his footed sleeper, getting excited and grinning bigger. He usually stayed in sleepers all day on Saturdays unless they had big plans. Lyarra liked staying in pajamas all day too but they had company.

She placed David tummy-side down on his quilt. He lifted his little head and looked around at the circle of girls watching him. He almost looked like he was trying to do a push-up. Lyarra was glad he didn’t cry during tummy time anymore. He seemed to like this now.

“Is that it?” Kylie scoffed.

“He just woke up,” Lyarra said defensively. Granted, this was usually the extent of it but she didn’t like someone scoffing at her little brother.

But then, he did do something else.

“Holy Guacamole!”
David had gone from lying on his tummy to his back. Was this okay?! But then, she remembered Mom talking about David possibly learning to roll over soon.

“We just watched a milestone happen!” Mina cried.

“Behold, the Amazing David!” Yeah, rolling over wasn’t that amazing but it was his first time doing it. Mina giggled at her words anyway.

“Big woo,” Kaylie laughed. Kylie laughed with her. It was not a nice laugh.

“Is that the first time he did it?” Julie asked. Julie had three little siblings so she would know this was special.

“Oh huh.” But poor David’s grin was gone. His eyes were really wide as he stared at the ceiling and Lyarra thought he was wondering what happened to the frolicking puppy pattern.

“Our dog can roll over on command,” Tanya said. Not exactly the point but she was an only child so that was forgivable. Lyarra and Mina had both been the same two years ago. That almost seemed impossible now.

Dad had been an only child until he was fourteen and met Aunt Rhae. He’d assured her he hadn’t been bothered by it. “Did you feel deprived not having a sibling before Mina came along?”

“Well, no.”

“You don’t typically miss what you never had but I know you wouldn’t trade her or David for anything now.”

Mr. Condon had made them work on their family tree before the semester break. Lyarra’s family had more than tripled from when it had been her and Dad with Grams, David and Aunt Rhae. She couldn’t complain at all. Mr. Condon had let her staple more notebook paper onto hers so everyone could fit!

“Oh, no! Mommy and Jon missed it! Should we tell them, Lyarra, or should we pretend…” Mina was interrupted by a pitiful wail. Poor David didn’t know what to think of this rolling over business, especially with a strange audience. “Oh, no! Don’t cry, baby! You did so great!”

Lyarra was about to join her sister in reassuring David that he was amazing when they were totally busted. “Girls? What are you doing in here?” Dad looked grumpy and they were probably in trouble.

Thankfully, Abby was impressed by the enormity of this moment. “Coach Jon! David just rolled over for the first time ever!”

“He what?”

“He did, Dad! Watch!”

Lyarra helped him roll back to his tummy. David lifted his head, looked around for a second and then promptly flipped over again.

David started crying louder this time but Dad stopped looking so grumpy. He was grinning bigger than David had been earlier, except it was that sappy grin Dad would get when one of them did something he considered extra amazing or sweet. Well, this was pretty amazing for 4 months and the twins could go fly a kite if they didn’t think so.
Dad scooped up David out of the floor to rescue him when Mom started calling from the kitchen asking where everyone was.

“In David’s room, love! Come here! Girls, Sansa’s back with the crafts so all of you head in there and get started.”

Mina and Lyarra led their friends to the kitchen and set up the winter’s day activity. Lyarra stifled a yawn and was sort of glad now that there was no sleepover planned. They’d asked to have one before school started back. Mom had started to give in but Dad had shook his head and said their household was not ‘sleepover ready’ again just yet.

So, the Saturday play day had been arranged instead as a compromise which was working out just fine…except for the two very unwelcome additions that were now complaining about Shrinky Dinks and paper chain snakes being kind of dumb leading Lyarra once again to regret opening her mouth and asking if they’d want to come inside. The twins were fine for outside play when they weren’t trying to kill each other. Indoors? Not so much.

Gratefully, the doorbell rang and it was their dad coming to tell them it was time to go. Lyarra breathed a sigh of relief and went to tell her parents they’d left. When she got to the nursery though, she stood in the doorway and watched as Mom and Dad were watching David do his new trick, looking absolutely thrilled by a baby rolling over. They were even more entertained than Lyarra had expected. Maybe they needed to get out more.

Then, Mom whispered something in Dad’s ear and Dad smiled all soft at her and kissed her. She was soon kissing him back and poor David was stuck there with them kissing while he stared at the ceiling. She didn’t want to interrupt though. They were goofy but kind of sweet. Plus, her co-hostess might need her.

Unlike most modern hotels where the headboards are firmly attached to the wall, the Wolf Mountain B&B had four-poster beds to match the Colonial America décor. They’d been at it on and off since they’d checked in. If there were guests in the next suite, they probably hated them already. He smirked to himself and pounded into her harder, ignoring the smack of wood meeting wall and focusing on the wet slaps of flesh meeting flesh instead. That and her moans.

“Oh, fuck…Jon…”

“That’s right. I’m fucking you. Are you going to come for me again?”

She whimpered a ‘yes’ and he picked up his pace.

Knowing his endurance was nearly at its end, he leaned down to kiss her long and deep. She turned her head to cry out when she climaxed. Her cries seemed to echo around him, spurring him to his finish. The headboard and posts stopped hitting the wall as he lost his rhythm at last, grunting her name when he came.

He brushed her hair back and stroked her cheek with one hand. Her eyes were unfocused and her lips twitched into a flicker of a grin, like she couldn’t quite manage a full smile yet. A good sign.
He started to roll off her, afraid of crushing her but her legs were still wrapped around him and she squeezed, holding him in place. “A little longer,” she said breathily. Another good sign.

They might be in danger of missing the B&B’s dinner hours and his belly grumbled in complaint. She had packed a gorgeous dress and her sapphire earrings. His wife should get to enjoy a fancy dinner.

_Tomorrow night_, the baser part of him decided. _There’s always room service._

Once their panting had ceased, her legs loosened their hold and he rolled off her but immediately pulled her close.

“So, the suite is really, um…wow,” she snickered, collapsing across his chest.

She was as sweaty as he was, hair plastered to the sides of her face. Her skin was flushed a lovely shade of pink. She still sounded winded, too. That wow had nothing to do with the room.

A smug smile crept across his face and he almost started to squash it. But Sansa had nearly ripped his hair out earlier and she’d sang out his name more than once in the three hours they’d been here. They had 40 more hours to go. He was not squashing his smug smile and, even if he left here bald, he planned on hearing her cry his name many more times between now and checkout time on Wednesday morning.

“Yeah? I picked a good room, did I?”

She huffed a laugh and snuggled closer. “You picked an unbelievable room. It’s breathtaking and…” *a little moan* “…ohhhh, so good.” His smug smile wasn’t going anywhere the rest of the damn night if she was going to talk like that.

“I’m glad I pleased you…with the room.”

“You pleased me, alright.”

“Happy Anniversary, love.”

“Happy Anniversary. I still can’t believe you did this.”

“You arranged our first getaway to surprise me. I figured it was my turn to do that for you.”

Another rainy March day and it was one year ago today that he’d married the love of his life. He couldn’t believe it. The year had flown by and he wanted to go back and do it all over again. Well, most of it. There’d been hassles with work, a van payment to take on, household crap to deal with and the stress and worry that came with everyday life on top of a few rough patches for all of them during the early newborn days. But overall, it had been wonderful. It had been wow.

If he looked back to two years ago, he couldn’t believe he’d just started falling in love with her then. She was the cornerstone of his life now, the other half of his soul (which didn’t remotely sound like something out of a soap opera.)

Three years ago barely seemed worth thinking about at this point. He’d loved his daughter but there’d been an empty place inside back then, one that had started to fill the evening Minisa Hardyng had come sprinting up to him on the pitch with her big blue eyes and socks with strawberries all over them where he’d later met his future wife…and made an ass of himself.

He’d been planning this for a while, sharing his idea with both their mothers to arrange childcare and
making the reservations back in December to surprise her at Christmas. He’d still worried that she might not be willing to go for two whole nights away from the kids with David 6 ½ months old. She’d been willing though and he was extremely glad of it.

Getting back to where they’d been in terms of sexual intimacy had taken a little while. He’d not had sex with Val again after their breakup so he’d had no experience with post-baby sex. He’d asked Sansa though and she’d admitted that she’d been too stressed to enjoy sex until well past Mina’s first birthday but she’d kept her silence for fear of driving Harry further away at the time. He hated thinking about that for various reasons. He also didn’t want that for them.

And though he wanted her and knew she loved him and found him desirable, her hormones had been in flux to say the least after the birth and in the months that had followed. Despite getting the all clear from her doctor at the six-week appointment, she’d wanted to wait another month or so and he’d readily agreed. It had still wound up being uncomfortable for her the first time they’d made love. But with a little patience (plus, plenty of foreplay and the right lubricant), they’d found their way again soon enough. And now, it was like it had always been.

Well, sort of…

A woman’s breasts are one of her erogenous zones though some women experience pleasure from nipple stimulation more than others. But pregnancy and nursing can change that. One of Sansa’s books had even stated that breastfeeding women might lose all pleasure from it during sexual intercourse. Thankfully, those books hadn’t met Sansa. If anything, she seemed to take more pleasure from it now. He sure as hell wasn’t complaining.

This getaway however was about more than sex. It was about reconnecting as lovers in a more emotional sense, having time to share things and focus on each other without the distractions of parenthood. Successful marriages don’t just spring into being and they don’t just tend themselves over the years. They take work and lots of patience. And part of a happy marriage is having time alone as a couple. No, exotic locales and expensive cruises are not necessary but time alone together is important even with little ones underfoot. And whether that time alone was an hour with the bedroom door locked while the kids were asleep or a glorious two-night escape to a B&B thirty miles from home, they’d both looked forward to this and shouldn’t feel guilty for enjoying it. This was about having time to be just Jon and Sansa, not mom and dad, not son or daughter or sister or brother either. Just them.

“Do you think they’re alright?” she whispered with her head nestled upon his chest.

He stroked her back and smiled. It’s not like you just stopped being a parent even when you were getting away for couple time. “I’m sure they’re fine. Do you want to call your mum or mine first?”

Cat and Ned had the girls tonight and his mother and David had their son. Tomorrow, they’d switch. Infants and toddlers are more tiring physically. Older children can be mentally fatiguing at times. The grandmas had planned ahead.

“Neither,” she said hastily but followed it up with, “…not yet.”

He kissed her brow and glanced at the time. It was nearly 7. The girls would be up another couple of hours at least. “We’ll call around 9, alright?”

“You don’t mind?” she asked, raising her head.

“Why would I mind?”
“I love you.”

“I love you.” She settled back against him and his stomach growled. “Dinner’s supposed to be something else here.”

“I’ve heard. I’m not sure I’ve got the strength to get dressed,” she sighed. “I’d probably need motivation to rise from this bed even.”

“Oh, yeah? Sounds like you’re hungry for something maybe.” He started teasing a nipple.

“A little.”

“What’s that, love?” he smirked, rolling her to her back again.

She moaned and rolled her hips. He might be finished for a little bit but she wasn’t. He lathed one breast with his tongue and then the other.

“I’ll start to leak, Jon,” she protested…very feebly.

“You’re saying this like I’m not perfectly aware what might happen when I lick your tits at the moment, wife. Doesn’t seem to stop me and you don’t seem to be complaining.”

“You’re very dirty, husband,” she said, flushing though her eyes were growing darker.

“I’ll take a bath later,” he murmured as he started suckling.

“We’ve got a, um…shit…a very…yes, there…nice big tub. I can…fuck, Jon…take it with you.”

“I know. I chose the suite.” His hand made its way between her legs. She immediately clenched her thighs around it like a vise grip to hold him there. He kissed his way to her belly button before moving down farther. “Spread those legs for me, love.”

“I know you’re hungry. We could go ahead and…order, uh…food and…oh.” That ‘oh’ was half a whisper. He needed her to go ahead and get a little louder. No kids were on the other side of that wall, just some potential strangers who could hate him all they liked.

Or maybe I’ll be nice and scoot the bed a few inches back from the wall…later.

One year ago, she’d made him the happiest of men. He was going to take his time with her tonight. Room service was served until midnight after all.

A sunny afternoon in April and childish shouts and laughter came filtering in from the open kitchen window as Sansa placed the number 1 and 0 candles side by side on the freshly frosted cake. Mina had turned ten the other day and today was her party. It didn’t quite seem real.

“That number’s too big,” a voice said from behind her and she spun to find Harry standing in the kitchen, looking a little lost. He was pointing at the cake but his eyes widened when he saw her face. “Oh, shit. Are you…”
“I’m fine. I was just thinking the same thing is all.” She hastily wiped her eyes and attempted a smile. His grimace made her suspect she’d failed.

“Ba, ba, ba,” David babbled from his highchair.

“Ba-ba-ba, to you, little guy,” Harry said bemusedly before stroking her baby’s soft, round cheek. “I think about her being this size sometimes.” He trailed off and looked at her, his eyes unusually expressive. “I think about how I treated you, how I made everything about me instead of either of you and all the ways that I…I’m sorry, Sansa. It’s not enough but I want to say it anyway. I know I wasn’t what either of you deserved and somedays I wish I could just have a chance to…but I’m too big to cry ‘do-over’ so…” He shrugged.

She clasped her hands together and nodded. Sansa understood what he was trying to convey but didn’t know what to say.

Things had been so strained that first year with Mina and only grown worse as time marched on. Compared to what she had with her husband, she knew that her and Harry wouldn’t have lasted in the long run even if he’d been a better father and partner back in those days. Her youthful affections for him had been a tide pool. Jon was the ocean.

There’d been a shift in her resentments though since Jon had come along and Harry had come clean about his alcoholism. Maybe they’d never be friends exactly but things were better between them now and that was better for Mina. The past was the past and they had their own lives to live. They would always share their daughter though, their amazing, bright and beautiful girl, and that was what mattered.

“If they could just stay little,” she said wistfully, looking back at the cake while Harry was still touching David’s cheek.

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad you’re with us today.”

“Me, too.” He dropped his hand and shifted awkwardly. “Did you need any help in here? Your mom and Jon’s have everything in hand and I felt kind of in the way out there.”

She started to say no but he wanted to help. People like to feel needed and she needed to stop trying to do it all. “Would you mind being my doorman? Guests other than family will be arriving soon and I’d hoped to steer them directly to the backyard. I was going to ask Rickon but I think he’s afraid Jon’s going to make him bake something again if he’s too early.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, sure thing.”

“Harry?” He stopped and turned. “I enjoyed working on that logo design for the company last month. I want to be home with my baby for now but that sort of thing would be something I could handle if…”

“I know who I’ll call first if we’ve got something for a freelance marketing whiz to work some magic on for us then.”

“Thank you, Harry.” She couldn’t help flushing at the compliment. It was nice to be appreciated for a job well done.

“No, Sans…thank you.” He left to see to his task.
It had been satisfying to have something to do, something productive beyond taking care of the house and the kids. Her family meant everything to her and she wouldn’t say she was unfulfilled but she’d enjoyed putting her degree to use and obviously the money was always welcome. Her father-in-law had graciously invited her and David into his office the day she’d dropped off her designs and told her he was always happy to have the distraction of his grandson for an hour or so if she ever needed to work in the office instead of at home.

Alone with the baby and the cake again, she looked out the window to see her girls playing soccer in the backyard with Beren from next door as they waited for the other children to arrive. She recalled the first time her and Mina had come over for dinner two years ago when the girls had played out back while Jon had kissed her breathless right here at this sink. They’d grown so much in those two years and her little girl couldn’t be ten already.

She wiped away more tears and smiled when she heard the garage door opening.

“Daddy’s home, sweet one.”

David had resumed smashing (and occasionally eating) the array of finger foods before him. Cheerios, little hunks of ripe banana, peas and slightly overcooked elbow macaroni had been today’s victims.

He gave her a toothy grin and babbled back at her. “Ba! Ba! Ba!” He hadn’t said any discernable words yet but that didn’t worry her. Some babies had a few words under their belt by one and some did not. He was only 7 ½ months. Plenty of time for talking. He did like to babble though.

She took a paper towel to wipe his hands as the dogs raced into the kitchen, barking and wagging their tails.

“Ba! Ba! Ba!” David shouted again.

“Yes, ba-ba-ba. Be quiet, you dogs,” she said good-naturedly.

David squirmed and pouted at the wipe down. Her son had a massive independent streak. He was restless when she nursed him except at bedtime now and seemed determined to master the sippy cup. Her milk wasn’t in danger of drying up yet but she knew that time would end at some point.

*How quickly it flies by,* she thought with a pang. Mina was ten and soon Lyarra would be. David would be one in September and she wished she could slow down time to a snail’s pace on days like this.

Sansa sighed, wrapped one tiny dark ringlet around her finger and kissed it before releasing it to rejoin the rest of his curls.

“You’re going to be just as handsome as your daddy when you grow up and what will your mommy do when all the girls start calling?” she asked as the door opened.

David squawked and tossed some Cheerios which Ghost quickly hoovered up.

“If he’s anywhere near as awkward as Jon was with girls, you won’t have anything to worry about until college at least,” another man replied.

“Theon!” She was quickly engulfed in a hug.

“Hey, Sansa. Hey, Little Squirt.”
“Ba!”

“Sorry, love. It followed me home. Can we keep him?”

“Rhae’s gotta work a little late and this asshole swung by my place and offered me $20 to get into his minivan and go to Party City with him. I was worried that was some sort of double-entendre.”

“Fuck off.”

“Language, both of you,” she hissed, covering David’s ears. “You can both add $20 to the swear jar for that.”

“BA!”

“Aw, Sans! Really?! His word was worse than mine!” Theon whined.

“He’s a bad influence on me. I never curse except around him.”

“Yes, really, Theon. Cursing during birthday parties and in front of babies costs extra. And, what a load of malarkey, Jon.”

“You know technically that word means…”

“BA!!” David interrupted. He was looking out the window and seemed agitated. Also, Jon was studying her face. Crying tended to leave its mark for a while.

“Take him outside, Jon. I think he wants to be where the other kids are. Since you’re early, you can help set up some chairs, Theon.”

“Uncle Theon at your service, madam.” He clicked his heels together and made a courtly bow, making her laugh.

“No,” Jon said. “Theon’s going to take David outside for us and then we’ll get chairs and the balloons in a bit.” Theon grinned and took David without a word of complaint. Once they were alone, Jon tipped her chin up. “Look at me. Tell me why you’ve been crying.”

“I don’t want you to laugh at me.”

“When do I ever laugh at my wife when she’s been crying?”

Her eyes were already watering again. “Your wife is a sentimental mess today.”

“I love that about her. Come here.”

She was engulfed in another embrace but, unlike Theon’s friendly and enthusiastic one, this one was gentle. It made her heart thump but also feel at ease at the same time. The warmth of his strong arms around her and his steady reassurance and love whenever she needed it. Whether they were tears of joy, of sadness or just the bittersweet variety that assailed her over moments like this, she knew this man would be here to comfort her and wipe those tears away for all their days. She was so happy to call him hers.

“Yikes. The kids are right outside,” another voice said.

“We’re just hugging, Arya,” she laughed, pulling away. She hadn’t heard any doors but then again, Arya had a knack for sneaking up on you.
“Is this a thing with you Starks? Walking in on me holding my wife in our kitchen?” Jon grumbled playfully.

“I’m not making brownies for you. You got a sec?” Arya asked, looking at her.

“For my sister? Of course, I do.”

"A sec alone actually?” She gave Jon an apologetic smile.

“I’m getting kicked out of my own kitchen?”

“No. Well, yes. Now, get out. I still love you like another brother though.”

“Thanks. Guess I’ll go see about transporting Balloon City to the backyard.”

Sansa laughed and kissed his cheek before he walked past Arya, mussing her hair affectionately and getting an equally affectionate shove in return.

“Alright. What’s up?”

"I’m in trouble.”

Sansa remembered thinking of herself as ‘in trouble’ when she’d got pregnant with Mina. She somehow couldn’t see Arya thinking the same way. She blinked rapidly and told herself not to overreact or jump to conclusions or freak out in general. “What kind of trouble?” With Arya, this might be something requiring an alibi or a good attorney.

“Mom’s going to be so pissed at me.”

“Oh!” She started giggling then. “I was afraid you were about to confess a crime.”

“No!” she huffed. “You know how Gendry and I went out to Denver last month?”

“Yeah. Was the hotel all booked up? Did you and Friend Gendry wind up having to share a room? Did the heater break? Did you have to share your body heat to survive?” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“God, shut up! And yeah, one bed, snuggling for warmth and all that. So, it’s really pretty out there and…you know how I’ve always liked the mountains.”

“Yes.” Sansa couldn’t make heads or tails of how their mother was going to be pissed by any of this but her sister was literally blushing.

“Anyway, we got kind of caught up in the moment and, uh…decided to get married.”

“You’re engaged?!” she squealed.

“Uh, no. We got married.” Arya held out her hand. She was wearing a turquoise ring, a band…on her left ring finger.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Wait a second. You…you…What the fuck?!” She glanced at the calendar and did a quick tally. “That was four fucking weeks ago! You’re just now sharing this?! With your only sister?!”

“Sansa, language!” yet another voice gasped from behind her. She needed a damn door sensor in this kitchen or something. Her mother had apparently come inside and caught her reaction. “There are
“Geez, Mom. You need to wear a bell. You’re quieter than me.”

Their mother rolled her eyes at Arya’s comment. Sansa pointed at the kitchen table. “Sit. Spill.” Arya looked at their mom the same way she would when she was little and had got into trouble, real trouble…for a kid. “Just tell her. Like a band-aid.” She made a ripping motion and then she hugged Arya. “She loves Gendry. She’s going to be happy for you,” she whispered dramatically.

“Girls, what is going on?”

“And Dad?” Arya whispered back.

“Him, too.”

“I didn’t mean to wait this long to share with you or them. I just needed a little time for it to really sink in, is all.” She hugged her back tightly. Then, Arya sighed and squared her shoulders before the three of them took a seat. “So, Mom…I’ve got a bit of news.”

Two hours later, the birthday party was running its course with nearly all the family present along with a handful of the girls’ friends and their parents. Mina had thanked everyone politely for coming earlier. For Sansa, her happy face right now was more than enough thanks for the work of putting it together.

Lyanna and David were speaking with the Tallharts and Cerwyns. Harry, Myranda and his mother were talking to some of the parents they’d met through soccer and school.

Her parents had Arya and Gendry cornered but it was a good talk from the looks of things. The marriage news was a shock perhaps but this seemed more like Arya than any highly scripted, frou-frou wedding with yards of lace, a string quartet and invitations hand-written in calligraphy. And, her younger brothers had already been admonished to stop calling him Friend Gendry since he was now their brother-in-law.

Meera had sighed over Arya’s description of the Rockies and the helicopter ride they’d taken up to their appointed spot to exchange their vows. Sansa hoped Bran was taking notes. Rickon had asked if lack of oxygen might have played a role in Arya’s decision…and got a head slap from their dad for it. Theon had shot Rhae a look at one point and Sansa hadn’t missed the one she gave him back. Her heart felt full at the thoughts of other happy couples. She wanted everyone to be happy like she was.

Pizza and cake done, Sansa sat down with Robb, Margaery, Sam and Gilly to take a break before present time, farewells and the inevitable party clean-up began. Each mom had a baby in her lap although Neddie could walk fairly well and was eager to be down.

She glanced over at her husband who was playing soccer with the kids now, burning off the sugar rush. He caught her looking and gave her a roguish wink. *My hot soccer player,* she thought, blushing as she acknowledged that wink. Later, once the children were abed, their embraces would definitely be of a different variety than the one Arya had stumbled in on earlier.

“Ba! Ba! BA!” David shouted, watching his father and the kids.

Theon wasn’t able to resist joining in so Rhae joined their circle.

“I still can’t believe they enjoy kicking that black and white ball around with their feet more than

...
Honest-to-God American Football,” Robb said.

Sansa snorted at her brother. “Nice job with the accent there.”

“I really leaned into that A-MUR-i-can, didn’t I?”

Margaery pinched the bridge of her nose. “I do apologize for my Honest-to-God Dork of a Husband.”

“That’s my little brother and my boyfriend’s favorite sport you’re picking on, Stark.”

“Apologies, Targaryen,” he chuckled. “I don’t want you kicking my butt at Dance-Dance Revolution or Skeeball so I’ll keep my sports opinions to myself.”

“I would totally kick your butt at both.”

“Yes, she would,” Sansa concurred.

“I for one love both brands of football and if it wasn’t for Minisa taking an interest in said sport, Uncle Robb…” Margaery paused and gave her a tender smile. “Well, things would’ve been very different maybe. So, obviously I deserve all the credit since I met him first and told Sansa how he was hot as…” She glanced at the babies. “Well, you know.”

Sansa laughed though her heart twisted with thoughts both bitter and sweet at that ‘maybe.’ What if Mina had never expressed an interest in soccer? If, if, if. Isn’t life just full of those? Thank God for soccer and Hot as Fuck Coach Snow.

Then, she recalled Jon’s words from long ago about if they’d not met through their daughters. “I’d like to think that if we’d met under different circumstances, say at work or through friends, the result would be the same...I’d like to think I’d...that I’d fall in love with you. I’m pretty sure I’d fall in love with you just like I already have.”

She caught his eyes on her again. He’d stopped playing and was coming to join them. And didn’t that make her heart go thumpity-thump?

Not to be deterred from his mission to find a fellow sports fan, Robb had turned to Sam when Jon stopped to kiss her forehead and then the top of David’s head.

“How do you feel about baseball, Sam?”

“Is that the one they play with the bat?” Sam said it so steadily, his eyes looking owlish to where you might almost wonder if he was joking or not.

“I...uh…” Robb was rendered speechless until Sam started grinning. “Tarly, you had me there, you sh-”

“Oh, watch it, Robb. It’ll cost you $20 today,” Jon said.

“What?!"

“Birthday parties and babies in the vicinity jack up the price. Swear Jar Rules.”

David started again, drowning out the rising debate over inflation and the swear jar. “BA! BA! BA!!!”

Little Sam mimicked him and so did Ned.
“That’s right, babies,” Mina said sweetly, racing over to give her baby brother a kiss. “We’re playing with the ball. Come on, Dad! Play!”

She darted off again and Sansa’s mouth was hanging open. So was Jon’s. “I didn’t…I think that was…”

“I might cry now,” Jon said though he was chuckling.

“BAAAAAAA!!” David wailed helplessly.

It was Uncle Robb to the rescue, pulling a baseball from his pocket. “Here you go, buddy.” His eyes lit up and he made a cute little ‘oooh’ sound as he grasped it tightly in his chubby hands. “That’s right, Uncle Robb’s got you.”

“He has a mini soccer ball in his room. I’m going to get it.” She grabbed Jon’s hand to keep him from doing just that.

“You just happened to be carrying a baseball in your pocket?” Margaery asked incredulously.

“Yeah, but I’m still happy to see you,” Robb said with a smirk. “I thought I might teach those girls to play catch but they’re obviously brainwashed. And of course, my nephew’s first word was ball. In fact, a few years from now, I can almost picture our boys all playing together.”

“I can picture it perfectly,” Sansa said happily, holding her son close with one arm and squeezing her husband’s hand.

Chapter End Notes

Damn, this is hard to let go of. It’s been over 2 years though and I’ve told the story I wanted to tell of two single parents meeting, falling in love and blending their family before marrying and heading into their happily ever after with a bit of a soccer/football background. Honestly, I could write another dozen chapters of these fluff and angst family feels with a slice of domestic porn but I’ve always abhorred those TV shows that drag on and on until everyone wonders why the hell they’re still on. So, we’ve come to the end barring our epilogue.

Or not...

The lovely Jade Masquerade had suggested doing one-shots or short stories with this family a while back and I really like the idea. I’ve not made a ‘spin-off’ series of one of my longer stories since my first multi-chapter (even though I keep meaning to with Home is with You) but I think I will in this case. I’ve got some ideas but if you’ve got suggestions of something you’d like to see for Jon and Sansa, their children or the family in general, I’d love to hear them but I can't make promises that I’ll do them (or do them justice!) Anyway, you can drop me an ask on Tumblr @vivilove-jonsa or leave them in the comments here and we’ll see.

Now, I’ll go finish that epilogue and cry for a bit :)
Epilogue-"...when you've only got 100 years"

Chapter Summary

A peek at the Snows, their children, families and friends 5 years later.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title and lyrics from '100 Years' by Five for Fighting.

Thank you, Tanya!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Stay with the ball, Sam! Go! Go!” Lyarra shouted from beside him. “Take it to the…OH!” She groaned with disappointment. He gently touched her sleeve. Her groan ended and she started clapping. “That’s alright, guys! Good try, Sam!”

Jon smiled approvingly at his junior assistant coach and then looked over his shoulder at the little boy sitting in the grass with red and yellow dinosaur socks who was waving at his mother and other big sister across the way. “David? You ready to go back in?”

He jumped to his feet excitedly, blue eyes shining on the sunny August morning and black curls still all awry from where Sansa hadn’t managed to tame them to her satisfaction before they’d all scurried out the door for the 8 AM match. “Yes, Daddy! I’ll help Sam score!”

He affectionately mussed his son’s hair and stooped down so they were face to face. “Just do your best and have fun. Go sub Ned out, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy.”

David gave Lyarra a high five and sprinted out to take Ned’s place before play resumed. His nephew stomped off the field with his arms crossed and took a seat, sullenly yanking out tufts of grass. They were losing pretty badly but Jon took it in stride. They were just five and six year-olds and this little pre-season match was supposed to be about teaching them the sport and having some fun. It didn’t make losing any easier, especially for a child as competitive as Ned.

“I’ll talk to him,” Lyarra said earnestly. Jon did his best not to let his amusement show at her serious expression. She was fifteen and better at managing her frustration when the match wasn’t going her way but it hadn’t been so long ago she’d sat on the sidelines and yanked out tufts of grass when she was upset. And yeah, I used to do it, too.

He kept his eyes on the game. It was basically bunch ball at this age with most kids crowded around
the ball except for the occasional butterfly chaser. That was typically Little Sam but Jon didn’t mind. He was happy to coach his friend’s kid along with his nephew. But the only thing that compared to coaching his own son was coaching his daughters. *Maybe someday I’ll be able to say I’ve coached all my kids.*

The thought drew his mind from the match for a minute as he sought out Sansa on the parents’ sideline. She was currently holding Alannys in her lap. Rhae and Theon must’ve gone to the concession stand for coffee. Their Marna was in his mother’s arms, her light red curls gleaming in the sunlight.

The cousins were seven months old, born nine days apart. Theon liked to joke that their daughters had been conceived the same weekend since the four of them had taken a trip to Vegas to celebrate Rhae and Theon’s anniversary about nine months prior to that. *He’s probably right.*

His wife sensed his eyes on her. They seemed to do that pretty frequently at the fields. He waved subtly and she waved back, his heart thumping with that familiar joy he knew whenever she smiled at him like that.

He did a quick scan of the rest of the sideline. Ned and Cat were seated beside his mother and David. He watched his mum pass Marna over to Ned who started laughing when the baby squeezed his nose which made her laugh, too. Marna loved mimicking expressions.

Robb and Margaery were there of course along with Margaery’s parents, her brother Loras and her grandmother who’d come to see Neddie. Their younger son Lyonel was on Robb’s shoulders, likely ready to go home and play with the puppy they’d got the other day. Lyarra was reminding her cousin of that at the moment and he’d stopped yanking at the grass.

Gilly, Sam and their little girl were watching and cheering when David scored. Sam got the assist. Okay, it took a lucky bounce off Sam’s shin guard and David knocked it in but it counted.

Jon swelled with unpardonable pride at his son’s goal, his second today. He bit his lip to stop from crowing about it to the only other adult on his side of the field…the opposing coach. That wouldn’t do at all. Besides, Lyarra was crowing enough for them both. Neddie was back on his feet, cheering for his team, his earlier frustrations forgotten.

Checking the other side of the field again, he noticed Bran and Meera were absent. Jon couldn’t blame them considering the early hour and that they didn’t have a kid playing. *I’ll gladly lay in bed with Sansa on Sunday morning…if the kids and dogs will let us.*

They had seen the happy couple at Ned and Cat’s the other night. They were back together and now engaged after separating for a while last year. For an astrophysicist, Dr. Brandon Stark had been a little slow on the uptake when it came to his long-term girlfriend’s concerns over where their relationship was heading and the resulting strife that had ensued. He’d been a sad sack at Christmas and hadn’t even wanted to quote ‘A Christmas Story.’ But he’d come to his senses in the end, given Meera a ‘Say Anything’ sort of scene for his mea culpa from what Rickon had spilled and they’d got back together. All the Starks were glad for them both.

Arya and Gendry hadn’t made it to the match either but that was because they’d moved to Denver last spring. They’d be coming home for Labor Day weekend though.

Benjen was hosting the whole pack plus Jon’s parents at the lakeside cabin for fun and fireworks to celebrate the holiday weekend along with David’s birthday. Floor space would be at a premium and it’d be sleeping bags for everyone except the two oldest couples who’d get the two available beds and the youngest guest who’d be in her pack-n-play.
Benjen had said Karsi and him could rough it in his tent for a night. Knowing Benjen, it’d probably have everything anyone could want courtesy of Bass Pro Shops along with a comfy air mattress.

The kids would probably be awake half the night chattering and the adults on the cabin floor with them wouldn’t get any peace, true rest…or alone time.

Maybe I’ll talk Sansa into spending the night in the minivan with me. His lips quirked into a lascivious grin at the thought before he returned to the present.

Rickon had made it here bright and early. He was standing on the sidelines cheering as loud as ever for his nephews and their team. The girls were playing their match soon and he’d stay for it, Jon knew. He was a devoted uncle. And the brownies he always brought to family potlucks now were quite tasty.

He’d also brought his first serious girlfriend home to meet his parents a few weeks ago and then introduced her to Jon since she’d been looking for a part-time job and Jon had had a vacancy to fill at the school. Shireen was a sweet girl and a good match for Chelsea.

Ugh, Chelsea, he thought with a grimace. They’d been winning over Man U when they’d left the house this morning.

He was tempted to check his phone but he needed to focus on the little boys out there. That and his daughter was more easily tempted by her cell phone, he knew.

“Did you happen to take a look earlier when you were talking with Ned?” he asked out of the side of his mouth.

She didn’t answer right away, probably worried she’d be in trouble for admitting she’d looked while she was supposed to be coaching. But she knew her dad pretty well. “I just looked super quick.”

“And?”

“We made quite the comeback.” He could hear the smile in her voice.

His eyebrows shot up and a pleased grin appeared but he kept watching the match in front of him. He’d catch the highlights later.

After the match ended, both teams all high-fived each other and ran through the tunnel made by the spectators to the sound of raucous cheers before getting their aftergame juice drinks and orange slices or whatever. Jon felt a little sentimental to watch this part. It’d been years since his girls had done that. It was handshakes all around after their games but no tunnel or juice drinks anymore. They still liked cupcakes at an end-of-the-season get-together though.

Jon searched the crowd after gathering his gear and spotted Mina again. “Who’s that with your sister?” he asked Lyarra. Standing next to her was a boy he didn’t recognize wearing a uniform from one of the competing regions, a tall boy with dark, shaggy hair.

Lyarra glanced up from strapping on her shin guards. “Oh, him? That’s Tom from school. His team’s playing the boys’ team later but he came early to watch our game.”

“Tom?”

“Yeah, him and Mina went to the same school when we were little before she moved in and went to Chelsea with me. He transferred to Black Castle second semester last year. He was at her birthday party that year you started dating Mom.”
“Oh, yeah…Butterfly Necklace Tom.” That might have come out as a snarl. He’d swear she still had the damn thing. In fact, hadn’t she been wearing it recently?

“How?”

“What about Parker?” What about Marching Band Parker with braces who Mina’s said she’s only friends with?

Lyarra shrugged. “What about him?”

Lyarra’s interest in the opposite sex was fleeting so far. She might declare a boy cute one day and then pronounce him an idiot the next. They had to play football to even catch her eye usually and she was not in any rush to have a boyfriend. Which is a-okay with dear old dad!

Beren from next door tended to come over fairly often but they’d been friends since him and Lyarra were little. No big deal. Just the boy next door. Nothing to worry about. Let me cling to my illusions a little longer, okay? I’ve already had to deal with puberty, bra shopping and first periods. They can just be friends, right?

Mina however had plenty of romantic notions and lots of boy band posters on her wall, too. There was a lot of squealing and swooning noises whenever her and Abby would get together these days and watch movies or TV in her room. She had a few friends from school who were boys but nothing to make her parents worry. It was fine. Fine way to give me grey hair.

“I don’t see his parents,” Jon said with narrowed eyes as the boy leaned in a little closer to his daughter. Whatever he said, he could tell it had made Mina giggle.

Footballer, shaggy hair, made her giggle. T-R-O-U-B-L-E. Oh, now she’s tossing her hair and touching his arm. Even I know that’s Flirting 101! Christ…

“They’re not here. He turned 16 two weeks ago. He’s got a car.”

“A car?!” RED ALERT! RED ALERT!

“I think she’d mentioned asking you guys if she could stay for his game since he could drive her home after.”

“Wait…WHAT?!”

Lyarra had stopped paying attention to him though. “Hey, Tanya!” she shouted, chasing after her friend to head over to the much larger field they played on.

He sought out his wife who was already looking his way and reading his mind no doubt. She was smirking and shaking her head at him.

Yeah, yeah, I’ll behave.

He’d need to call Harry. He’d understand. He needed to call Brienne, find out why the kid had transferred last semester and get her to put together a full dossier while she was at it, too.

And there was no way in hell Tom with his driver’s license for all of two weeks was driving Mina home today when he’d not met her parents yet. Or met us again. Sansa would support him in that at least, he knew.

But first, he had another game to coach.
“How are your parents, Rhae?” Sansa had asked quietly before the match ended Saturday.

“Pretty well overall, thanks. Theon and I are going to drive over to visit tomorrow with Alannys.”

“I’m sure they’ll be excited to see you.”

“They are, Mom especially. I’d like for her to live closer but, in some ways, it’s better this way,” she’d finished with a grim look.

Rhaegar had not been in favor of his daughter marrying Jon’s best friend. Whether it was because Theon was Jon’s friend in particular or because there was some objection to him beyond that, Sansa didn’t know or care. Neither had Rhae who had told her father where he could get off if he thought he’d stop her from marrying the man she loved.

Needless to say, there’d been more than a few heated battles between father and daughter though no break like the one between Rhaegar and his son. There’d been a truce in place since Rhae had become pregnant last year though. Guess not wanting to miss out on having any grandkids in his life might have influenced that. Some people don’t ever really change.

It wasn’t fair that Elia was caught in the middle but when has life ever been fair? And it wasn’t as if she didn’t know the man she was married to at this point. However, she loved her daughter and granddaughter dearly. And unlike her husband, Elia got along fine with her son-in-law.

Jon might still have times that memories of his father, or mostly his father’s neglect, would resurface and make him moody and withdrawn for a bit but she knew he did not regret his choice from a few years ago.

But, they bore Elia no ill will and the few times they’d been at Rhae’s house for various functions when she was there and Rhaegar was not had been alright. Awkward maybe but bearable.

Reflecting on her own in-laws, Sansa could not feel more blessed. She was so grateful they’d been able to move back to the States and were part of their lives. Grams and Granddad were an important part of her children’s lives just like Grandma and Grandpa. Sansa had treasured her time with her mother’s parents but her father’s had been gone before she’d come along, just like Jon’s grandparents. She was happy for her children to have all four of them in their lives, along with Anya for Mina.

Sansa felt sorry for Rhae, Theon and their daughter in that sense. Rhaegar was who he was and Theon’s father was who he was, two crappy dads to their sons. Theon’s mother lived on the other side of the country and Elia lived an hour away. They didn’t have the kind of grandparent support that Jon and Sansa enjoyed. But they have plenty of family here all the same. It was true. They were part of the family as much as anyone, unofficially adopted by the Stark clan as easily as Jon and Lyarra had been. And of course, they’d both known Lyanna and David longer than she had.

“So, Monday’s coming at us. How are you holding up, Mom?” Rhaenys had teased next to move away from family issues.
“I’m okay.”

“Uh huh.” It had been a very skeptical ‘uh huh.’

“I’m okay, Rhae. He’s starting kindergarten. Not my first kid to start school and won’t be the last,” she’d added with a fond look at her dear little Marna.

“Okey-dokey then.”

“I lied, I’m not okay!” she sobbed on Jon’s shoulder Monday morning in their bedroom. He held her tight and rubbed soothing circles along her back. “Do you think you could hire me back at Chelsea part-time? I’d be close in case he’s having a hard time or someone is mean to him.”

Jon didn’t quite contain his amused chuckle. Damn him. “I’d have to let Shireen go. Your brother might not forgive me.”

“She can stay, too. You don’t have to pay me. I’ll just work for free.”

“Oh, maybe we’d come up with some sort of payment arrangement,” he said, waggling his eyebrows. She swatted his arm. “But what would our little Marna do if Mommy went back to work?”

“Hang out in the office with me and the ladies? She already does that with Granddad when I go into Arryn’s to drop off designs and ideas.”

He grinned at her and shook his head. “No, love.”

“I hate when you’re all rational.”

“I love when you’re all sentimental.” He kissed her cheek and wiped her eyes. “Our son is starting kindergarten today and we’re very proud.”

“Yes, we are.”

“And tonight when the kids go to bed, we’ll drag out his baby pictures and cry together, deal?”

“Deal.” Her final sob became laughter when he pulled her close again.

They joined their children in the kitchen where Mina and Lyarra had already started breakfast, Mina working on eggs and Lyarra attempting to not burn toaster waffles. She took over the eggs and told Mina to get fruit out of the fridge and pour the juice.

Jon’s coffee sat on the table untouched as he started feeding Marna her rice cereal with applesauce mixed in. Her dark blue eyes watched her father intently as he leaned into David’s shoulder and started singing.

“A duck walked up to the lemonade stand,

And he said to the man running the stand,

Hey! (bum bum bum) Got any grapes?”

He snatched one of David’s grapes which reduced David to giggles. Marna immediately started giggling, too.
“Yikes,” Mina snickered.

“Ugh, Dad,” Lyarra whined. “Must you?”

“Not a word, you two,” Sansa warned.

David and Marna were still giggling. Someday, they’d be like their big sisters and think ‘The Duck Song’ was lame. Right now, they were little, this was the first 1st day of school for their son and the first time Jon had ever got to sing it for Marna and that was something worth cherishing.

“Have you got all your supplies and stuff, girls?”

“Yes, Mom,” they said in sync.

“Hey, Mom?” Mina asked as they were finishing up breakfast. “Can we catch a ride with you guys today?”

“With us? You don’t have to be there as early as David and Dad.”

“We know,” Lyarra said. “We kind of wanted to ride along to Chelsea this morning and wish David good luck.”

Most days, she’d be seeing them off and stay with Marna, she knew, but Sansa had wanted to drive Jon and David to school today so she could walk David down to his class. She and Marna would pick them up at noon since it was just a half day. The girls had started riding the bus last year but she wouldn’t say no to all six of them together for a little longer.

“Of course, you can.”

“Great. Oh, and Mom?” Mina said next. “Tom and I were planning on being study partners in Chemistry. Would it be alright if he came over one night next week? Maybe he could have dinner with us?”

HAVE I JUST BEEN BUTTERED UP WITH THE RIDE TOGETHER FOR AN ULTERIOR MOTIVE? No, that wasn’t really like her girls. EXCEPT FOR ARRANGING TRIPS TO THE ZOO BEHIND THEIR PARENTS’ BACK, she recalled with a grin.

“Study partners, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Their daughter was blushing and she kept darting glances at Jon. They’d said no to the ride home after the soccer game on Saturday. Actually, Jon had been the one to say it but she’d agreed. She knew they wouldn’t be able to say no forever. Still, fifteen was…well, fifteen! But study partners at the house under parental supervision might be a decent compromise.

She looked to Jon who was studiously picking out more of David’s grapes and not commenting. Coward. She couldn’t really be angry though. He’d had to play the bad guy Saturday which was not a role either of them relished.

“We’d have to think about some rules.”

“I know.”

“We’ll talk about it tonight, the three of us, okay?”

“Okay.”
Thirty minutes later, the six of them pulled into the parking lot at Chelsea. They met Randa getting out of her car. Mina gave her a hug first and they were chatting as Sansa and David approached.

“First day, huh? Are you ready?” Randa asked David.

“Yes, Randa…I mean, Mrs. Hardyng. Daddy says to call you that at school.”

“You can still call me Randa when we’re not inside,” she winked.

“So, how big this week?” Sansa asked her friend with a grin.

She patted her tummy. “16 weeks, size of an avocado.”

“Mmmm…chips and guac sound good for lunch.”

Randa snorted with laughter as Jon joined them with Marna in his arms.

Once they reached the entrance, Jon handed the baby off to an eager Randa, hugged David and then took up his post by the front door to welcome the new students as well as the returning ones. She knew there were times he still missed just being a classroom teacher but Chelsea really couldn’t have a better principal in many ways to guide it and Sansa loved the look on her husband’s face as he greeted all the children.

“Have a great first day at kindergarten, bro!” Lyarra said as she booped David’s nose. He acted annoyed by it now but Sansa saw his fleeting grin he couldn’t quite hide.

Mina gave David a hug and whispered something in his ear before they did an elaborate high five routine that they’d apparently been working on.

Then, it was herself and David. The girls stayed out front with Jon, Randa and the baby and Sansa took her son’s hand to walk him down the hall to Miss Cassel’s room. She waved at Shae, Megga and Shireen through the glass window of the office but she was in no shape to socialize right now. She needed to focus on not bawling.

She’d made this walk with Mina her first day of kindergarten but that’d been a different school and long ago…but not so very long ago. She remembered how wide her daughter’s eyes had been and how she’d clung to her side. David was excited more than anything but he kept tugging his sweaty little hand from hers to wipe it on his shorts.

“Do you think anyone in my class will like soccer like me, Mommy?”

“I’m sure of it, baby.”

He frowned. He did not like being called baby in public and she’d need to try and remember that.

“You don’t have to walk me after today. I know the way.”

“I know…I know you do.”

He must’ve heard the longing and the bit of hurt in her voice because then he took her hand and squeezed it. “I’m glad you’re walking me today, Mommy.”

“Me, too.”

By the time they reached the room, his excitement was increasing. She hugged him tightly but he
barely seemed to notice when he spotted another boy wearing a shirt with a soccer ball on it, sitting
at the table where he would be. She was glad he was excited and not crying and clinging to her.
He’d been coming for random visits to the school since before he could walk. His father was the
principal and he knew nearly all the teachers just like his sisters had. He was going to be fine.

“I’ll see you later, alright?” she whispered, unable to resist running her fingers through his curls once
more.

“Yes, Mommy,” he said absently. He was grinning at the boy with the soccer ball shirt. “See you
later, alligator.” He bounded off to meet his tablemate.

“After a while, crocodile,” she replied, knowing he would not hear her.

Sansa waved to Beth who was surrounded by nervous, first time kindergarten parents. Beth gave her
an encouraging smile and she left.

She felt hollow as she walked back down the hall alone like she needed to run back and scoop him
up in her arms and tell him it would all be okay. He already knew it would be okay and that would
only embarrass him.

She reclaimed Marna from Randa, holding her precious baby close. As long as you’ll let me. Then,
she went back out front to find Jon and the girls, deciding to wait until the bell rang to leave. It
wouldn’t be too long until Marna would be rubbing her eyes and ready for her morning nap but she
wanted Jon to walk them back to the van. There’d be a lot for him to do today but he’d take five
minutes for them.

She found him ushering a couple of lollygaggers inside, urging them to hustle to class so they
wouldn’t be marked as tardy.

The girls walked ahead after asking if they could start the van and listen to the radio. She’d get them
dropped off and then take Marna home.

Housework during nap time, let the dogs out, play time after that with Marna, look over some work
stuff maybe and then pick up Jon and David. Wait for the girls to get off the bus and then we’ll all
have lunch. Hm...chips and guac. Maybe we’ll go to Goal Burrito as a treat for the first day back.
Regular day tomorrow and soccer practice as well. Back into the school year routine for us all.

“How’d it go?” Jon asked when they were relatively alone.

“Very smoothly...for him anyway. I think I need to crawl in bed and cry for an hour.”

“Every year, we see plenty of kindergarten moms do the same. Well, not the crawling in bed part but
the other.” She scowled at him. “And I know you hate it when I’m rational.”

“I love my rational husband though.”

“I love my sentimental wife...and your husband’s a big old softie sometimes.”

“Yeah, I know.”

They reached the van but she couldn’t seem to leave him yet and he didn’t seem to want her to leave.
She knew it was silly. Four hours and she’d be heading right back to get them.

“So, our boy’s off to kindergarten and our big girls are in high school and one of them wants a boy
to come over for dinner and to study. How’d this happen?”
She shook her head. “I’m not sure and I’m not entirely sure I like all this growing up business.”

“Did you hear that, young lady?” Jon asked Marna. “We need you to stay this size for a few years, alright?”

Marna just smiled at her daddy.

“No, let them grow,” Sansa said, feeling more philosophical. “We get to enjoy them, watch them grow and help them along the way. And, someday when they’ve all flown off, we’ll still have each other, won’t we?”

“Always, love.” He cupped her cheek and then kissed her. “You’re not getting rid of me. You’re my perfect match.”

Marna puckered her lips together in imitation of their kissing and blew a raspberry, making them both laugh. Sansa indulged herself in letting him hold them for another minute before she climbed into the van. Jon buckled Marna into her seat and bid the girls a good day. He watched them pull out before heading inside.

Mina sang softly along with the radio while Marna babbled in the backseat in response to Lyarra’s chatter. It was like they’d invented their own little language but it was just play. Sansa told herself she’d already cried enough tears for one Monday morning and enjoyed listening to them and Mina’s sweet singing.

“I’m fifteen for a moment,

_Caught in between ten and twenty

And I’m just dreaming

_Counting the ways to where you are…”_

Before she knew it they were at the high school. The girls hugged her and Marna goodbye. Sansa spied Brienne standing out front, easy to spot being a head or more taller than many of her students. She was welcoming them all with a smile just as Jon had been doing earlier. Both girls waved at her a final time then she turned the van towards home, humming along to the radio by herself now.

Her and Marna both yawned as she pulled into their neighborhood twenty minutes later.

“It’s you and me for now, little one,” she said glancing over her shoulder at Marna. Her eyes were looking very heavy. She’d be out as soon as Sansa laid her down.

Her heart swelled with love and affection. Her husband, the children, their families and friends, her life was so full and she couldn’t think of anything more she could need in her life. She yawned again after laying Marna down. Well, maybe she needed a nap.

Chapter End Notes

Fun Fact: My husband wanted me to end this with Sansa getting a phone call from Rhae
saying that Rhaegar had died. Sorry, honey, but I opted for a gentler ending :)

I also couldn't resist using The Duck Song again. Here's the url if you want it caught in your head, too!! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtN1YnoL46Q

As hard as it is for me to say goodbye to this particular story, let me just say how much I’ve enjoyed writing and sharing it with all of you. I have loved building this little world more than you can guess. Thank you so very much for the much-appreciated kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and most of all the comments. It makes the hours I’ve spent with this family richer knowing others have enjoyed them.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!